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Thursday 2 November 2023

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Thursday 2 November 2023

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Fire Brigades Union (Dispute)	1
Fire Brigades Union (Report).....	2
HMP Kilmarnock (Public Ownership)	4
Transitions to Adulthood Strategy	5
Accident and Emergency Admissions (Winter Falls).....	6
Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (Support for Evacuated Residents)	7
Violence and Bullying in Schools.....	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Covid Pandemic (Message Retention)	10
Covid-19 Inquiry.....	14
Post-cancer Breast Reconstruction Surgery (Waiting Times).....	17
Firework Safety (Public Awareness).....	18
National Health Service Dentistry	20
Public Transport (Affordability)	21
Emergency Access Naloxone Scheme	24
Eljamel Public Inquiry (Chair)	24
Housing Supply (Edinburgh).....	25
Medical Evacuation from Gaza.....	25
Police Funding Cuts	26
School Meals Debt (Cancellation)	27
NUCLEAR WEAPONS	29
<i>Motion debated—[Bill Kidd].</i>	
Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP).....	29
Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)	32
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)	34
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab).....	36
David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)	37
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	40
Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP).....	41
Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)	43
Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP).....	45
The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie).....	46
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	51
TRANSPORT, NET ZERO AND JUST TRANSITION	51
Newburgh Railway Station	51
Local Bus Services	52
Sustainability (Net Zero Targets).....	53
Just Transition (Role of Industry).....	54
Access to Public Transport (Motherwell and Wishaw)	56
Climate Adaptation Funding	57
Rail Services (Mid Scotland and Fife)	58
Transport Infrastructure (South Scotland).....	59
EDINBURGH TRAM INQUIRY REPORT	62
<i>Statement—[Màiri McAllan].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan).....	62
EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE PROGRAMME	74
<i>Motion moved—[Jenni Minto].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Roz McCall].</i>	
The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto).....	74
Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	78
Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab)	81
Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)	83
Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP).....	85

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)	86
Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)	88
Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)	89
Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)	91
Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)	93
Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)	94
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)	96
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)	98
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)	100
The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don)	103
APPOINTMENTS OF THE CHAIR AND COMMISSIONERS OF THE POVERTY AND INEQUALITY COMMISSION	108
<i>Motion moved—[Shirley—Anne Somerville].</i>	
MOTION WITHOUT NOTICE	108
<i>Motion moved—[George Adam]—and agreed to.</i>	
DECISION TIME	109

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 2 November 2023

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time.

Fire Brigades Union (Dispute)

1. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made towards reaching a resolution to the on-going dispute with the Fire Brigades Union. (S6O-02672)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I will be clear: the Scottish Government is not in dispute with the FBU. The FBU campaigns on behalf of its members, as all trade unions do, and we share the aim of having an effective Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to keep our communities safe. I meet the FBU regularly and am next scheduled to meet it this month.

Pauline McNeill: The regional secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, John McKenzie, is on record as saying that the union is in consultation with its members on industrial action, but it is extremely important to note that that action is a result of the deep impact of cuts on the safe running of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and that firefighters are considering taking that unprecedented action because they are firmly of the view that lives are being put at risk. With that in mind, what will the Scottish Government do to avert strike action and ensure safer communities?

Siobhian Brown: The £36 million savings figure for 2026-27 that has been quoted by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's chief officer is based on various assumptions about inflation, pay increases and future funding levels, all of which can change over time. The resource spending review provides long-term indicative spending plans for the Scottish Government, based on the challenging financial situation that we currently find ourselves in. Although it is appropriate for the SFRS to assess its long-term planning up to 2026-27 on that basis, that assessment does not replace the annual budget that is presented to the Parliament. The amount that is allocated to the SFRS in the annual budget will be based on a robust assessment of need—as was the case for 2023-24, when we gave it an extra £14.4 million.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Our fire service is in crisis, according to the Fire Brigades Union. The on-going dispute, if unresolved, threatens to have a further detrimental impact on response times in rural communities in my region. Why should rural communities suffer due to the Scottish National Party Government's failure to resolve long-standing issues within the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service?

Siobhian Brown: Since 2017-18, there have been substantial year-on-year increases in funding to support the SFRS to create a modern and effective fire and rescue service. The annual budget for the SFRS for 2023-24 is more than £55.3 million higher than it was in 2017-18. I highlight to Sharon Dowey that, during First Minister's question time on 26 October, the First Minister made it clear that

"We continue to invest in our fire service. I want to thank and pay tribute to the FBU and to our firefighters on the ground. I will continue to promise them that we will, as long as we are in Government, continue to ensure that they get the investment that they need to keep"

the community

"safe."—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2023; c 16.]

Fire Brigades Union (Report)

2. **Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Fire Brigades Union's report "Firestorm", which reportedly warns that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is in "crisis". (S6O-02673)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I recognise the role that the Fire Brigades Union plays in highlighting the concerns of its members, including in the publication of its "Firestorm" report. I agree with many points in that report—including that our firefighters should be paid a fair wage for the work that they do and should be properly trained and equipped to deal with the wide range of emergency incidents that they attend.

As I said in my previous answer, the more than £368 million that we are providing to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service this year is an increase of £14.4 million on last year. The Scottish Government will continue to support the SFRS to prioritise public safety.

Alexander Stewart: On Tuesday, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's publication of new statistics indicated a rise in fatal fire incidents and an increase in non-fatal fire casualties, which amount to just under 1,000 in one year. The data illustrates the dangerous consequences of having an underfunded fire brigade. How much worse does the situation need to get before the Government looks at the statistics and provides

the resource that the fire brigade deserves to support it?

Siobhian Brown: The number of fatal fire casualties per million of population has been on a long-term downward trend in each nation since the early 2000s. In the early 2010s, that trend levelled off, but the different demographics and urban and rural profiles of each nation are the likely factors that explain the different rates for fires. The Scottish Government will continue to work with the FBU and the SFRS to ensure that they have the money that they need to keep communities safe.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is highly valued for its unwavering dedication to saving lives and protecting communities. It embodies the highest levels of service and public safety. The "Firestorm" report says that 96 per cent of respondents who were surveyed agreed that

"Increased investment in training and facilities would positively impact the skills and preparedness of firefighters".

Given the concerns that have been raised about training, will the minister consider the report's recommendation for an independent audit of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's training provisions?

Siobhian Brown: Ensuring that our firefighters are properly trained and equipped is a ministerial priority in the "Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland 2022". The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has an assistant chief officer with dedicated responsibility for training, to properly address that strategic priority. Some aspects of training fell behind as a result of the Covid restrictions, but the service is addressing that backlog as a priority.

His Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland carries out independent inspections of fire service activity, and training is examined as part of the HMFSI service delivery area inspection programme. The "Inspection of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service: East Service Delivery Area" report was published on 19 October, and the service will be taking forward all the recommendations that that report contains.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Does the minister agree that the "Firestorm" report makes alarming reading and that not providing safe systems to enable firefighters to decontaminate is a failure of the employers to fulfil their duty of care to their workforce?

Siobhian Brown: Firefighters' safety and wellbeing are a priority for the Scottish Government and the fire service. The SFRS continues to make progress with its contamination working group, and I was pleased that we were

recently able to contribute £56,000 to allow Scottish firefighters to be part of the current health screening trials.

HMP Kilmarnock (Public Ownership)

3. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the transition of HMP Kilmarnock into public ownership. (S6O-02674)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): When I visited HMP Kilmarnock in August, I saw at first hand that work on its transition into public ownership and operation is progressing well and that the prison is on track for handover to the Scottish Prison Service on 17 March next year. The Scottish Prison Service has been working closely with Kilmarnock Prison Services Ltd and Serco, which is the private operator, to deliver a smooth transition that not only supports staff and those who are in custody but maintains the high standards that are already set in the prison.

Russell Findlay: When I visited the prison last week, I asked the staff whether they backed the transfer. None did. I asked whether they knew why it was happening. None of them did. I asked whether they knew how it would happen. None of them did.

Humza Yousaf is transferring HMP Kilmarnock for blindly ideological reasons. He does not care that it is an effective, efficient and well-run prison. The Scottish National Party's transfer will even result in staff losing the protection of body-worn cameras, which will be sent to English prisons. Will the cabinet secretary reverse that dangerous decision and commit to providing cameras to all prison officers across Scotland?

Angela Constance: The contract with Serco was due to end. The Government has always believed that our prisons should be owned and operated in the public sector, in the interests of public safety and not those of private profit.

When we look at the facts and information, we see a lower level of assaults in the Scottish Prison Service than in our private prisons and a lower level per population of drug-taking incidents in the public sector. I would have thought that Mr Findlay would take such matters seriously.

I reassure the member that the Scottish Prison Service is finalising its arrangements for a pilot on body-worn cameras to be carried out in collaboration with our trade union partners, and that the cameras that are currently in HMP Kilmarnock belong to Serco and not to the Scottish Prison Service. I further assure him that efforts are being made, and will be made, to progress work on the important matter of body-worn cameras.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Mr Findlay's comments are completely at odds with what I have heard from the project director and the staff at Kilmarnock prison over many years. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that arrangements for transfers under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 for all the staff and prison officers are well under way and that the overall impact of their transferring to the SPS will be beneficial?

Angela Constance: The transfer will take place following the well-established process under the TUPE regulations that have existed since 2006. The Scottish Prison Service has written to Serco to inform staff groups about the measures that will be taken. Plans have been developed in partnership with recognised trade unions, and the Scottish Prison Service is actively planning one-to-one meetings. It is also important to recognise that the chief executive of the Scottish Prison Service has chaired four engagement sessions to date.

The Presiding Officer: We move to question 4. Let us keep our questions and responses concise, please.

Transitions to Adulthood Strategy

4. **Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its national transitions to adulthood strategy, following its statement of intent on 28 September. (S6O-02675)

The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don): We will introduce Scotland's first national transitions to adulthood strategy in this parliamentary session, to ensure that all disabled young people can experience a supported and positive transition to adult life. We are currently engaging with more young people, parent carers and others with a role or interest in transitions to seek feedback on the statement of intent. Following that phase of engagement, we will analyse and publish a summary of the responses to show what people have said, which will then be used to develop the strategy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I thank the minister for that answer, but the Government mentioned a strategy on transitions as far back as 2016, in its manifesto. That is seven years ago, and there is still no strategy. A young person who entered high school then will have left by now. They have not seen a strategy and their chances have been affected as a result. The Government knows that transitions are not working. On what date will the Government publish a national transitions strategy, and will it include a legal right to a plan that gives all young disabled people a fighting chance for the future?

Natalie Don: As I said in my previous answer, we are currently seeking feedback on the statement of intent through the online questionnaire and a host of engagement events, including the Glasgow Disability Alliance's transitions event for young people, the Scottish Youth Parliament and the forthcoming carers parliament. That is an important step to sense check what we have heard so far. We want to get this right. Findings from that phase of engagement will be used to develop the strategy for the future, on which we will aim to consult more widely in spring 2024.

The Presiding Officer: Question 5 has been withdrawn, for reasons that will be apparent.

Accident and Emergency Admissions (Winter Falls)

6. **Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what data it has on rates of winter admissions to accident and emergency as a result of winter falls since October 2020. (S6O-02677)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): Public Health Scotland publishes quarterly data on emergency hospital admissions resulting from falls. Total figures for falls admissions across the two winter quarters ending in December and March show a slight downward trend, with the highest number, 18,508, having been seen in the winter of 2020-21 and the lowest number, 17,892, in the winter of 2022-23.

Christine Grahame: I thank the cabinet secretary for his detailed answer. I advise him that both Midlothian Council and Scottish Borders Council in my constituency have on their websites information as to where salt bins are located, which is good. However, does he agree that the more that can be done by simply increasing the number of salt bins available for clearing winter pavements, the greater the likelihood that there will be even fewer falls and so less pressure on already hard-pressed accident and emergency services?

Michael Matheson: I encourage councils to continue to take the action that I know that they already take when there is adverse weather that can result in slippery pavements, which can have a knock-on effect on demand on our A and E departments. Local authorities will consider applications from local communities that are looking for salt bins to be located in their area—that is something that I have undertaken to do on behalf of my constituents, and I encourage the member to do so on behalf of her constituents, where it is felt that that would be appropriate.

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (Support for Evacuated Residents)

7. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what support is available to residents who have been required to evacuate their properties due to deteriorating reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. (S6O-02678)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Where residents are evacuated from their homes under local authority dangerous-building powers, it is for the local authority to determine what support is available to the individuals affected. For Mark Ruskell's constituents who have been decanted in Tillicoultry, that has involved providing temporary housing, as well as support and advice to find alternative accommodation while detailed investigations take place.

My thoughts are with the families who are currently in those circumstances. The impact on those households has been significant, but I know that Clackmannanshire Council is working hard to minimise disruption while keeping people safe.

Mark Ruskell: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response and note her awareness of the situation in Tillicoultry. I understand that Clackmannanshire Council suspects that more than 100 other residences in the same area could also be seriously affected. What engagement has there been between Clackmannanshire Council and the Scottish Government? Has there been correspondence about the dire situation that some residents are in at the moment? How is the Scottish Government preventing affected residents across Scotland from remaining in temporary accommodation indefinitely while they await the outcome of building assessments and potential remedial works?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Government is in contact with all councils on the issue and with the Scottish Housing Regulator, and it has been involved in the issue in Tillicoultry since it was first identified. My understanding is that 29 households across three housing blocks have been affected. The local authority is conducting further survey work to determine next steps, but it has not identified other blocks with unsafe RAAC.

An important point of reassurance is that the Institution of Structural Engineers notes that statements about RAAC having a 30-year lifespan are misleading and that there is no specific data supporting that. The institution notes that, if manufactured and installed correctly and maintained appropriately, RAAC should perform comparably with similar materials. Of course, it also stresses the importance of inspecting RAAC

installations to determine their condition, which is my understanding of what the council is doing.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The response to a freedom of information request that I submitted to the City of Edinburgh Council identified two developments comprising 43 homes that contain RAAC. Can the cabinet secretary tell Parliament whether ministers now know how many social rented properties and private properties across Scotland could contain RAAC?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I highlighted in my original answer, this is an issue for the councils concerned, but we are working with the Scottish Housing Regulator to undertake a data-gathering exercise on the presence of RAAC across all social housing providers. The initial responses to that request were due by 31 October and are now being collated. It is important to ensure that the Scottish Government continues to work with local councils to support communities where they are affected.

Violence and Bullying in Schools

8. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it can take in response to the reported rise in violence and bullying in schools. (S6O-02679)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): In June, I convened the first meeting of the headteacher task force, which is focused on school exclusions. In September and October, I hosted two events as part of the Scottish Government's summit on relationships and behaviour in schools. A third event will take place later this month to discuss the behaviour in Scottish schools research, which will provide a robust national picture of what is happening in our schools across the country on a wide range of behaviours. My aim for the summit process is to work with teachers and other stakeholders to identify practical actions that we need to take to make progress.

Finally, we have started a review of our national anti-bullying guidance, "Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People". The outputs from the summit and behaviour research will inform that work.

Alex Rowley: It is important to work with teachers, pupils and schools, but the fact is that we will not build a world-class education system while so many pupils are worried in schools. We need to put discipline and behaviour back on the top of the agenda as a condition of being in school. Will the cabinet secretary bring forward a detailed proposal that sets out the types of resources and the plan that we are going to use to

address the problem, which is affecting schools up and down Scotland?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much recognise Mr Rowley's interest in the matter, and I agree that we need to work with the profession on how we can support it to best respond to some of those challenges.

Mr Rowley talked about behaviour and discipline. I am conscious that we have a cohort of young people moving through our education system who have experienced disruption to their education from industrial action or Covid impacts. We need to be mindful that all of that plays into changed behaviour and relationships in our schools. That said, Mr Rowley has raised an important point.

There is already national guidance in relation to what we as the Scottish Government provide. The national policy that already exists is the "Included, Engaged and Involved" policy document. However, I have made it very clear that my intention through the summit process is that we look to gather national evidence from those who work on the front line—our teachers and, of course, those who work as learning support assistants, who play a hugely important role in relation to our schools.

We use the findings from the summit process and the behaviour in Scottish schools research, which gives us the national picture, to help to inform the national action plan. Subject to the agreement of Parliament, I intend to bring forward a statement later this year to that end.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Covid Pandemic (Message Retention)

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In June 2021, the Scottish Government was told to retain messages relevant to its handling of the Covid pandemic. However, five months later, the Scottish National Party introduced a policy of destroying WhatsApp messages. That is the digital equivalent of building a bonfire to torch the evidence. Why did the SNP bring in a policy of deleting messages after it had been told to keep them?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): First of all, the policy that Douglas Ross refers to is a general policy on mobile messaging, including informal messaging, such as on WhatsApp. What is key is that, when we got the advisory notices, particularly from the Scottish inquiry but also when we received information from the United Kingdom Government in relation to the UK inquiry, it was made very clear to officials, civil servants, ministers and cabinet secretaries that any information that was relevant or potentially relevant to the inquiries should be retained and, of course, appropriately recorded in our record management system. That is why 14,000 WhatsApp messages are in the process of being handed over now that we have the section 21 order. That is why 19,000 documents have already been submitted. That is why, when I submit my final statement, unredacted WhatsApp messages will be handed over to the inquiry. I should say that that is in stark contrast to the approach of the Prime Minister, who tried to take the public inquiry to court and lost, of course, and is still refusing to hand over his WhatsApp messages.

Douglas Ross: People who are viewing this are listening for the First Minister to tell us what the Scottish Government is doing. It is not up to Humza Yousaf or any current or former SNP minister to decide what is relevant to the inquiry and to pick and choose which messages are going to be handed over.

It is absolutely clear that the SNP brought in an auto-delete policy not just after being told not to do so by the UK Covid inquiry but after Nicola Sturgeon had set up a separate Scottish inquiry. That policy was introduced two months later. Nicola Sturgeon went on television to say that she could not withhold messages even if she wanted to. However, this week, it was reported that she has deleted her WhatsApp messages.

We know that destroying or withholding evidence from an inquiry is illegal. Does Humza

Yousaf accept that, if Nicola Sturgeon or any Government minister has destroyed WhatsApp messages that are relevant to the inquiry, they would be breaking the law?

The First Minister: As Douglas Ross has mentioned the former First Minister, let me remind him and, indeed, the chamber, that, in terms of accountability and transparency, Nicola Sturgeon stood up day after day—virtually every single day—and did 250 media briefings—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Members!

The First Minister: She made 70 parliamentary statements. There was full accountability and full transparency in answering questions. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: First Minister—

The First Minister: The Conservatives do not want to hear that, Presiding Officer, because, of course, that refutes their allegations—

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, take your seat for a moment.

We are not going to continue this session in this vein. Members are required to conduct themselves in an orderly manner. Let us treat one another with courtesy and respect, and members should not decide to contribute from their seats.

The First Minister: I remind the Opposition, particularly the Conservatives, that when the former First Minister stood up and did those daily media briefings, spoke to the public and took questions from the media, it was the Opposition that wanted to stop that happening in the first place.

Let me be absolutely clear, because this is such an important issue—[*Interruption.*]

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): What are you hiding?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, I must ask you to cease shouting from your seat. I would be very grateful if you could comply.

The First Minister: It is important that Opposition members do not shout from a sedentary position, because there are family members who have been bereaved by Covid who want assurances.

I reiterate what the Deputy First Minister said a couple of days ago in the chamber. The Government apologises to those families who were bereaved by Covid for any anxiety or distress that we have caused them; it was certainly not our intention.

We received clarification from the Covid inquiry last week of its expectations. It has provided us

with a section 21 order, and we are in the process of providing 14,000 WhatsApp messages. On top of that, I will give my WhatsApp messages—unredacted—to the Covid inquiry, because we set up that inquiry for one reason only: to get to the truth and to ensure that there are answers for those families who suffered the most during Covid.

Douglas Ross: I cannot believe that Humza Yousaf has just stood up and, in the strongest possible way, defended Nicola Sturgeon, who has been accused of deleting vital WhatsApp messages. He did not answer the question, “Would she have broken the law if she had done so?” but the law is clear: deleting evidence that is required by an inquiry is a criminal offence.

That is in writing, in the Scottish Covid inquiry’s letter. The SNP Government was told

“to make sure that no material of potential relevance to the inquiry is destroyed, deleted or disposed of”,

as it would be

“an offence under section 35 of the Inquiries Act 2005”.

The problem with the SNP’s policy is that the messages are deleted before the inquiry can judge whether they are relevant or not.

Humza Yousaf previously told the chamber:

“any material that is asked for ... will absolutely be handed over to the Covid inquiries and handed over ... in full.”—[*Official Report*, 29 June 2023; c 15.]

Why has the SNP Government now failed to deliver on that promise by deleting evidence?

The First Minister: Douglas Ross continues to say that we are not handing over WhatsApp messages. That is incorrect. We are in the process of handing over 14,000 messages.

On top of those 14,000 messages, I will, when I submit my final statement, be handing over many messages, not just with cabinet secretaries or with ministers but with UK Government ministers and Opposition politicians across the chamber with whom I communicated.

I will do so unredacted, because this Government believes in accountability, which is very different from Douglas Ross’s leader, the leader of the Conservative Party, who is refusing to hand that material over.

I understand why Douglas Ross wants to talk about process as opposed to substance. The reason why, of course, is that—in this week alone—we have seen utterly scathing, damning evidence about the UK Government’s handling, or mishandling, of the Covid pandemic.

I am, and this Government is, absolutely committed to being transparent and accountable, because we want the truth to be heard not just by the public but, in particular, by the families who

were bereaved by Covid. We certainly do not have anything to fear from the truth—I suspect that the Conservatives absolutely do.

Douglas Ross: Humza Yousaf is all over the place with this. He starts by saying that he is going to hand over all the messages—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: Now he says that he is going to hand over “many” of them and that he does not hide “from the truth”.

We do not know what the truth is, because messages have been deleted, and they have been deleted because of a policy of the SNP Government. That policy means that that Humza Yousaf can cherry pick the information that the inquiry sees. Crucial discussions may have been destroyed by the SNP’s auto-delete policy, and any uncomfortable information may be lost, never to see the light of day.

That secretive approach treats the Covid inquiry, and grieving families, with contempt.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): No, it doesn’t.

Douglas Ross: The Deputy First Minister is saying, “No, it doesn’t.” I urge Shona Robison to listen to Margaret Waterton, who lost her mother and—*[Interruption.]* Jenny Gilruth, listen to someone who lost her mother and husband to the virus.

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if members would show one another courtesy and respect. When a member is meant to be speaking in the chamber, let us listen to them.

Douglas Ross: Senior Government ministers in the SNP do not want to hear what grieving families think about their actions. Margaret Waterton, who lost her mother and husband to the virus, said that the news that the Scottish Government has withheld evidence from the Covid inquiry is “frankly shameful”. Jane Morrison, a member of the Scottish Covid bereaved group, said:

“If someone deliberately deleted stuff to avoid us getting to the truth, then morally and ethically, as well as legally, it’s totally in the wrong.”

Does the First Minister regret letting down those families and so many others?

The First Minister: Douglas Ross has every right to ask those questions. We have a responsibility to remember that many people lost loved ones to Covid, including many in the chamber as well in my Government. I reiterate the apology that was made by the Deputy First Minister to the Scottish Covid bereaved group and its representatives that we did not mean to cause

them the anxiety that they clearly felt as a result of what was said at the Covid inquiry last week. That is on us and we intend to make that right. That is why we will release the 14,000 messages and I will also release my messages.

The absolute purpose of the inquiry is to get to the truth of the handling of Covid matters and, where mistakes were made, to learn from them. Ultimately, everyone will have an interest in that, from businesses across the country to members of the public—but those with the most acute interest will be the families who have been bereaved by Covid. I will give them an absolute assurance that we are here to co-operate fully with the inquiries.

I remind Douglas Ross of what we already know about his party’s mishandling of Covid. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members.

The First Minister: Families could not say goodbye to their loved ones, and family members had to attend funerals by themselves without their family or friends around them, all while the Conservatives were partying, breaking Covid rules in number 10.

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, First Minister.

The First Minister: We know that the Conservatives do not believe that the rules apply to them. We have seen that in the evidence that has been given to the inquiry this week.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister.

The First Minister: I give an absolute commitment that the Scottish Government will fully co-operate with both inquiries.

Covid-19 Inquiry

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): During the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic in Scotland, thousands of people died. It is for those people that we should be thinking about our questions and answers today. The Government sent untested and Covid-positive patients into care homes, with devastating consequences, and millions suffered from the effects of lockdown. That is why both the UK and Scottish Covid inquiries are crucial, because we need to understand what happened in order to learn lessons for the future.

The Deputy First Minister and the First Minister have talked a lot about individual responsibility in relation to the inquiry. However, the First Minister is responsible for the conduct of the Scottish Government. Will he take personal responsibility for ensuring that the Government complies in full with all requests from the Covid inquiry?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Of course, it is my responsibility and I will liaise closely, as Anas Sarwar would imagine that I would, with the permanent secretary in order to ensure that the organisation fully complies. I said that to Anas Sarwar previously. We will hand over whatever material has been retained by the Scottish Government; 14,000 WhatsApp messages are in the process of being handed over, on top of the 19,000 documents that we have already submitted. It is appropriate that every member and official in the Government complies.

On Anas Sarwar's specific point, I am responsible for my witness statement. I do not know what other requests have gone to individual ministers or cabinet secretaries, nor do I know what they have submitted. That is appropriate. Anas Sarwar is mouthing "Why?" The reason is that there are confidentiality requirements for any public inquiry that must be adhered to. If I tried to break that, Anas Sarwar would be the first one to drag me over the hot coals and say, "Why on earth are you breaching the confidentiality of an inquiry that could potentially prejudice any said inquiry?"

To make it absolutely clear, my understanding is that the information about the confidentiality of the inquiry has been sent to the Scottish Parliament information centre, but we can make sure that Anas Sarwar gets a copy for his information.

Anas Sarwar: I think that Humza Yousaf is missing the central point. He is the First Minister; he is responsible not only for his own actions as an individual but for the actions of the Scottish Government, ministers and officials. I do not think he has read last week's transcript from the Covid inquiry, which is absolutely damning about the actions of this Government and about his own behaviour. In June, I asked the First Minister directly:

"Will the First Minister confirm that all ministers and officials, past and present, have complied with the do not destroy instruction? Will he give a guarantee that all requested emails, texts and WhatsApp messages will be handed over in full to the inquiry?"—[*Official Report*, 29 June 2023; c 15.]

He gave a direct answer. He said, "Yes, they will." There was no equivocation and there were no caveats or grey areas, but we now know that messages have been deleted. Crucially, it is for the judge, and not for individual ministers and officials, to decide what is relevant.

Once again, this is about the conduct of the Scottish Government. Can the First Minister tell us how many of the 70 ministers and officials have failed to comply with the do not destroy notice and how many have deleted messages?

The First Minister: Let us be absolutely clear. Anas Sarwar—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members!

The First Minister: Anas Sarwar is asking me to demand witness statements from individual witnesses so that I can see what they have or have not handed over, because that is the only way that I could know whether former ministers have or have not submitted information—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: —or what that information is. That would, in my view, be a pretty serious breach of the confidentiality of the inquiry.

Anas Sarwar has also asked me about the organisation. It is absolutely my expectation, and that of the permanent secretary, that potentially relevant information should be kept, recorded in the appropriate way and handed over to the inquiry when that is requested. That is why we are in the process of handing over 14,000 messages. I do not know, because I have not seen the detail, but I suspect that many of those messages—given that they came from WhatsApp groups, as the Deputy First Minister outlined earlier this week—may not be relevant. Anas Sarwar is right that it is for the inquiry to determine that. That is why I, as First Minister, will hand over all my WhatsApp messages in unredacted form.

I return to the point that I made to Douglas Ross: the Scottish inquiry was set up to get to the truth of the matter. That is why, as part of its terms of reference, the inquiry will examine the issue of the discharge of patients, and we will fully cooperate with that.

Anas Sarwar: The public, and indeed the inquiry, can see that the First Minister was unequivocal in June but that he is now dodging responsibility in the answers that has given today. It is also clear that the section 21 notice was issued to the Government, not to individual ministers and officials, and that it is the Government that is responsible for collating that evidence and providing it to the inquiry. To abdicate responsibility is frankly shameful, and people right across the country will see that.

The harsh reality is that the First Minister has lost control of his Government. He does not know how many ministers or officials have complied with the "do not destroy" notice, he does not know how many have deleted messages and he claims that the Government's response to the inquiry is for individuals, rather than for his Government.

The First Minister promised members that he would ensure that all material was handed over to the inquiry in full. We have seen this week how important those messages are. Why does the First Minister believe that his Government should be

held to a lower standard than the Tories at Westminster? What is he doing to identify those who did not comply with the “do not destroy” notices? What action is he taking against those who failed to comply, or should we conclude that his word means nothing?

The First Minister: I will again try to clarify some of the issues that Anas Sarwar has raised. It is crucial to say that, when the UK Government inquiry asked us in June for details of the various WhatsApp groups concerning Covid 19, it did not request the messages themselves. The messages were asked for in September, just a matter of weeks ago. The Scottish Government then asked for a section 21 order because of the personal information in some of those messages, and that was received. Now, of course, we will meet the deadline of 6 November to hand over 14,000 messages in unredacted form.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Destroyed!

The First Minister: I can hear Jackie Baillie shouting, “Destroyed!”, but the 14,000 messages have not been destroyed. We are handing them over, and they include ministers past and present. We do not know which ministers—again, for confidentiality purposes—but we know that they include ministers past and present.

I go back to the point that Anas Sarwar and Douglas Ross have every right to ask about messages being handed over. I give an unequivocal guarantee to those families who have been bereaved by Covid that the messages that we have retained will absolutely be handed over—and handed over in full. As First Minister and the head of the Government, when submitting my statement, I will be handing over my messages in full and unredacted.

Post-cancer Breast Reconstruction Surgery (Waiting Times)

3. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on waiting times for post-cancer breast reconstruction surgery. (S6F-02497)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We recognise the importance of breast reconstruction surgery. I am aware that there are still unacceptable waits in some specialties, but we are committed to delivering sustained improvements and year-on-year reductions through service redesign and national working.

Waiting times are not published by individual procedure, but the most recent national statistics from June show that almost 7,500 patients are waiting for in-patient day-case treatment in the plastic surgery specialty in Scotland. Breast reconstruction surgery covers a range of procedures, and delays can be caused by a

number of factors. We know, of course, the impact that the pandemic has had, but I assure Pam Gosal that we are working hard to reduce those waiting times.

Pam Gosal: Breast cancer treatment is not just physically demanding—it is emotionally taxing, too. Reconstructive surgery gives women the chance to regain control of their bodies. I have received a response to a freedom of information request that shows that the average wait time for that surgery is nearly 400 days in Greater Glasgow and Clyde. However, I have a constituent for whom it has been more than three and a half years since her mastectomy. She was told that she would have a date for her surgery by 21 October, but that date has come and gone. Does the First Minister accept that that is not good enough? What steps will he take to cut waiting times for that surgery and ensure that patients such as my constituent are not left waiting for years?

The First Minister: I thank Pam Gosal for raising the case of her constituent. Obviously, I do not know the details, but Pam Gosal can write to me if she has not done so already. I am happy to look at the case and the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care will be happy to raise it with the health board.

I agree with Pam Gosal’s premise that waits of that length are unacceptable. She speaks powerfully around the emotional and physical impact of breast cancer, in particular. We have been working towards improvements in waiting times, and we have met the 31-day standard, according to the most recent statistics, but I am afraid that we have fallen short of where we need to be with the 62-day standard.

We will continue to progress work and action to reduce those waiting lists. I will ensure that the cabinet secretary for health writes in detail to Pam Gosal about some of the actions that we are taking. In the meantime, if Pam Gosal provides me with the details of her constituent, we will liaise with the health board to see whether anything further can be done.

Firework Safety (Public Awareness)

4. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what steps the Scottish Government is taking to increase public awareness of firework safety ahead of bonfire night. (S6F-02498)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We have recently launched our annual public awareness campaigns across a range of media platforms. Those campaigns reinforce appropriate messaging around attending organised displays and how to stay safe over the bonfire weekend. I

encourage everyone to familiarise themselves with those campaigns and the firework code.

In addition, we have distributed more than 200,000 safety leaflets to retailers, the Scottish Wholesale Association, trading standards teams and third sector partners to increase awareness of firework safety and the law at the point of sale.

It is, of course, illegal to sell or give fireworks to anyone under the age of 18, to use fireworks before 6 pm or after 11 pm—that is extended to midnight on the 5th—and to use fireworks in the street or other public places. Ultimately, that is so that the public—and, crucially, our emergency services—can have a safe bonfire night.

Clare Adamson: Recent data from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service shows that the number of deliberate fires in the three weeks up to 5 November has fallen by 30 per cent since 2018, to 907 last year. That is very welcome news but, every year, our emergency workers are subjected to immense pressure due to the misuse of fireworks, which is compounded by antisocial behaviour.

Does the First Minister agree that the public can do a real service for our emergency services by taking the decision to attend a public display, which is by far and away the safest and most enjoyable way for a family to spend bonfire night?

The First Minister: I agree with that. Fireworks can be a great spectacle and enable communities to come together. As injuries are less likely to occur at a public display, we would always encourage people to attend one. I know that many communities, regional and national organisations and local authorities do fantastic work to organise such displays.

As members know, we have strengthened the law around access to the use of fireworks, with the aim of reducing demand on our emergency services. The new law also makes attacks against emergency workers an aggravated offence that can be considered by courts when sentencing offenders. As Clare Adamson has articulated very well, I encourage people to attend those public displays where they are available.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Scottish National Party ministers claim that their new firework control zones will improve public safety around bonfire night, but my party has found that at least 28 of Scotland's 32 councils have no plans to introduce them. That includes Dundee, where riot police are on the streets to tackle gangs that are using fireworks to inflict chaos and terror.

Will Humza Yousaf explain why his rushed firework law is being ignored by councils that are suffering from severe SNP cuts?

The First Minister: It is for local authorities to make an application for a control zone. I assume that Conservative-led councils also do not have control zones in place. I do not think that we should blame local authorities or the Government for the actions that we saw in Dundee. We should be very clear that those who misuse fireworks, particularly when they endanger the public and our emergency services, should be held to account for their reckless actions. We should be getting behind our fire service, Police Scotland and the Scottish Ambulance Service, which all do a fantastic job in the run-up to bonfire night and on bonfire night itself.

We have introduced legislation, and a number of applications are in for control zones, which will be given due consideration.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I declare an interest as convener of the cross-party group on animal welfare.

The safety of people, especially children, is obviously paramount, but does the First Minister agree that we should be mindful of the effect of fireworks on our pets and livestock, to keep them safe, too, and that, if in doubt about what to do, people should follow the advice of animal organisations, including NFU Scotland?

The First Minister: Yes, I agree with that. There is excellent guidance from a number of third sector partners, including the NFUS. I know from the Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and others that some very good guidance is available. Christine Grahame is right that we often focus on members of the public, but we should absolutely include our pets, which we know can suffer during the lead-up to bonfire night and on bonfire night itself.

As Christine Grahame has suggested, I ask those who are unsure about animal welfare and safety during this period to please look at the range of third sector organisations that can provide excellent advice.

National Health Service Dentistry

5. Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that dentists are suitably funded to be able to continue taking on NHS patients, in light of reports that some dentists in Edinburgh are ceasing to accept NHS patients altogether. (S6F-02489)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): That is a serious problem, which has been exacerbated by the global pandemic. I am pleased to say that there has been an improving picture in NHS dentistry since the pandemic. Building on that progress is an absolute priority for the

Government. We have been working closely with the British Dental Association Scotland and the wider sector on payment reform, which launched just yesterday. That is the most significant change to NHS dentistry in a generation and it provides practitioners with a whole new suite of fees that are designed to provide a full range of care and treatment to NHS patients.

I am confident that reform will provide longer-term sustainability to the dental sector and will encourage dentists to continue to provide NHS care, helping to further mitigate some of the access challenges that we are seeing.

Foyso Choudhury: My constituent Claire was informed that her dentist would be privatised from January and that her family would need to start paying monthly fees or leave the practice. That is not an isolated case; another family in the west of Edinburgh was also informed that their dentist would be privatised. Neither family has been able to find another dentist in their area who will take on NHS patients.

Can the First Minister outline what action the Scottish Government has taken to support dentists and their staff to ensure that their services remain accessible for all?

The First Minister: As I have said, the issue that Foyso Choudhury has raised is extremely important. I hope that, when we can provide him with the details of the payment reform, he will see that we are doing our very best in our work with the sector to incentivise NHS dentistry. For example, a dentist who provides a full set of dentures will now receive £366.80, which is an increase of more than 60 per cent. We have increased the fee for providing surface fillings by almost 45 per cent. We are trying to incentivise NHS dentistry because of the issues that Foyso Choudhury is right to mention.

We are also working with the BDA and others on the recruitment and retention of dentists, particularly in areas where we know that the problem is most acute. I will ensure that the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care writes to Foyso Choudhury with a full and detailed response on all the actions that we are taking in that regard.

Public Transport (Affordability)

6. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government is making public transport more affordable. (S6F-02494)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We are taking a range of actions to deliver an affordable public transport system for people throughout Scotland.

Earlier this week, we announced that £2 million will be made available in next year's budget to progress free travel for people seeking asylum in Scotland. This week, we announced the expansion of the existing national ferry concessionary travel scheme to all island residents under the age of 22. Right now, passengers throughout Scotland are benefiting from low fares as a result of our decision to pilot the removal of peak fares on ScotRail. In addition, thanks to the most comprehensive concessionary travel scheme in the United Kingdom, more than 2 million people are eligible to benefit from free bus travel, and 3 million such journeys are taking place every single week.

Mark Ruskell: I thank the First Minister for outlining those successes. Free bus travel has been described as life saving for people seeking asylum. When those people, having escaped from persecution, war and suffering, are forced to live on just £6 a day, the very least that we can do is extend a hand of help.

Does the First Minister agree that it is our responsibility to use the full extent of our powers to welcome those who are forced to flee their homes? Does he agree that, by extending free bus travel to people seeking asylum, we are showing that we are a country and a Parliament that are proud to protect all those who seek safety here?

The First Minister: That is absolutely well said by Mark Ruskell, and I agree with every single word of it. We have long campaigned—often with other political parties, including the Greens—against the UK Government's inhumane asylum processes. Those processes have left many asylum seekers, who are not allowed to work, almost at the point of destitution—in fact, many of them are in destitution.

Mark Ruskell is right to challenge the Scottish Government on what more we can do to assist them. That is why I am pleased that we have announced that £2 million will be made available in next year's budget to progress free bus travel for people seeking asylum. It is an issue that our Green colleagues have been keen to pursue with urgency and pace. The announcement is the next step in ensuring that our transport system and our country are fair and accessible to all.

I could not agree more with Mark Ruskell that, when people are seeking sanctuary from war, persecution, extreme poverty and hatred, we all have a responsibility to step up to ensure that we help them as best we possibly can.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I am sure that the First Minister agrees that the UK Government's £2 bus fare cap scheme is a very positive initiative. It has made a real difference for thousands of people and has encouraged more

people to use the buses. When can we expect to see something similar in Scotland?

The First Minister: The lacklustre response to that question from the member's own colleagues is probably quite merited, because we have, of course, the most comprehensive—it is very comprehensive—concessionary travel scheme in the UK, and we have just expanded it, as I mentioned in my response to Mark Ruskell.

The point that Mark Ruskell made, which I agree with entirely, is that we are having to step in here because asylum seekers—the origin, of course, of this question—are suffering so badly because of the inhumane laws of the UK Government. Because of those inhumane laws and because of the fact that the UK Government is inflicting destitution on many asylum seekers, we have to step in. We are proud to do that, but we should not have to step in. We should not have to continually mitigate the worst excesses of the UK Government. It would be far better if we had the powers in our own hands.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The origin of the question was how we can make bus travel more affordable. The fact is that, while we have a good and comprehensive policy in place for those who are aged up to 22 and those who are over 60, people in the middle are finding it very difficult. It is people who are on low pay, with low incomes, who are asking the question. When Andy Burnham introduced the £2 fares in Greater Manchester, usage went up by 10 per cent in a month. When are we going to look seriously at helping that group of people—the low paid, who are struggling the most and are finding bus travel unaffordable?

The First Minister: We can compare concessionary travel schemes across the UK. I go back to the point that we have the most comprehensive concessionary travel scheme in the UK. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Young people, those with disabilities and older people are all being assisted through our concessionary travel scheme. That ensures that millions of journeys are made every week, which in turn helps the bus companies, particularly in the face of the challenges that they struggled with in the course of the pandemic.

I say to Alex Rowley that we also have our fair fares review to ensure that a sustainable and integrated approach is taken to public transport fares. I am sure that he and others will take a great interest in that when it is published. However, wherever we can act, whether that is on our buses, in removing peak rail fares, or on our ferries when it comes to the expansion of the

concessionary scheme, we will act where we have the power to do so.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): For those living in the smaller isles in my constituency, ferries to and from the Orkney Mainland perform the same role as bus transport elsewhere in the country. Can the First Minister confirm that young islanders who rely on those lifeline routes will also be included in any future free ferry fares scheme?

The First Minister: I will, of course, consider the very important point that Liam McArthur raises. He raises the crucial point that those links are lifelines. They are important to young people on islands just as rail and bus services are on the mainland. We will give further details in due course, but that point will be given serious consideration.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementaries. If members are concise, we will be able to get more members in.

Emergency Access Naloxone Scheme

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I am sure that members across the chamber will join me in welcoming the emergency access naloxone scheme that is beginning this week. It will see access to potentially life-saving naloxone kits, which can reverse the effects of opioid overdose, being expanded to include community pharmacies right across Scotland. Can the First Minister say any more about how that will complement the Scottish Government's on-going work to widen access to naloxone as part of the national mission to reduce drug deaths?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I am very pleased that access to naloxone is being expanded to community pharmacies right across Scotland through our national mission to reduce drug deaths and drug harm. We have already invested more than £3 million in widening access to naloxone, including through our emergency services Police Scotland and the Scottish Ambulance Service.

However, we are now going further, and the new nationwide service that was launched on Monday is a welcome addition to existing services. It has been backed by £300,000 of Scottish Government funding and will ensure that every community pharmacy will now hold at least two life-saving naloxone kits. I am very grateful to all the people in community pharmacies who are supporting our £250 million national mission to reduce drug deaths.

Eljamel Public Inquiry (Chair)

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): When will the chair of the Eljamel independent public inquiry be in post?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Liz Smith will be aware that we have to consult the Lord President on that issue. It will be for the Lord President to nominate an appropriate senior judge for the inquiry. Those discussions are very much under way.

I completely understand the desire of the people who suffered so badly at the hands of Professor Eljamel for pace and urgency, so there is no dither or delay at all from the Government: we simply have to go through the appropriate processes. I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care to write to Liz Smith with further details, but I reiterate that nomination of an appropriate judge lies with the Lord President.

Housing Supply (Edinburgh)

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests.

It is expected that, this afternoon, the City of Edinburgh Council will declare a housing emergency, following a call from Shelter Scotland. Will the Scottish Government now accept that there is a housing emergency in our capital city, and will the First Minister look at targeted solutions and investment to increase housing supply in Edinburgh?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We will, of course, watch proceedings at City of Edinburgh Council very closely. There is simply no getting away from the real challenge that City of Edinburgh Council faces in relation to housing. That is why the Government has a very good track record of not just building houses, but building socially affordable houses. From April 2007 to the end of June 2023, we delivered more than 123,000 affordable homes, more than 87,000 of which are for social rent, including 22,994 council homes. We are the party that also ended the right to buy, which has protected an estimated 15,500 social homes. Sarah Boyack will also be aware of the measures that the Government has taken to control rent.

We will continue to liaise with City of Edinburgh Council, as we would with other local authorities, to see what assistance we can provide to deal with the real and significant challenges that it faces in relation to housing.

Medical Evacuation from Gaza

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Will the First Minister provide an update on the Scottish Government's latest engagement with the United Kingdom Government on any plans for the medical evacuation of injured civilians from Gaza in the light of his commitment to treat injured

civilians in Scottish hospitals in the event that there is a medical evacuation?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I will make the point that I have made in the chamber before. The people of Palestine and Gaza are very proud people. They should not have to leave their land, but many of them have been forced to leave—in particular, those who have been moved from north Gaza to south Gaza.

Many people are lying injured and dying in hospitals, which are running out of fuel and medical supplies. When we can bring those injured people for treatment in Scotland and the UK, Scotland is certainly prepared for that. Our officials are in regular contact with their counterparts at the UK Department of Health and Social Care. No request has been made for the UK to receive medical evacuations from Gaza, but we hope that, if that request comes, the UK and Scotland will be ready to play their parts.

I reiterate the calls that I have been making for many weeks now: for an immediate ceasefire to allow the humanitarian corridor to open; to allow supplies, including fuel, to come into Gaza; and, of course, to stop the bombing and killing. We have seen horrendous scenes during the past week, let alone the past three and a half weeks—in particular, the sickening bombing of Jabalia refugee camp, which must be condemned in the strongest possible manner.

Police Funding Cuts

Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con): On Tuesday night, in the Kirkton area of Dundee, large gangs caused chaos by damaging property, setting fires and blocking roads into a housing estate, which prompted the intervention of riot police. That behaviour is unacceptable and Kirkton's residents deserve better. The police force is stretched because of funding constraints, which are making it increasingly challenging for it to handle large-scale incidents such as that one. Will the First Minister get behind the police and reverse police funding cuts?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Let me just say very clearly that there was a very efficient response by Police Scotland. We should thank our police officers for what they do every single day, putting themselves in harm's way in order to protect the public.

On funding for Police Scotland, I have said in the chamber on many occasions in recent weeks that we have provided an increase to Police Scotland's revenue budget in this financial year.

I am very grateful to not just Police Scotland but the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and other partners for their swift attendance and efficiency in dealing with that damaging and reckless

behaviour. There is an open police investigation under way, so I urge anyone who has information about the disorder to contact Police Scotland.

School Meals Debt (Cancellation)

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Aberlour has called for the cancellation of school meals debt. Through its research, it has identified that

“income thresholds for free school meal eligibility have barely risen in the last twenty years.”

Delays to the extension of free school meals mean that some parents and families are now feeling the impact of the Government’s inaction. Will the First Minister back calls for the cancellation of school meals debt? Will he consider an immediate uprating of the income thresholds to give working families some much-needed relief and further reduce the likelihood of hunger in schools?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We will, of course, consider any suggestions—not just from trusted third sector partners such as Aberlour, but from members right across the chamber, as we head into the budget process. We have a very generous free school meals offer and, as per my programme for government, we will seek to expand that.

However, we know that we still have significant challenges around poverty in Scotland. It is due to the Scottish Government’s actions, including the game-changing Scottish child payment, that an estimated 90,000 children will be lifted out of poverty this year. Instead of our having to continually mitigate the harm from Westminster—such as from the two-child limit, the benefits cap and the rape clause, some of which we can mitigate and some of which, I am afraid, we simply cannot mitigate—would not it be much better to have the full powers in our own hands, so that we could not only reduce poverty but eradicate it altogether?

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister’s questions.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

In the First Minister’s answers this afternoon, he said of the request for messages from the Scottish Government that

“The messages were asked for in September, just a matter of weeks ago.”

However, commenting on that, at the UK Covid inquiry, Jamie Dawson KC said:

“requests have sought not only information, but also access to potentially relevant messages ... requests for such information and such messages were issued in late 2022”.

Can the First Minister confirm that counsel to the inquiry is correct? If so, will he revise the statement that he made to Parliament?

The Presiding Officer: The point that Mr Ross raises is not a point of order. Mr Ross’s comments are now on the record, and there might or might not be a response. However, the content of a member’s contributions are a matter for the member.

12:48

Meeting suspended.

12:49

On resuming—

Nuclear Weapons

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-10712, in the name of Bill Kidd, on a nuclear weapons-free Europe. [*Interruption.*] I ask those who are leaving the public gallery to do so as quietly as possible, please.

The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes what it sees as the continuing progress being made towards implementing the aims of the United Nations Agenda for Disarmament, as outlined in the 2018 document, *Securing Our Common Future*, and in particular towards the establishment of more nuclear weapon-free zones (NWFZs), which were reportedly described by the UN secretary general as "landmark instruments that represent an excellent example of the synergy between regional and global efforts towards a world free of nuclear weapons"; recognises the work of the secretary general and the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs in their efforts with UN member states to strengthen and consolidate NWFZs, including, it understands, by facilitating enhanced cooperation and consultation between existing zones, encouraging nuclear weapon states to adhere to the relevant protocols to the treaties establishing such zones, and supporting the further establishment of such zones, including in the Middle East; understands that the process of establishing NWFZs is a complex, difficult endeavour, but, despite this, considers that examples such as the ongoing progress in exploring the establishment of a NWFZ through the work of the Middle East Treaty Organisation (METO) and others demonstrates that anything is possible; applauds the work of METO and everyone working for a nuclear-weapon-free world, including the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (PNND) and the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND); understands that, through the endeavours of such organisations, including those operating in Glasgow, it is estimated that 39% of the world's population, 56% of the Earth's land area and 60% of its countries are currently within NWFZs; notes the expression of regret that the establishment of a NWFZ across the European continent has not yet been possible, and further notes the belief that the time to comprehensively explore the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free Europe is now, in order to see what is possible and how it is possible, and to make it possible.

12:49

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I know that people in the gallery are excited about seeing me speak—that is just the way it is.

We are here today in the shadow of the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict and the continuing war in Ukraine. Our thoughts go out to all those who are affected. We are reminded of man's

inhumanity to man and to where such inhumanity can lead.

This August, we commemorated the 78th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Parliament noted that, in Nagasaki, which experienced a more powerful and even more deadly detonation than the previous one in Hiroshima three days earlier, everything within a mile of ground zero was annihilated and more than 40,000 human beings were killed by the initial detonation.

It is said that we need to learn from history to avoid repeating past errors, but, today as much as ever, the risk of escalation under the dark shadow of nuclear confrontation is ever present. Even though we are under that shadow, we need to look for the light, fight for what is right and hope for a better tomorrow.

After the tragedies 78 years ago, hopes for a nuclear weapons-free world were seen as naive. Few would have believed that, today, almost half of the world's population, more than half of its land area and almost two thirds of its countries would be included in nuclear weapons-free zones.

That truly remarkable achievement has been possible only through the passion and perseverance of trailblazing individuals, civic organisations and like-minded nations. I am referring to pioneers such as Alva Myrdal, born in Sweden in 1902, who dedicated her life to the welfare of others and rose to become the chair of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's social science section. She was the first woman to hold such a prominent position in the United Nations.

Myrdal went on to be elected to the Riksdag and, in 1962, she was sent as the Swedish delegate to the UN disarmament conference in Geneva. She continued to perform that role until 1973. In 1982, she was awarded the Nobel peace prize for her work on disarmament and, until her passing in 1986, she continued to advocate for global nuclear disarmament.

Today, that torch is carried on through the work of international organisations such as Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, the Global Security Institute, the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy and, of course, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons—which, coincidentally, this August announced the appointment of Melissa Parke, a former United Nations legal expert and Australian Government minister, to the position of executive director. Melissa is here today, and it is an honour to welcome her to the Scottish Parliament—[*Applause.*]

There is more to say, though. We wish Melissa every success in her position, in which she will, I

am certain, prove to be as much of a trailblazer as those who have come before her.

We have other trailblazers with us here today. I would like to honour Gari Donn of UN House Scotland and the indomitable Rebecca Johnson and Janet Fenton from Scottish CND, whose tireless work has served to further the cause of nuclear disarmament here, in Scotland, and beyond.

Many said that encouraging the establishment of the Middle East Treaty Organization to further the aim of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the region was naive—impossible, even—yet I remember a meeting taking place here in Edinburgh, which was made possible only through the work of Janet and others, to aid the fledgling idea. That idea is now firmly established and acknowledged in the region as one with real potential to rid the middle east of all weapons of mass destruction as a gateway towards regional security and peace. At a recent meeting, METO founder and executive director Sharon Dolev, alongside director Emad Kiyaei, spoke of the incredible progress that they were making and of their gratitude to those involved in that pivotal meeting in Scotland.

That reminded me of the respect and regard in which Scotland is held across the globe through its historical and contemporary contributions to international development and discourse. As such, Scotland is uniquely placed to play a central and crucial role in furthering the work that has already been done to rid our planet of the threat of nuclear weapons and to promote global security. To that end, the time is right to begin serious discussion on the framework for establishing a nuclear weapons-free Europe—a discussion that has Scotland at its centre.

I ask members to remember that, in Europe, to this day, wild boar in Germany have caesium in their bodies as a result of nuclear weapons tests that were carried out in the atmosphere. In addition, we must all be aware of the damage that would have resulted in Scotland if, in the 1950s, the Westminster Government had carried through its plans to use Caithness as its nuclear weapons test site. That did not happen, not because of the damage to our people and environment that would have resulted from the radioactivity following the nuclear explosions, but because the very wet weather there was damaging to the delicate electrical equipment that was to be used.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Bill Kidd mentioned that Caithness was not allowed to be a nuclear weapon test zone. Will he acknowledge that many of our constituents were on Christmas Island, that they and their families have suffered since then and that the United Kingdom Government has ignored them?

Bill Kidd: That point is extremely important. The truth is that, wherever in the world nuclear weapons are used, they damage human beings and the environment. The people who have suffered from that deserve our strongest support and to be recognised.

This Saturday, Glasgow welcomes Scotland's first festival for survival, which has been organised by Scottish CND to explore the link between nuclear weapons and climate change and will include speakers from across the political spectrum and civic society. The festival will also examine the role that we can play in an era of global crisis by showing how campaigns, progressive foreign policy and the expertise that is based in Scotland can take forward the agenda for peace, disarmament and climate justice.

For me, part of that agenda is about starting the process of establishing a nuclear weapons-free Europe. It is my wish that today's debate, the ideas of others and the response of the Government can come together to inform and shape where we go from here in order to make that wish a reality. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we move to the open debate, I give a gentle reminder to those in the public gallery that they should not participate in our proceedings. That includes applauding, however tempting that might be.

12:58

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Bill Kidd on bringing his motion to the chamber. It will come as a surprise to no one that I am not a unilateral disarmer. I believe in multilateral disarmament. I say politely to Bill Kidd that my policy outlook is framed by the real world situation. We cannot disinvent nuclear weapons, so, while some states have them, it is right that Britain retains its nuclear deterrent.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): According to the logic of Stephen Kerr's argument, given that he thinks that a deterrent—as he calls it—is necessary, he is not in favour of multilateral disarmament, never mind unilateral disarmament.

Stephen Kerr: Recent history shows that it is possible for nuclear arsenals to be downscaled, given the nature of the power of nuclear weapons. I therefore do not accept the premise of Richard Leonard's intervention.

I believe firmly that the first duty of any Government is to protect this country. At its core, that means protecting our country from attack by another country—that is what the nuclear deterrent is all about. It is the ultimate defence insurance policy. Being pro-nuclear deterrent does not by any means make me in any way pro-war.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I am pro-nuclear deterrent because I am anti-war. War—as we have seen, tragically and all too evidently, in the past few months in Ukraine—causes enormous destruction and loss of life. I have been thinking a lot about Ukraine in relation to the motion.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Stephen Kerr refers to nuclear weapons as deterrents, but does he accept that it is equally the case that they could be targets in the event of a war?

Stephen Kerr: Let me focus on the deterrent aspect, because I have been thinking a lot about Ukraine. We have to go all the way back to December 1994—to the Budapest memorandum—when the United States, Russia and the United Kingdom committed themselves to a memorandum that stated that they would

“respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine.”

We all know what has happened since 2014 and, more dramatically, since last year. I ask members this very simple question, as unpalatable as it is: would Ukraine have been exposed to the aggression and brutality of, and the invasion by, Vladimir Putin’s Russia if it had retained its nuclear weapons? The Budapest memorandum paved the way for Ukraine to give up its nuclear weapons.

Politicians from all parties have a duty to avoid conflict and war. I think about our own national motto, “nemo me impune lacessit”—forgive my schoolboy Latin—which means “no-one provokes me with impunity”. The United Kingdom, our country, is not a warmonger. We are not an aggressive country. We do not try to impose our will on others by using hard power; we are a nation of pragmatists. We appreciate that we have to defend what we have and that the best route to peace is through strength. That pragmatism calls on us to be pragmatic in the context of reality—we have to deal with the world as it is, not the one that we would like.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: I will.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please be brief.

Ruth Maguire: Peace is obviously more than the absence of war; it is about justice and safety. Would the money that is spent on these weapons of mass destruction and indiscriminate killing not be better invested in things that truly make people safe in this country?

Stephen Kerr: I would be grateful, Deputy Presiding Officer, if you would give me some latitude with my speech, because I think that I will

be the only speaker in the debate who will take a position different from that in the motion.

I agree with Ruth Maguire, funnily enough; she is, of course, right. However, again, we are moving away from the reality that we have to deal with towards a world that we would perhaps like to deal with—we have to deal with the reality as it is. In the spirit of the pragmatism that I have been describing, that means that we have to be pragmatic about the need to retain, upgrade, modernise and keep relevant our nuclear deterrent.

The simple message that we need to send—it is one that, I am afraid, we will continue to need to send—is one of deterrence: deterring aggressor nations from thinking that we can ever be intimidated or blackmailed by them in the way that Russia has attempted to do with Ukraine.

I thank the Deputy Presiding Officer for allowing me a little bit of latitude, since mine will be the only voice saying something different during the debate. I reiterate that Vladimir Putin has made no secret of his detestation of our country and of the west. We have seen the lengths to which he is prepared to go to undermine the west and to undermine Ukraine by attempting to obliterate it as a sovereign nation. We, in the United Kingdom, must never put ourselves in a position in which we are defenceless. Our insurance—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: —through the nuclear deterrent is based on reality, not some desirable fantasy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The latitude was granted for the interventions rather than for any other reason.

13:05

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): It will be no surprise to anyone that I disagree with every word that we have just heard Stephen Kerr say.

Stephen Kerr: Every word?

Rona Mackay: Practically every word.

I thank Bill Kidd for bringing the debate to the chamber. I fully support his motion and commend him for his unwavering commitment to getting rid of the obscenity of nuclear weapons. In fact, I would even call him a trailblazer. I completely endorse my colleague’s wish for a nuclear weapons-free Europe. I welcome to the gallery the United Nations legal expert and executive director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, Melissa Parke. I hope that she enjoys the debate and can see how much support she has in the Scottish Parliament.

Nuclear weapons are wrong at every level—strategically, morally and financially. Even before I became involved in politics, decades ago, I instinctively knew that they were abhorrent. I am delighted that the Scottish Government has set out how, after independence, Scotland could adopt a written constitution that would protect and enhance all our human rights and get rid of those weapons from the shores of our beautiful country. The First Minister's proposals for new constitutional rights for an independent Scotland include a constitutional ban on nuclear weapons being based in this country. Westminster's commitment to nuclear weapons leaves other aspects of our defence weakened, and the outdated argument—some of which we have just heard from the previous speaker—that they have kept the peace and are a deterrent is palpable nonsense as the world is witnessing the tragic and heartbreaking wars that are happening at the present time.

Stephen Kerr: I will ask the member a very straightforward question. Does she not accept the premise that the war in Ukraine might have never happened if Ukraine had still had nuclear weapons? The reality is that it was the perceived weakness of the position of Ukraine that led Vladimir Putin to do what he did, recklessly, over a year ago.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Ms Mackay.

Rona Mackay: I do not agree with that premise, which was woven into Mr Kerr's own speech. I do not think that such weapons will ever be a deterrent, and they never have been.

The UK Government's irresponsible obsession with nuclear weapons has led to immoral and ruinous expense. The current estimate is that the nuclear deterrent costs us around £2.7 billion a year. Just think how that money could be spent on new hospitals, schools and uplifting armed forces' pay. The Scottish Government supports long-term investment in Faslane as a conventional military base. Our position on nuclear weapons is clear. After independence, the SNP would use Scotland's new sovereign powers to remove them from Scottish territory as soon as that could safely be undertaken.

Bill Kidd has already mentioned this, but it is worth repeating repeat that, on Saturday, the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament will hold a festival for survival, which promises to be an inspiring and landmark event. It will take place in two venues in Glasgow and will bring together campaigners, civic voices, think tanks and academics—everyone who is interested in moving forward the case for removing such weapons from Scotland and the world. The festival will include a range of workshops and cultural exhibits to bring

hundreds of people together to discuss and debate the issue. The focus will be on the twin threats to our planet—nuclear calamity and catastrophic climate change—because the two are interlinked. The CND's statement on its website says that those twin issues

"fuse together to threaten the very habitat we rely on. Today's nuclear bombs are many times more destructive than those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All of the nuclear states including India and China are developing new weapons while the non-nuclear powers create new pressure towards disarmament through the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. In Scotland, we have a special responsibility to rise to that challenge. Removal of nuclear warheads from Faslane and Coulport would dismantle the British nuclear weapons system and prove that nuclear states can be disarmed."

We share the deep concern about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from any use of nuclear weapons and recognise the consequent need to eliminate these inhumane and abhorrent weapons. The abolition of nuclear weapons would be a global good of the highest order and an essential step to promoting the security and wellbeing of all people.

13:10

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): The dream of a nuclear-free world is one that sustains those who have been committed to peace and justice for decades, yet we still seem very far away from that ideal. To Mr Kerr, I say that reality will change only if we change it, and we must play our part in doing so. Our job is to build peace, not war. I am happy to make any small contribution that I can as part of that effort, and I am sure that many in the chamber are, too.

Stephen Kerr: Is Carol Mochan saying that it is the position of the Labour Party that we would unilaterally give up our nuclear weapons? We already have an example of a nuclear state that—despite what we heard earlier—was attacked because it gave up its nuclear weapons. That was true in the case of Ukraine. Is she advocating that we should do exactly the same and leave ourselves vulnerable to the sort of blackmail and aggression that Ukraine has now suffered?

Carol Mochan: I do not believe that the world is a safer place with nuclear weapons, so we disagree on that point.

Stephen Kerr: Is that Labour's position?

Carol Mochan: This is a members' business debate, and I am entitled to put forward my view on the idea that we should have a nuclear weapons-free world.

During a time when horrendous war and inhumanity are on our screens day after day, it has really felt appropriate that we strive to work on the

issue that we are discussing today. I thank Bill Kidd for his continuing work on this vital issue, and I am clear in my support for the aims that are addressed and recognised in the motion. We need more activity in the Parliament that is dedicated to peace and more parliamentarians speaking boldly in favour of that.

The motion notes that 60 per cent of the world's countries are now nuclear weapons-free zones, which is promising. Although the pace is gradual, we are slowly decreasing the threat of nuclear weapons globally. However, it remains the case that a small concentration of countries continue to put the entire globe at risk, and I am ashamed to say that our own is included in that number.

Striving to make Europe a nuclear weapons-free zone is a noble and worthwhile pursuit that this Parliament can contribute to constructively with partners across the continent, many of whom will have a clear interest in Scotland, due to its significance as one of the few areas in Europe to house nuclear weapons. Adding our voice to that orchestra has a definite impact, and it is wise of us to do so. People want to hear from Scotland on this issue, so let us speak to the world about it. Speaking to the world on this issue is something that we perhaps do not do often enough.

Although there are differences of opinion on this issue across the chamber, and even within parties, Scotland and the UK more widely have played an important role in the anti-nuclear weapons movement for decades by being proactive and constructive and having our communities speak out about the issue. There is no reason for us to slow that down.

I understand that there is no quick fix to the mistakes of the past that brought these horrible weapons into reality, but I am confident that, in time, the idea that we once had nuclear warheads capable of mass death and destruction on our doorstep will seem completely ridiculous. That might not be in my lifetime, but I hope that it is in my children's lifetime. Here today, in this building, we can come together and make a difference. We can have a nuclear weapons-free Europe. I do not want generations to suffer because of the mistakes that we made and because we did not speak out. That is a key responsibility for all elected representatives. Let us work together in the knowledge that we can make Europe a beacon to the rest of the world and have a nuclear weapons-free Europe.

13:14

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I am very grateful to Bill Kidd for securing this important debate, and I congratulate him on achieving cross-party support for his motion. The issue has been

at the forefront of his campaigning for many years, and I commend his tireless efforts.

It is an honour and a solemn responsibility to speak in this debate, in a country that stands for peace and one that seeks the abolishment of the threats that loom large over our collective futures as we stand on the precipice. Global affairs in the past few weeks have demonstrated that a state of safety and security is not one that we can take for granted. Last week, Russia's Parliament backed the withdrawal of Moscow's ratification of the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty, which is one of the most consequential international agreements for global security. In these turbulent times, the establishment of nuclear weapons-free zones—or NWFZs—stands as a beacon of hope for the present and future generations and the international community as a whole.

We have a duty to our constituents to ensure that Scotland plays a leading role in driving forward the ideas of peace, prosperity and a sustainable future. That is why I join others in supporting the United Nations agenda for disarmament and recognise and commend the relentless efforts to establish more nuclear weapons-free zones across the globe.

Currently, there are five established NWFZs, which cover regions such as Latin America, the Caribbean, the south Pacific, south-east Asia, Africa and central Asia. Those zones cover a staggering 56 per cent of earth's land area, include 60 per cent of its countries and shelter approximately 39 per cent of the global population from the immediate dangers of nuclear weapons. What makes those NWFZs truly remarkable is that they are not merely symbolic gestures; they come with legally binding obligations, verified by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

While we celebrate the milestone of achieving progress towards the UN agenda for disarmament, we must also face the undeniable reality of the absence of NWFZs across the continent of Europe. Scotland, with its clear history and stand on nuclear disarmament, has a unique perspective and a role to play. The Scottish Government's position on the matter is clear, and I am proud to support the commitment to pursuing the safe and complete withdrawal of all nuclear weapons from Scotland. However, our vision of a nuclear-free Scotland has been threatened by changes in the geopolitical landscape in recent years. One of the most alarming repercussions of Brexit is the potential impact of the UK's nuclear posture. Brexit has weakened our ties with European neighbours, particularly those that champion peace and diplomacy. If the UK Government truly aspires to rebuild and strengthen our relationship with those countries, a greater effort towards to the

establishment of NWFZs in Europe would certainly be a bold step in the right direction.

Stephen Kerr: I cannot believe that we have heard no reference at all to the importance of NATO in all of this. NATO is a nuclear alliance. I understand that the Scottish National Party's policy is that we remain a member of NATO. No acknowledgement of the important role that NATO has played in the peace of Europe for decades seems remiss on the part of the speaker.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give David Torrance the time back.

David Torrance: Many nations in NATO do not have nuclear weapons, but they are part of it.

By establishing those zones, we can take collective ownership of our safety and security, and send a powerful message that security can be based on mutual trust, co-operation and diplomacy.

Most people in Scotland are strongly opposed to nuclear weapons, and it is well established that an independent Scotland will be free of nuclear weapons. However, it is only with independence that Scotland's interests can be adequately represented on the international stage.

The UK Government has not ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons; in fact, it has decided to increase its stockpile of nuclear weapons. That is not only hugely disappointing; it is a break in the commitment to the international community.

European history has borne witness to countless wars and conflicts. By establishing NWFZs, we affirm our collective commitment to peace, unity and security. Doing so in Europe would be a powerful signal to the world that it is united in its desire for a safer future for all its inhabitants.

As international security concerns are heightened and global politics continue to change, we need to renew and encourage our global co-operation and diplomacy. The establishment of a NWFZ in Europe is one of many tools to help us to achieve that. That would be not just for strategic or political reasons—it is a moral imperative.

Although the path to nuclear disarmament is undeniably challenging, it is a path that Scotland is leading on with determination. That is demonstrated by cross-party support for the motion, with unity. In the words of Rabbie Burns:

“Now's the day, and now's the hour.”

The time to explore the establishment of a nuclear weapons-free Europe is now for Scotland, Europe and the world.

13:19

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Bill Kidd for bringing this important debate to the chamber, and I thank him, along with most other members who are taking part, for their clear stance that nuclear weapons are a moral disgrace.

I am grateful, in particular, that Bill Kidd's motion highlights the UN document, “Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament”. It is five years since it was produced, but it has had little attention, either in this chamber or elsewhere in UK political debate. That is a shame, because it is a rich and deep piece of work that is at least as relevant now as when it was written, and probably more so. It closes with a quotation about disarmament from the great and visionary Dag Hammarskjöld. He said:

“in this field, as we well know, a standstill does not exist; if you do not go forward, you do go backward”.

The past five years have seen us, as a global community, going backwards in some fundamental and tragic ways. We have seen the relentless rise of inequalities; the normalisation of war; the intensification of climate breakdown; the undermining of norms against nuclear weapon testing; and, in just a few short weeks, thousands of children killed in Gaza. We grieve together, as peace and justice both feel very far away.

Bill Kidd's motion invites us to recognise, through our deep sadness, some of the quiet work of peace that is carried out by the establishment of nuclear weapons-free zones. It asks us to recognise how much of the world is covered by those zones, and how much is not. The gulf between the hemispheres—between south and north, and between the majority and the minority—is laid bare for us all to see. We acknowledge, especially in these days of pain, the dedication of those who are seeking such a zone in the middle east.

Mr Kerr may be interested to know that there is a central Asian nuclear weapons-free zone that includes Kazakhstan, with its extensive border with Russia, belying some of his earlier comments about Ukraine.

Why, therefore, should we not have such a zone in Europe? In 2016, the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt and others analysed that question. They argued for the value of a European zone, beginning, perhaps, with just a few committed countries, building momentum across civil society, courageous in resisting powerful opposition, and challenging the deadly control of the nuclear status quo. That is a vision that many in Scotland share and that an independent Scotland might take as one of its priorities.

We should not underestimate the work of peace, neither its significance nor its cost. “Securing Our Common Future” reminds us that the casualties of modern war, whether it is nuclear or conventional, are, more and more often, civilians. The document reiterates the connections between peace and the sustainable development goals, those minimum grounds for human flourishing.

The absence of war is not just one goal but an essential foundation for all the goals. It speaks of the gendered impacts both of violent conflicts and of unmet sustainable development goals. Women experience those shortfalls not just as absences but as direct blows to their bodies, their homes, their children and their hope.

It reminds us of the obstacles to peace and disarmament. They are not just the accidental causes of conflict: disputed resources, land and beliefs. There are those for whom the expansion of war, the stockpiling of weapons, arms races and disaster capitalism mean profit and power. We must call them to account as clearly as we do the fossil fuel industry.

Finally, there is a question for us all: what do we mean by security? Why do we support a defence sector, including NATO and its military-industrial complex, without question and yet refuse to fund peace to the same level? Are we content to cover beneath a nuclear umbrella, praying that the wind does not turn it inside out, watching the hard rain fall on our neighbours’ uncovered heads? Or might we be more truly safe alongside them, building a sustainable shelter that we can all share? Surely we must all seek to secure our common future.

13:24

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague Bill Kidd on securing this important debate on a nuclear weapons-free Europe, and I thank him for his commitment to the issue and his work as the convener of the cross-party group on nuclear disarmament.

As has been mentioned, Bill will be one of the main speakers at Saturday’s festival of survival. The event will bring together many campaigners for peace and focus on the twin threats of climate destruction and nuclear annihilation. I wish it every success and thank the organisers for their endeavour. In doing so, I also pay tribute to the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons and all others who oppose nuclear weapons across the world.

I am sure that many of us in the chamber and across Scotland saw the global blockbuster “Oppenheimer” over the summer. The film, which was utterly harrowing, brought greater awareness

to younger generations of the sheer destruction and death caused in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, it was able to illustrate only some of the horror—the reality was far more gruesome than can be depicted in film.

What was important, though, is that the film drew people’s attention to the real and present danger of nuclear weapons. Scottish CND estimates that there are 13,000 nuclear weapons in the world; their power is even more destructive, and their use will be more catastrophic than ever. That is why we must be passionate about achieving a nuclear-free Scotland, first and foremost in a Europe where nuclear weapons are a thing of the past.

Scotland’s nuclear weapons base at Faslane is only 40 minutes’ drive from my constituency, and I am sure that many of my constituents will agree that it has done nothing to make us feel safer. Instead, it has made us feel more on edge.

Stephen Kerr: Many of the member’s constituents are probably employees who work at Faslane; indeed, the livelihoods of probably tens of thousands of people depend on it. That is the other side of the coin, and it deserves to be displayed as well as the side that the member is talking about.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Ms McNair.

Marie McNair: I thank the member for his intervention. I am not quite sure what the figure is, but I think that it is only 500.

Again, many of my constituents will agree that the base has done nothing to make us feel safer; instead, it has made us feel more on edge. Obviously, these weapons are wrong, statistically, morally and financially; they cost billions of pounds, and that money would be much better spent on healthcare, education, housing, welfare and building a better future for our children. It puts the debate about the level of social security in a different context.

Critics might argue that a Europe free of nuclear weapons undermines our security, but the reality is quite the opposite. They do nothing to keep us safe in the current geopolitical landscape; in fact, it is more likely that they put us at risk. When we debate having nuclear weapons in Scotland and across Europe, I think that we must all remember the scale of damage that they can cause. We know that their existence is something that we can unite against. Indeed, it was a proud moment when, by an overwhelming majority in 2015, the Parliament united in opposition to Trident renewal.

Not only would an independent Scotland be a way of seeing nuclear weapons removed from our country, it would be a significant boost towards

removing these weapons of mass destruction from the rest of the UK. It is clear that rehousing nuclear weapons elsewhere would be a significant challenge—hopefully, it will prove impossible. By advocating for disarmament in our own country, we send a strong message that we must work collectively to achieve a nuclear weapons-free Europe and world.

A nuclear weapons-free Europe is about the protection of humanity and the provision of a safer world for our children. At its core, it represents a dedication to peace, co-operation and a world in which dialogue prevails over destruction. That is a world that we should all want to live in.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that, when referring to Bill Kidd or any other member, full names should be used.

I am conscious of the number of members who still want to participate in the debate, so I am minded to take a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Bill Kidd*]

Motion agreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not an invitation to extend your speech too much, Mr Leonard.

13:29

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Bill Kidd for bringing this important debate to Parliament.

We have been campaigning for a nuclear weapons-free Europe for as long as I have been active in the peace movement. People like Edward Thompson, Mary Kaldor and Ken Coates formed European Nuclear Disarmament in the early 1980s, in response to the deployment of American cruise and Pershing missiles across Europe, including at Greenham Common, arguing that instead of being, in the words of the propaganda, a “theatre” of “limited” nuclear warfare, Europe must be a “theatre of peace”.

They joined up with dissidents like Rudolf Bahro in East Germany and Roy Medvedev in the Soviet Union, with the shared credo that

“Protest is the only realistic form of self-defence”,

bearing witness to the enduring truth that nobody wins a nuclear war: we all lose. The understanding that if we do not destroy those weapons, they will destroy us—that there is a terrifying finality to it.

Stephen Kerr: It is more than 40 years since Richard Leonard and I first debated the whole issue of nuclear weapons. I have to say to him—

and I hope that he will accept this—that, in the 40 years since, this country has not been involved in a land war or a war of any description in Europe. Does he not agree and acknowledge that the strength and success of NATO—by the way, it was Labour that founded NATO—has been a guarantor of the peace, and that underpinning that has been our nuclear deterrent?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Mr Leonard.

Richard Leonard: No. I am afraid that Stephen Kerr has not changed his position since he was in favour of Trident, back in those days, and I was against it. I do not accept the premise of his arguments either, because, four decades on, the cause of peace and disarmament has never been more critical.

It has never been more critical than it is in Europe today, with Russia waging war on Ukraine but also just last week revoking its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. It has never been more critical than it is today in the middle east, with the gravity of the situation that we now face, with Israel a nuclear state with a substantial nuclear arsenal and with a Government that, along with the US Administration, is boycotting United Nations attempts to establish a nuclear weapons-free zone in the middle east. Yet, it is my deepest conviction that all that people want, including the people of Israel and the people of Palestine, is a chance to live in peace.

My message to all nuclear states, including our own, is that nuclear weapons are not just immoral; they are illegal. There is no such thing as a “targeted” nuclear attack. Its impact is indiscriminate. It cannot be limited to military installations. Entire civilian populations face annihilation.

Just as, 40 years ago, we were warning that a war in Europe is not a limited war, a war in the middle east is not a limited war, either. It risks becoming a general war, a total war, a nuclear war, which is why it is unthinkable. That is exactly why we demand a ceasefire now and UN peacekeepers on the ground, and it is why we need a nuclear weapons-free zone treaty in the middle east if we are to secure a just and lasting peace.

Finally, what of our own situation in all of this? The idea of an independent UK nuclear deterrent is mendacious. The Pentagon supplies us with nuclear warheads. Any use of weapons from these shores would need to be sanctioned by the President of the United States of America, and only then at the request of the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, who is always an American general. We are a client state, but the power of

example should not be underestimated. That is why I do not flinch in my support for unilateral nuclear disarmament.

So, I steadfastly oppose the commissioning of a new generation of nuclear weapons. It is why I will continue to campaign for peace, justice and disarmament because, even at this time of despair, I believe that hope will triumph over fear; that we can build a world where we convert skills and science from being in the service of violence, warfare and destruction to being in the service of the human condition, ecology and the cause of peace. I firmly believe that working for that brighter future is not only our bounden duty as members of this Parliament; it is also our solemn obligation as citizens of this world.

13:35

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):

Peace and stability are precarious, and safety and security are about more than the absence of violence and war. The number of conflicts around the globe and the accompanying human suffering are horrific. It is hard to witness, even from our position of comfort and safety. Many of the citizens whom I represent feel entirely helpless watching from afar the violence and destruction unfolding in Yemen, Ukraine and Gaza. The escalation of such hostilities to nuclear warfare is all too real a prospect.

I thank my colleague Bill Kidd for securing this important debate, and I acknowledge his long-standing and unwavering commitment to nuclear disarmament, and to peace and justice.

I also thank my colleague Stephen Kerr. It is not often that we hear a pro-nuclear weapons voice in such debates. I think that it is helpful. I know that it is not always comfortable being the only person who takes a different position—even for a confident young Conservative such as himself—but it is helpful that we talk about and exercise our differences. It is helpful for people to hear them.

Nuclear weapons are a threat to safety and security. That they continue to be considered to be a source of international influence by some is perverse to me. Those who believe that often speak of their being a deterrent, but it is demonstrably not the case that they are a deterrent. Even if it were true, that does not, as Bill Kidd noted in a previous debate, preclude the use of nuclear weapons for evil intent.

Where weapons of mass destruction are used to kill indiscriminately and to wreak environmental carnage, the results are catastrophic and long lasting. Whenever we speak of these matters, we must never forget that the two atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan in 1945 killed and maimed hundreds of thousands of civilians. Their effects

are still being felt today. Close to 250,000 civilians met an unimaginable end in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many thousands more have since died from radiation-related illnesses.

There are currently five nuclear weapons-free zones, and the benefits of the treaties are clear. They have helped to strengthen global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament norms against use and testing. They are a testament to what nations can do when they work together, and they represent the first step towards the exclusion of all weapons of mass destruction.

The Middle East Treaty Organization reported that nine out of 28 countries in that region have the capability of creating weapons. Worryingly, four of them have already used chemical weapons during war. The Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons states that, as long as any weapons remain, it “defies credibility” that they will not one day be used, including “by accident or miscalculation”.

The establishment of a nuclear weapons-free zone is a measured and incremental approach to disarmament that slowly and methodically rules out areas from nuclear deployment. It is explicitly endorsed by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, article 7 of which formally defines the right of states to create regional nuclear weapons-free zones

“to assure the total absence of nuclear weapons in their respective territories.”

I wish to see an independent, nuclear-free Scotland. Until then, we must all continue to oppose the presence of nuclear weapons in Scottish waters and support the global fight for nuclear disarmament.

Safety and security are about more than the absence of violence and war; they are about creating a just and equal society in which everyone can achieve their full potential and where no one is left behind. The continued progress towards the establishment of more nuclear weapons-free zones will help to nurture and support those who most need such zones.

13:40

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie):

I commend Bill Kidd on bringing this important debate to the chamber. He is a long-time campaigner for nuclear disarmament and a fine advocate in this Parliament and across the world for a world that is free of nuclear weapons. He is a legend, I think. Those are my words.

I welcome to the debate Melissa Parke, who is the executive director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. I had the

privilege of meeting her earlier, and we discussed many areas of mutual agreement and co-operation. We will continue those conversations as we move forward.

I declare an interest—members will not be surprised—as an outspoken advocate for and supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament since my teenage years. I will leave others to work out the timeframe for that. I am unequivocal in my opposition to nuclear weapons.

The Scottish Government's position is very clear: nuclear weapons, with their indiscriminate and devastating impacts, are morally, strategically and economically wrong. We firmly oppose the threat and use of nuclear weapons and the basing of them in Scotland.

Marie McNair mentioned a new generation of young people learning about nuclear weapons from the film "Oppenheimer". The words "I am become death" now resonate through all the generations. We are firmly committed to pursuing the safe and complete withdrawal of all nuclear weapons from Scotland. Independence would allow Scotland to achieve that aim and unite with allies across the world in securing nuclear disarmament.

As Rona Mackay reminded us, in June the Scottish Government published a paper in our "Building a New Scotland" series on "Creating a modern constitution for an independent Scotland". That paper proposed that the interim constitution should place a duty on the Scottish Government to pursue nuclear disarmament. I am sure that colleagues across the chamber who share my opposition to those dangerous weapons will agree that independence is the surest route to ridding Scotland of them for good.

I join Bill Kidd and others in welcoming progress under the United Nations agenda for disarmament. I commend all countries that act as champions and supporters of those important actions. The international community, the vast majority of which opposes nuclear weapons, must continue to work together to create the conditions for a world without those weapons.

I am particularly pleased to see the progress of nuclear weapons-free zones that is mentioned in Bill Kidd's call for a nuclear-free Europe. Those zones, as David Torrance highlighted, provide a vital protection to the people and environments of Latin America and the Caribbean, the south Pacific, south-east Asia, central Asia and Africa. Within the zones, the manufacture, acquisition, testing and possession of nuclear weapons are not allowed. That is us in the global north taking responsibility for our impact on the global south.

Europe does not enjoy the protection of a nuclear weapons-free zone. As the motion notes,

establishing nuclear weapons-free zones is complex and difficult. Theodore Roosevelt famously said:

"Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty."

Although I cannot completely agree with that sentiment, it would be nice if some things were easy. I hope that we can all agree that a world that is free of nuclear weapons is worth having and that working towards that is very much worth doing.

As I and many others—including Richard Leonard—have said, the moral case alone should be sufficient incentive for nuclear disarmament. No more reason should be needed, but let us consider the colossal waste of money, for a moment. Estimates for the replacement of Trident range from the UK Government's own figures of up to £41 billion to a lifetime cost that has been calculated by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament at a staggering £205 billion—money that could be well spent elsewhere. That spending simply cannot be justified. With Ruth Maguire, I urge the UK Government to focus its defence spending on the capabilities that we need in order to fight the threats that we face in the modern world. I also urge the UK Government to recognise and compensate our Christmas Island veterans, many of whom I have proudly represented in the chamber.

I join colleagues in thanking organisations such as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament. Their commitment to the cause is truly helping to make the world a safer place.

I commend Rona Mackay, Carol Mochan, David Torrance, Maggie Chapman, Marie McNair, Richard Leonard, Ruth Maguire and, of course, Bill Kidd for their unstinting commitment to the cause against nuclear weapons and for the peace that we all seek for our country and our world to live in.

We live in a complex and fragile world, but nuclear weapons do not provide any meaningful deterrent to many modern-day threats, and they have not prevented other nuclear-armed states from carrying out terrible acts in the UK and around the world.

I find it quite offensive that Stephen Kerr suggested that Ukraine could have prevented its being invaded if it had retained nuclear weapons—especially considering the past and current threats to nuclear energy plants in that country.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way on that point?

Christina McKelvie: I certainly will.

Stephen Kerr: That is not, in fact, what I said, and I think that the minister has perhaps not been listening to the debate as closely as she should have been. I asked this question of Parliament: if Ukraine had retained its nuclear deterrent, which it gave up freely on the back of the Budapest memorandum, would Russia have so easily—without careful thought—done what it did last year? That is what I asked. To misrepresent my views otherwise is not in keeping with what I expect from a minister of the Scottish Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I can give you the time back.

Christina McKelvie: Oh, it's not like Stephen Kerr to tell a woman off in this chamber. Quite frankly, I do not take lessons from Stephen Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: That is a despicable statement. You are a minister.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr—

Stephen Kerr: I have a point of order.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Stephen Kerr has a point of order.

Christina McKelvie: I think that Stephen Kerr's behaviour—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, can you resume your seat?

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. Surely it is not in order, when a minister is intervened on and a different point of view is put forward, for the minister to revert to the sort of defence that we heard there, basically accusing me—which I do not think is very respectful—of some form of misogyny. I really object to that and I do not think that it is necessary. Surely that is out of order.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, that is not a point of order, but it is probably timely to remind all colleagues that they should treat each other with courtesy and respect, which I think we have managed, by and large, in this debate.

Minister, please continue.

Christina McKelvie: Thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

I have been listening to the tone police all my political life. I will not be listening to them, going forward—even from today.

The point that I made was that the possession of nuclear weapons has not prevented states from having terrible acts perpetrated on them, which lays bare Stephen Kerr's weak argument that nuclear weapons prevent war. They do not, and they never have. There is no justification for the possession, threat or use of those weapons, so I

look forward to the day when we make it possible to free Europe and the rest of the world from those weapons for good. Thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate. I suspend this meeting of Parliament until 2.30.

13:48

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time, and the portfolio on this occasion is transport, net zero and just transition. Members who wish to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Newburgh Railway Station

1. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its consideration of the proposal for a railway station in Newburgh, Fife. (S6O-02664)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Transport Scotland officials considered the initial detailed options appraisal for a Newburgh station submitted by the South East of Scotland Transport Partnership and provided feedback.

Although it opted not to take up the offer of a meeting to discuss Transport Scotland's comments on the draft detailed options appraisal report, SEStran provided a revised detailed options appraisal report. That report outlines a number of multimodal options, including a rail station, and is being considered by Transport Scotland, which will provide feedback to SEStran on the revised report during the coming weeks.

Willie Rennie: Locals have put years of work into the plan. An appraisal, in line with the Scottish transport appraisal guidance, was submitted in June last year but it took more than six months for Transport Scotland to respond. Suggested changes were made to the plan, which was resubmitted months ago, in June of this year. There is overwhelming and enthusiastic support for a new railway station at Newburgh, so when exactly will a decision be made?

Fiona Hyslop: As I said in my first answer, there will be a response in the next few weeks. To be fair, there has been a considerable amount of work by everyone, not least by the community and by those who put forward the options appraisal report. It is clear that SEStran has wanted to revise its proposal at every stage. Although that will make for a better proposal, constantly going back to revise it takes time. In this case, although patience may be a virtue, the people of Newburgh may want to see action sooner rather than later. I understand why the member asks that question.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Willie Rennie is right to say that the project is well supported by the local community. A site has been identified and there are plans to construct a platform at a relatively low cost, but progress has been glacially slow. Will the minister facilitate an early meeting between Transport Scotland and the local community action group so that we can finally see some progress on what would be a very welcome project?

Fiona Hyslop: SEStran submitted a report on the project and a revised detailed options appraisal report. As I said, there have been three revisions as part of the process. As the member well knows, the STAG appraisal must be robust and must consider a number of areas. The community case, which has been set out by many, is strong, but there are also financial and economic factors. I know that the member has held finance briefs for his party in the past and that he will know the severe financial constraints that the budget is under, not least because of the failure to provide for inflationary increases on capital budgets for this Government.

Every consideration will be given to the report and a response will be given in a few weeks time.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The local community has made a really good case for bringing a station back to Newburgh, proposing a low-cost modular station that would be of great benefit. Does the minister agree that the new modular stations have an important role to play in expanding Scotland's rail network and that developing one at Newburgh could be a trailblazer for developments that could benefit other communities?

Fiona Hyslop: It is my understanding that modular railway stations have already been used but may not be applicable to every circumstance. If a strong business case is presented for rail intervention, plans must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. If the plan for Newburgh is taken forward, we must consider the fact that modular stations are not suitable for all sites and that the design of any new or altered station must take into account the characteristics of that particular location. Acceptance of the design of station platforms is ultimately a matter for Network Rail, as the infrastructure owner, and ScotRail, as the operator.

Local Bus Services

2. Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last received an update from the traffic commissioner for Scotland on any complaints regarding local bus services. (S6O-02665)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Scottish Government officials have regular engagement with the traffic commissioner for Scotland. However, the traffic commissioner is an independently appointed regulator and does not inform officials about specific complaints that she receives. Findings of any proceedings against bus operators can be found on the office of the traffic commissioner's website.

Keith Brown: As the minister is aware, the traffic commissioner has a standard of 95 per cent for the punctuality of buses. Following a number of complaints, an investigation by Bus Users Scotland showed that only 88 per cent of some McGill's Buses services in my constituency ran on time. However, I suspect that figure to be much lower, as my constituents regularly tell me that services are cancelled at short notice, that they are unreliable and that communication is poor. That impacts on people's ability to get to work and access education and healthcare on a daily basis, and it often leaves people stranded late at night.

Can the minister outline the steps that the transport commissioner can take to ensure that McGill's takes action to improve the levels of service that are so crucial to many of my constituents?

Fiona Hyslop: In relation to punctuality and service complaints, the traffic commissioner relies on evidence that is submitted to her by BUS arising from the monitoring exercises that it carries out. If BUS finds evidence that an operator is failing to run a service in line with its registration, it can inform the traffic commissioner, who has the power to take action against the operator. That could include issuing a fine, imposing conditions on its public service vehicle licence or rejecting future service applications from the same operator.

I am aware that, on 14 August, in recognition of the punctuality and reliability issues, McGill's made a number of service changes that were designed to improve bus services in the Clackmannanshire area.

Sustainability (Net Zero Targets)

3. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it defines "sustainability" when creating policies aimed at reaching its net zero targets. (S6O-02666)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): Specific definitions can be adopted, depending on the subject matter. Of course, the natural definition is:

"development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

When exercising our functions under the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, including developing policy for our next climate change plan, Scottish ministers take into account the need to do so in a way that contributes to sustainable development, including the United Nations sustainable development goals. The 2009 act defines the goals as those that are set out in "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015.

Emma Harper: I visited Dalswinton Estate, in Dumfries and Galloway, to meet the owner, Peter Landale, and discuss how Scotland's estates are working to support rural communities and housing and to meet Scotland's net zero targets in the face of the global climate emergency. Peter described his six tenets of sustainability: efficiency of production, animal welfare, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, quality and community. Does the cabinet secretary agree that those tenets are important in ensuring that we have true sustainability that works for rural Scotland and our planet?

Màiri McAllan: Yes—I absolutely agree with the point that Emma Harper makes. I welcome the fact that businesses, including Dalswinton Estate, are recognising the need to consider economic, environmental and social sustainability in their businesses. I certainly commend the six tenets of sustainability that she narrated. That is exactly the kind of work that my colleague Mairi Gougeon and I had hoped that our vision for agriculture—among other climate strategies across the Government—would elicit.

Just Transition (Role of Industry)

4. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the just transition secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the role of industry in delivering a just transition. (S6O-02667)

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade (Richard Lochhead): Ministers including the cabinet secretary regularly discuss Scotland's just transition—including the role of key economic actors such as industry—in Cabinet meetings, Cabinet sub-committees or regular bilateral discussions. Industry and business will be critical in Scotland's just transition, ensuring that we capture the economic opportunities and mitigate the risks from the transition.

Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful for that answer, but the Scottish Trades Union Congress has previously slammed the Government's strategy for failing to outline even the basic steps to ensure a just transition, particularly for offshore oil and gas workers. We have had promise after

promise about Saudi Arabia's renewables and the 120,000 green jobs by 2020, all of which have failed to happen.

More significantly, the Scottish Government has also failed to deliver a renewables supply chain of jobs here, in Scotland, or the publicly owned energy generation company that was promised back in 2017. After that, why should Scotland's energy industry have any faith in this lacklustre Government to secure Scotland's energy needs and create a smooth transition to net zero?

Richard Lochhead: I recall some recent independent reports showing that, in relation to the creation of green jobs, Scotland was outpacing the rest of the United Kingdom. Further independent research carried out by a couple of universities showed that up to 100,000 new green jobs had been created in Scotland. We are making really good progress.

The Scottish Government helps to fund posts in the STUC to work on just transition issues. That was warmly welcomed by our trade union movement.

We will continue to work closely with the business community in Scotland and the trade union movement to secure a just transition for Scotland. Countries around the world are looking at Scotland with admiration and are full of praise for what we are achieving. It is a pity that some of the members in the chamber cannot recognise that.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Scottish supply chain businesses are key to delivering a just transition and ensuring the lasting industrial and economic benefit of Scotland's renewable energy potential, which will support highly paid jobs locally. What work is the Scottish Government doing through its supply chain development programme to leverage procurement, in particular, to help to build robust local supply chains?

Richard Lochhead: Ivan McKee raises a very good point. The supply chain development programme uses public sector procurement to improve the capacity and capability of Scottish manufacturing supply chains in the country. The programme is currently linking the opportunities that arise from our energy transition with the innovation and enterprise support that is provided by enterprise agencies such as the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland and others. At the moment, the programme is prioritising the opportunities in low-carbon heat networks and the Scottish Government's affordable housing programme, so it is playing an important role in the transition.

Access to Public Transport (Motherwell and Wishaw)

5. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to improve access to public transport for people in the Motherwell and Wishaw constituency. (S6O-02668)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): This Government and its partners have rebuilt Motherwell station, with passengers now enjoying new facilities in the station. This project has also provided enhanced interchange for bus services and has improved active travel routes to and from Motherwell town centre and the local area.

Passengers throughout Scotland, including in the member's constituency, are benefiting from lower fares as a result of our decision to trial the removal of peak fares on ScotRail services to encourage modal shift.

We are also providing unprecedented levels of support through our concessionary travel schemes, which allow free bus travel for passengers who under 22 or over 60.

Clare Adamson: Those measures are very welcome in my constituency, especially our wonderful new station.

At surgeries, I frequently come across constituents who are suffering from the effects of an austerity-driven cost of living crisis, including many people with disabilities who have not accessed free bus travel even though they are entitled to do so. Will the minister advise how we can better raise awareness of concessionary bus travel as a passported benefit for people?

Fiona Hyslop: All MSPs in the Parliament have a role in highlighting the issue to promote take-up. I agree that the schemes can make a real difference to those who are entitled to access them.

In March 2022, the Child Poverty Action Group reported that free bus travel can save a total of "£3,000 in the lifetime cost of a child in Scotland".

In spring 2023, Transport Scotland co-funded and delivered a successful national marketing campaign with the Confederation of Passenger Transport and bus operators to encourage people to return to bus or to use it for the first time. The campaign had a considerable reach at that time, and the number of concessionary journeys by older and disabled people increased by 5.8 per cent during the campaign.

Although we can have such campaigns and spend more than £300 million on such schemes, it is important that eligible disabled people, as the member mentioned, and everyone else who is eligible take up free concessionary bus travel.

Climate Adaptation Funding

6. Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to discuss climate adaptation funding. (S6O-02669)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): Ministers regularly meet COSLA, including with regard to funding, particularly as we approach a budget period. Most recently, Scottish Government officials met COSLA to discuss climate adaptation on 24 October. At that meeting, a range of issues were covered, including funding and on-going engagement with COSLA ahead of public consultation on the new climate adaptation plan, which will open early next year.

Sarah Boyack: In the past month, we have seen the impact of devastating floods. When we talk to councillor colleagues, they all comment that they are cash strapped and not getting enough support from the Scottish Government. My understanding is that funding for flood defence in Scotland is far lower per capita than it is in England and Wales, and it has flatlined over the past decade. Given the clear cross-party support for action expressed in yesterday's debate, could the cabinet secretary say how she intends to ramp up financial support for adaptation investment in our communities?

In yesterday's debate, the cabinet secretary did not comment on the Scottish Government's failure to report on progress on flood risk management plans, as is required by the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009. Could she confirm when the Scottish Government will report on that for 2021-22?

Màiri McAllan: There are a number of matters in that question; I will try to answer them all.

I agree with Sarah Boyack that funding for climate adaptation is essential. It is very clear that the future prosperity of our economy, our society and our environment is wrapped up with our ability to adapt to climate change. As we go into the budget period, I will, of course, be arguing very strongly for support for adaptation. However, I have to point out, as my colleagues will, just how difficult—how unrecognisable, frankly—the public finances are on this side of the pandemic and Brexit.

I point to the £42 million per annum that has been provided to local authorities for flooding for many years and the additional £150 million that we are already making available over the parliamentary session.

An update on the flood risk management cycle development is pending and I will bring it to Parliament as soon as I can.

Rail Services (Mid Scotland and Fife)

7. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to improve rail services for passengers in the Mid Scotland and Fife region. (S6O-02670)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government has invested consistently in the improvement of rail services in Mid Scotland and Fife. For example, new trains that are faster and greener are providing passengers travelling to Alloa with quicker journeys due to electrification, and the Levenmouth railway will reopen next year. As I mentioned earlier, passengers throughout Scotland are also benefiting from lower fares during the ScotRail peak fares removal pilot.

Claire Baker: As the minister recognises, the impact of Covid on rail passenger numbers has been significant. On taking ownership of ScotRail, the Scottish Government said that it would meet the needs of people, and those needs include inclusive pricing. Can the minister confirm when the delayed rail fares review is expected? It was expected by the end of the year; can she confirm that that is still the case?

Also, given that public finance has contributed to the rail fares pilot that she referred to, how is the Scottish Government involved in the on-going monitoring of the pilot and, in particular, its progress in encouraging new passengers on to the rail network?

Fiona Hyslop: We want to see modal shift. We have removed peak fares to encourage that, and I ask all MSPs to help to publicise that pilot. The member will be aware that, in October, we were subject to severe weather, which has clearly had an impact on the running of some services. It is important that we get behind the peak fares removal pilot to encourage modal shift.

I think that the member is referring to the fair fares review, which is due to report by the end of the year—that will happen. On the national rail conversation, as I reported to the Cabinet, I am more focused on delivery and action, so that has now been rolled into the fair fares review, as part of the analysis of rail fares.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that the question is about rail services in Mid Scotland and Fife. I call Jackie Dunbar.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): O ye of little faith, Presiding Officer.

As the minister has said in answer to a previous question, the Scottish Government has reconnected one station in Mid Scotland and Fife to the railway and will reconnect two more shortly. Will the minister remind us why that action, which

had not been taken by any previous Scottish Government, was necessary?

Fiona Hyslop: This Government has a great track record on reconnecting communities. The opening of Cameron Bridge and Leven railway stations in Levenmouth will help to reconnect communities, and the opening of the Leven station in particular will make a big difference.

We have invested more than £11 billion to give Scottish people the railway that they want and deserve. Since 2009, we have reconnected 15 communities. As I mentioned, people in Mid Scotland and Fife will benefit particularly from the opening of the stations on the Levenmouth railway.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): One of the direct consequences of improving rail services in Mid Scotland and Fife is a new ScotRail timetable under which local train services in the north-east will be slashed. What impact does the minister predict that those cuts will have on the accessibility of places such as Aberdeen, Inverurie and Stonehaven, the businesses and economy there and the modal shift that she speaks of?

Fiona Hyslop: I think that the geography of the member's region is being stretched somewhat. Looking at Mid Scotland and Fife, I note that the consultation on the Fife timetable was launched in early September and it closed on 23 October. One of the proposed options is an additional service running in Fife, which could ease the capacity issues on existing services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: My faith is restored.

Transport Infrastructure (South Scotland)

8. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on plans to develop transport infrastructure in the South Scotland region, including in relation to an upgrade of the A75 and rail links from Ayr to Stranraer and Cairnryan. (S6O-02671)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is committed to the proposals for transport infrastructure improvements that are contained in the 45 strategic transport projects review 2 recommendations, which include improved and resilient connections to Stranraer and Cairnryan, among others. The Scottish Government is using all the levers that are at our disposal to maximise investment in those recommendations as effectively as possible during these challenging times.

Following the United Kingdom Government's announcement of the availability of funding for initial appraisal work on pinchpoints on the A75, a business case was submitted to the Department for Transport in April 2023. I have received confirmation from the UK Government that it is supportive and I urge it to formalise that as soon as possible.

Brian Whittle: Long before my seven-plus years in this Parliament began, Scottish Government ministers were promising investment in the long overdue—and, some would say, forgotten—development of the A75, the A77 and rail links from Ayr to Stranraer. In 2010, Alex Salmond committed to significant transport infrastructure around the port of Cairnryan. Here we are, 13 years later, with a commitment from the UK Government to develop the A75 Euro route. Will the Scottish Government now focus on developing an A77 development plan, along with a plan for the wholly inadequate rail link from Ayr to Stranraer?

Fiona Hyslop: I say to the member that there has been considerable investment along the A77, as he well knows. He talked about the longer timeframe, but that has already happened, and investment can continue to happen.

It is not the Scottish Government's responsibility that the UK Government decided on a union connectivity review. It demonstrated that, on the A75, most of the benefits would fall outside Scotland, because the A75 is the connection to Northern Ireland. It is not my responsibility that the UK Government wants to do the Scottish transport appraisal guidance exercise. I am pleased that it has undertaken to do that. I just need formal recognition.

Work has been undertaken on the A75 and particularly the A77, with the Haggstone climbing lane, the new carriageway at Glen App, the Park End to Bennane project, the Symington and Bogend Toll project and the Maybole bypass. That bypass is a considerable improvement to the road. For the member not to recognise that does his constituents a disservice.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: With a similar reminder to my earlier one about the geographic focus of the original question, I call John Mason to ask a supplementary.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will try to be closer than Liam Kerr managed to be.

As well as the A77 and the A75, the Conservatives are demanding road improvements on the A9, the A96 and the A82, yet the Conservatives at Westminster have cut our capital budget by some 7 per cent. Can the minister explain to the Conservatives that the finances

have to add up and that we have to set priorities, or does she think that they do not understand the finance?

Fiona Hyslop: We are a responsible Government. The UK Government's mini-budget under Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng, which is within living memory, caused financial havoc. For the Conservatives not to take responsibility for that and then to come to the chamber asking for investment right across our capital infrastructure at a time of a 7 per cent reduction in our budget and a time when construction inflation is outpacing other increases in costs is unrealistic, and it is why it would be extremely unrealistic to think that another Conservative Government will ever hold office either here or at Westminster.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions. Before we move to the next item of business, there will be a brief pause to allow the front benches to change.

Edinburgh Tram Inquiry Report

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Màiri McAllan on the Edinburgh tram inquiry report. The cabinet secretary will take questions on the issues raised in the report at the end of her statement and there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:55

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition (Màiri McAllan): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement in response to the Edinburgh tram inquiry report—a comprehensive document totalling nearly 1,000 pages, which I received on the morning of publication on 19 September. The report was also laid in Parliament in line with the requirements of the Inquiries Act 2005.

I believe that the report addresses the terms of reference that were set, which were to establish why the Edinburgh tram project incurred delays, cost more than was originally budgeted for and, through reductions in scope, delivered significantly less than was projected. I recognise the extensive work and efforts of the inquiry team in delivering the report, and I thank all those who contributed to the inquiry, including the many witnesses who provided evidence.

I am aware that the construction of the original tram line caused a great deal of disruption to the residents and businesses of Edinburgh. It is important that we recognise that frustration and ensure that lessons are learned and applied to future infrastructure projects, be they local authority or central Government projects. As such, I can confirm that the Government has given careful consideration to the full report along with its recommendations, any actions required and lessons learned.

I would like to be very clear that the Government's primary objectives in establishing the inquiry and throughout the process have been to support the delivery of valid findings and recommendations, to engage meaningfully and to co-operate fully and openly in the production of evidence at the inquiry's request. Significant resources were committed to carrying out that endeavour diligently, and all those who gave evidence on behalf of the Scottish Government did so in good faith, providing the inquiry with a comprehensive and accurate view of Scottish ministers' collective position throughout.

Although I welcome the formal publication of the report, I understand and empathise with the public's frustration at the length of time that it took to conclude the inquiry, as well as the cost to the

public purse. That is particularly disappointing, as it was the Government's concern for prudent public spending that saw the commission of the inquiry in 2014. However, as an independent statutory inquiry, it would have been very much beyond the powers of Government to seek to influence the proceedings, and any questions about the length of time and the cost of the inquiry are rightly for Lord Hardie to answer.

The report contains 24 recommendations. A minority of them are directed to the Government, and they mainly concern administrative processes and record management, including minute taking and legislative and practical aspects of setting up inquiries. As I have said, all recommendations are being considered in detail.

The report also outlines 10 headline causes of failure that contributed to the delays and cost overruns associated with the project. Nine of those relate directly to the actions of the City of Edinburgh Council and its arm's-length delivery body, Transport Initiatives Edinburgh or TIE, with the 10th and final cause relating only to Scottish ministers. Indeed, the chair, Lord Hardie, is unambiguous, noting in a video statement that he produced alongside the report:

"TIE's failures were the principal cause of the failure to deliver the project on time and within budget."

He added that City of Edinburgh Council must

"also share principal responsibility with TIE for the delays in the design."

That reflects the fact that responsibility for delivery of the project, including procurement and risk of any cost overruns, belonged solely—and rightly—to City of Edinburgh Council.

The only cause of failure attributed to the actions of ministers was the decision, following the debate in Parliament in June 2007, to reposition Transport Scotland as a principal funder as opposed to a project partner. Setting aside for a moment the fact that the Government was very clear at the time about the risks inherent in the project and that it was others who are represented in the Parliament today who voted the project through, it is clear that the outcome of that vote transferred accountability to City of Edinburgh Council and necessarily altered Transport Scotland's relationship with the project.

Indeed, a failure to clarify the role of Transport Scotland would have been an abdication of leadership and would have led to poor governance and confusion around roles. The decision to alter the governance arrangements was taken explicitly to avoid uncertainty about where leadership of the project lay, clarifying the Government's role as principal funders and, on that basis, preventing further calls on the public purse. It was exactly because of the clarity and clear setting of

governance boundaries that Government funding for the project remained capped at the agreed £500 million and not a penny more. Following the parliamentary vote on the tram project, the decision to separate the roles of Transport Scotland as principal funder and City of Edinburgh Council as project lead was good governance and helped to avoid potential delay and increased risk.

As I have mentioned, the report identifies 24 recommendations, all of which I will address. There are 11 recommendations that are directed expressly at Scottish ministers: four refer to the establishment and delivery of public inquiries rather than the Edinburgh tram project itself; two are jointly for Scottish ministers and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to consider a range of measures to ensure robust project delivery; one concerns record keeping; and four relate to the provision of evidence and potential sanctions for providing misleading evidence.

We are working through all those recommendations, but I can report that additional guidance similar to that which has been suggested is already in development with reference to the efficient establishment and delivery of public inquiries and has been shared with recent inquiries as they have been established. The Government is very aware of the impact of public inquiries and the importance of supporting them effectively, ensuring efficient and timely reporting. Robust and enhanced procedures regarding minute taking and documentation management, as suggested, have already been embedded within the Government and civil service for a long time. The permanent secretary recently appeared at the Finance and Public Administration Committee and reiterated the commitment to ensuring that robust systems and processes are in place to record and manage that critical information.

I turn to the recommendations that involve collaboration with and working alongside COSLA and local authority partners. Effective collaboration sits at the heart of this Government, and the recent Verity house agreement is a testament to our commitment to embrace that collaborative approach to delivering our shared priorities for the people of Scotland. Although responsibility for the delivery of local authority projects must, quite rightly, remain with councils as project leads, I have absolutely no hesitation in championing close working with our local authority partners.

The remaining 13 recommendations cover a range of areas relating to the governance and delivery of light rail projects. Although the recommendations are directed squarely at project leads and local authority officials, there is a link to much of the work that is being done by the Government and its agencies, including Transport

Scotland. I am pleased to report that the Government and its public bodies already operate in line with those recommendations and the suggested best practice, as evidenced by our excellent record of delivering major infrastructure projects including the Borders railway, the Edinburgh-Glasgow improvement programme, the Aberdeen western peripheral route and the Queensferry crossing over the Forth estuary, which is a complex engineering feat that has put our workmanship to the front and centre of global engineering.

Furthermore, we follow detailed Government guidance on procurement, risk and optimism bias, as enshrined in the Treasury's green book, the Scottish Government's client guide to construction projects and the Scottish public finance manual. Indeed, the identification and management of risk and adherence to best practice on business case production and assessment rests at the heart of project and programme delivery in Transport Scotland and the wider Government. Transport Scotland always follows published best-practice guidance when setting up project governance structures and has its own guidance on governance procedures for investment decision making, monitoring and review.

I emphasise that we will continue to carefully consider each of the recommendations, noting where action has already been taken or where it has always been best practice, as well as, crucially, noting where we can go further.

I acknowledge that we came into government with a manifesto commitment to abandon the project and to spend the £500 million of promised funding on other high-priority infrastructure programmes, but, once the will of the Parliament was made clear, this Government endeavoured to ensure that our involvement with the project followed good governance practice at all times. For that reason, it was essential that we provided clarity around roles following the vote in favour of the project, thereby providing a clear sponsorship structure that allowed us to assume the role of principal funder and ensure that public funds were monitored and that grant conditions were applied in compliance with published guidance at all times.

Although I reiterate the fact that nine of the 10 lead criticisms in the report relate to matters that clearly lie within the responsibility of City of Edinburgh Council and TIE, I acknowledge that lessons must be learned from the report by all the parties involved. We will give full consideration to the recommendations and to any actions that follow, thereby ensuring that lessons are learned and that best practice is always followed for major project infrastructure.

I thank everyone who took the time to provide evidence to the inquiry, and I again point to the full

co-operation of this Government. The provision of evidence that demonstrated a comprehensive, transparent and accurate view of events underpinned the approach that was taken to the inquiry by this Government, by ministers and by officials, and I commend that approach to Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for that, after which we will need to move on to the next item of business.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for providing advance sight of her statement.

After almost 10 years and £13 million of taxpayers' money, there is very little in the statement to suggest that Scottish National Party ministers have accepted their role in the failures around the Edinburgh tram project. The former Deputy First Minister John Swinney is mentioned 156 times by name in the report, but not once did the cabinet secretary mention him in her statement.

The cabinet secretary has stated that the only cause of failure that is attributed to the actions of the Scottish ministers was the decision, following the debate in the Parliament in June 2007, to reposition Transport Scotland as principal funder as opposed to project partner. That is the understatement of the century. Lord Hardie states:

"The actions of the Scottish Ministers ... and ... the limitations imposed by them on the involvement of officials in 2007 was a serious error and resulted in the failure by the Scottish Ministers to protect the public purse".

Does the cabinet secretary now accept that the decision to withdraw Transport Scotland was, indeed, a serious error? Who in the Scottish Government is taking responsibility for that?

Màiri McAllan: Miles Briggs is absolutely right to point out that the cost of the inquiry and the time that it took to report are not satisfactory, although I have to say that those are matters over which the Scottish ministers have no locus whatsoever. Any interference on our part would have been rightly criticised. Questions about time and cost are for Lord Hardie.

I caveat Miles Briggs's comments about responsibility by making it clear that I and the Government have considered carefully all the recommendations and findings. I again point him to the fact that one out of 10 of those—the final one out of 10—is attributed to the Scottish ministers and that a minority of recommendations are put to the Scottish Government. Many of the recommendations that apply to the Scottish Government were instituted years ago. Miles Briggs really ought to keep up.

I want to focus on the point about the principal finding of failure in relation to the Scottish ministers and about the separation of the roles. In my remarks, I narrated the fact that this Government came into government in 2007 not supporting the trams, but we were instructed to proceed by a vote in the Parliament, which I understand was led by an Opposition amendment from Labour's Wendy Alexander. When we got that instruction to make the promised funding available, we did so, but that necessitated a separation of roles, with Transport Scotland, which had previously been part of project delivery, becoming the principal funder.

I want to quote Mr Heath of Partnerships UK, who was one of the only independent witnesses who commented on that point in the inquiry. He said:

"I think it was very sensible at the time. Complex projects require the simplest overall governance structure and reporting to both CEC and TS with inevitably different emphasis in their reporting requirements would have been unnecessarily burdensome and introduced potential decision delay and risk."

Therefore, I do not agree with the finding.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): First and foremost, it is important to acknowledge that, now that they have been delivered, the trams are running successfully and the feedback from the people of Edinburgh is largely positive.

It is clear that City of Edinburgh Council has recognised the errors that were made and has learned lessons from those errors in its successful delivery of phase 2 of the project. The council has had the good grace to acknowledge its mistakes and to apologise—something that the SNP Government seems incapable of doing. Even after the report and today's statement, I still pose the question of what lessons the Scottish Government has learned. The report was damning of the Scottish Government's involvement—or, indeed, non-involvement—in the project throughout Transport Scotland's time.

The question, therefore, remains: is Transport Scotland fit for purpose, and does it have the capacity to provide oversight and support for the large-scale, multipartner infrastructure projects—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary.

Alex Rowley: —that Scotland so desperately needs?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary. Mr Rowley, please resume your seat.

Màiri McAllan: Alex Rowley is right to mention that people in Edinburgh now enjoy the proper running of the trams and the fact that the council

went on to produce successful additions. That probably underlines that Transport Scotland's involvement was not required in those additional sections, and it probably undermines some of the report's findings about our role at the time.

Transport Scotland is absolutely fit for purpose. Every day, my colleague Fiona Hyslop and I have the pleasure of working with many experts, who work exceptionally hard to ensure the running of our transport system and the development of major projects in Scotland. I was proud to reel off in my statement a number of successes: the Aberdeen western peripheral route, the Queensferry crossing and the Borders railway, among many others. I have absolute faith in Transport Scotland.

Ultimately, the report is a historical piece of work. Although we have considered very carefully all its recommendations, many of them are facets of the past, and the changes were instituted years ago.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The Scottish Government was clear in 2007 about its position on the Edinburgh trams and on the Edinburgh airport rail link that some members also wanted at that time, which would have taken even more millions away from the capital budget for other parts of the country. Will the cabinet secretary confirm that, after the Parliament voted to deliver the tram project, the Scottish Government provided assistance to those who were tasked with delivering the trams?

Màiri McAllan: As I have highlighted, the outcome of that vote in Parliament in 2007 was instructive, and we respected it. We transferred accountability for the project to City of Edinburgh Council. That necessarily altered Transport Scotland's relationship with the council. The decision to alter those governance arrangements was made in order to avoid any uncertainty about where leadership of the project lay and to ensure that Scottish ministers' role was strictly as principal funders. Not only did that transfer do that—the evidence reflects that that was the right governance decision—but, arguably, it protected the public funds of the Scottish Government from being called on in future years as the project languished.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): John Swinney is named throughout Lord Hardie's report, and most of it is criticism. Lord Hardie said:

"Mr Swinney said that he would do nothing differently if doing the project again ... the conclusion of what I have considered ... is that that would be an error."

Is that a valid finding?

Màiri McAllan: I repeat the remark that I made in response to a previous question: the actions of John Swinney and the decisions that he took

following the vote in the Parliament, which, I stress, was supported not by the Government but by the Opposition, not only created the right governance structure, with the separation of roles—I again point to the comments of Mr Heath of Partnerships UK—but ensured, arguably, that we were able to stick to what John Swinney said about providing £500 million and not a penny more, so the funds of the Scottish Government were protected.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The inquiry has taken a ridiculous amount of time and cost a ridiculous amount of money. It seems that some lawyers have no sense of urgency or of keeping to time. I take the cabinet secretary's point that such inquiries have to be independent, but surely there is some way of putting a constraint on the length of time and the cost of them.

Màiri McAllan: I understand the sentiment behind John Mason's question. I agree with him, as I agreed with Miles Briggs, that the length of time that the inquiry took and the costs that mounted are not acceptable. To be frank, however, I stress again that the time that was spent and the costs that were incurred were not matters over which we had any say whatsoever, and it would have been wrong for us to have had any say over them.

However, we have been developing guidance on public inquiries to support not only the operation of inquiries but civil servants who support such inquiries. It is worth pointing out that, when we decide whether to convene a public inquiry, we must consider the costs that could arise from it.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The cabinet secretary's answers have relied on the fact that Transport Scotland's scope was reduced to that of being just a funder, but Lord Hardie found that the Scottish Government provided inadequate oversight of that funding. He described the Scottish Government's reliance on "covert influence", which involved no record or minute keeping.

Recommendation 12 outlines the key improvements that are needed for transparency and accountability. Will the Government commit to accepting that recommendation in full and reviewing its interactions with Transport Scotland and delivery partners?

Màiri McAllan: I have pointed out that all the recommendations have been considered and will continue to be considered by Scottish ministers. Daniel Johnson mentioned the recommendation on record keeping, minuting and document retention. Such practices were instituted years

ago; the report captures a period that is, to be frank, very much in the past.

The Scottish Government, Transport Scotland and Scottish ministers committed to supporting the inquiry fulsomely and in the best of faith. That included the provision of written and oral statements from everybody who was involved.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): The Edinburgh tram inquiry has to lead to good governance in urban infrastructure projects and not to any hesitation to invest in the public transport networks that our cities and towns need. What assurance can the cabinet secretary give that the Government will continue to support mass transit projects, such as further Edinburgh tram expansion or the proposed Clyde metro?

Màiri McAllan: It is apt to consider the learning from the Edinburgh tram project inquiry as we embark on the Clyde metro. I have mentioned a number of times that there are recommendations on light rail projects and engagement between Transport Scotland and local authorities, and we will take all of that on board. One recommendation is about Transport Scotland's involvement in the delivery of projects. I have made it clear this afternoon that my view is that our decision in 2007 to separate the roles was right, and I would like that approach to continue as instituted.

On the Clyde metro, since publication of the strategic transport projects review 2, we have had a multipartner client delivery group, which includes Transport Scotland, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport and Glasgow City Council, to define better the scale of the work that the metro might represent and the associated governance around it. We will take into account the tram inquiry's findings as we take that work forward.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Shopkeepers, business owners and residents in our nation's capital have all been denied answers for far too long because of the time that the inquiry has taken to report. The inquiry did not happen in isolation; there are similar inquiries—particularly those on Covid-19 and on Professor Eljamel—that victims will be looking to for answers. What lessons can the Scottish Government learn from the time that was taken and the mistakes that were made in delivery of the tram inquiry?

Màiri McAllan: I understand the interest in and the point about time and costs. I have noted that the Scottish Government has to consider those carefully when deciding whether to start an inquiry. However, members must understand that, once a decision has been made to institute an inquiry and once it has—as in this case—been supported to move to a statutory footing, ministers cannot dictate the time or the cost.

I note that one of Lord Hardie's recommendations was about presenting only the net costs of public inquiries, less the costs for accommodation and staff. To be frank, I do not agree with that recommendation. Full transparency on costs and publication of them are in the public interest.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): There are serious questions to be asked about the value of the inquiry report's conclusions and whether they are sufficiently supported by the evidence. What process will the Scottish Government follow to identify the most valuable and evidence-driven recommendations in the report?

Màiri McAllan: As I have said, the report contains 24 recommendations, a minority of which are directed to the Government. Those that relate to the Government concern administrative processes, records management, minute taking and some legislative aspects of setting up inquiries. We have considered all the recommendations, taking into account the length of time that has passed since the inquiry was originally set up and the extent to which a number of the recommendations are already standard practice—particularly those on records management, those on the legislative and practical aspects of setting up inquiries and those relating to project governance. I have already said—I will repeat it for the member's sake—that we have already worked on guidance for public inquiries and their interaction with Scottish Government sponsored bodies and, equally, for civil servants in order to help them to interact with inquiries.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): In response to the inquiry, the charity Living Streets highlighted the accessibility challenges that are faced by people who walk, wheel and cycle and who then want to integrate their journeys with the tram. Are there lessons to be learned about how those groups will be engaged with and their needs taken into account in the design and procurement processes of future transport projects?

Màiri McAllan: There absolutely are such lessons. I point out, for the record, that design and procurement were matters for the project leads, namely City of Edinburgh Council and TIE, and not for the Scottish Government. However, everyone has lessons to learn about the development of such projects.

I assure Mark Ruskell that suitable provision for all users, including pedestrians, cyclists and wheelers, is a really important part of Scottish Government infrastructure projects, as is engagement with community and interest groups. We put that at the heart of development of our

projects. Impact assessments that are prepared at the early stages evolve throughout the development of any policy, and they always require engagement with the people who are affected. We will continue to practise that approach.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Councillors rely on the accuracy of reports to enable them to take informed decisions, but on the Edinburgh tram project it is clear that councillors were misled by high-level officials at City of Edinburgh Council. In the inquiry's report, Lord Hardie blasts Nick Smith of City of Edinburgh Council's legal department for making inaccurate reports to councillors. Will the cabinet secretary lay out what action will be taken to hold to account those who are responsible? What reforms will be put in place to prevent that from happening again?

Màiri McAllan: Ms Webber is absolutely right to highlight a part of the report that particularly stood out for me, too. I am sure that City of Edinburgh Council, and local authorities throughout Scotland, will give considerable thought to that.

As for what the Government can do, the report recommended to us the development of specific sanctions under the civil law of damages, and made a call for a criminal statutory offence. We are giving careful consideration to both those recommendations. Our current view is that there might already be provision for such developments under the civil law of delictual liability and the criminal common law of fraud, but we will continue to consider the matter.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): In the time that it has taken for the inquiry to conclude, the previous Scottish National Party-led Administration at City of Edinburgh Council approved an extension of the tram line to Newhaven, which successfully opened to the public this summer, on time and within budget. Edinburgh residents can take some satisfaction from the fact that lessons were clearly learned from the first tram scheme. Does the Edinburgh tram inquiry report provide, for mass transit in Scotland, any further lessons that have not already been applied in the past nine years?

Màiri McAllan: Jackie Dunbar makes a good point. The extension of the tram line to Newhaven was delivered on time and within budget. I add that that was thanks to the strong leadership and hard work of SNP councillors. However, that also underlines the point about the principal finding of failure, in the inquiry's view, in the role of Transport Scotland and the appropriateness of separating roles. I agree that it was appropriate to separate them. The work to Newhaven demonstrates that Transport Scotland's involvement was not required.

As I have said to a number of members, the report contains a suite of recommendations, a minority of which apply to the Scottish Government. Many of them were instituted years ago, but we will continue to consider the remainder.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): The inquiry clearly shows that the Scottish Government walked away from the major capital project. Recommendation 10 in the inquiry report advises Scottish ministers to consider

“establishing a joint working group consisting of officials in Transport Scotland and representatives of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities ... to consider how best to take advantage of ... the necessary skills and expertise within Transport Scotland”

to deliver future projects on time and within budget. Will the Scottish Government implement that recommendation in future large infrastructure projects?

Màiri McAllan: We will consider that recommendation on a case-by-case basis. The recommendation itself applies only to light rail, so that minimises the cases that it could apply to, but we will absolutely consider it. However, I must again reiterate that the inquiry heard evidence that separation of roles, which took Transport Scotland from being a funder in principle to principal funder, was good governance. I have already quoted some independent witnesses to the inquiry.

I also point to the 2011 Audit Scotland report, which took note of that move and the separation of roles but made absolutely no adverse comment about it at the time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the statement.

Alex Rowley: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Earlier, you quite rudely stopped me as I was trying to finish my question. Can you reflect on the time that is given for questions on statements, as opposed to the time that we spend on debates? If we are going to hold the Government to account, we should be able to put questions and do so without being stopped in full flow.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Rowley, please resume your seat. That is not a point of order. I was not rude; I was going by what was agreed by the Parliamentary Bureau with regard to timings for the statement, which involved an opening question from the main Opposition party of one minute and 30 seconds, and a minute for a question from the Labour front bench. I would have thought that you have been in Parliament sufficiently long to know that, Mr Rowley. I also think that you are coming pretty close to challenging a ruling of the chair.

Early Childhood Development Transformational Change Programme

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11053, in the name of Jenni Minto, on the early childhood development transformational change programme. I invite members wishing to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now, or as soon as possible.

15:27

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): It is a great privilege to open the debate on our early childhood development transformational change programme. I believe that it will create the opportunity and momentum for us to come together to help build the healthier, fairer and more successful nation that we want to see, by creating the conditions for future generations to thrive. Children get only one chance at childhood, so we must ensure that, whether we are parents, practitioners or politicians, we do what we can to get it right for every child.

There is nothing more important than giving our children the best start in life. The period of a child's life from before they are born and through the very early years is a unique and critically important period of development. It is when lives are shaped, laying the foundations for future health and wellbeing. As a nation, we must collectively do all that we can to support, help and nurture their growth. The World Health Organization is clear that all children need nurturing care during that early period. That means that the care that they get needs to be sensitive and responsive to their needs, providing the right nutrition and opportunities to play, learn and grow up healthy and safe from all types of harm.

That is why, in this year's programme for government, we included a clear commitment to continue to invest in primary prevention from pre-birth through the earliest years, to ensure that children have the nurturing care that they need to improve their outcomes, and to provide enhanced support for speech and language development during the critical window in the early years.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I appreciate and agree with much of what Jenni Minto is saying. However, does she not recognise that, at the moment, the waits for speech and language services across much of the country are simply unacceptable?

Jenni Minto: Through the programme, we are gathering evidence to ensure that we improve what is going on across the country. We are working hard to deliver that.

I am proud of the work that is already going on across Scotland, and I am grateful to the volunteers, practitioners and support networks that make that work happen. The power to do that is in our communities, and it is reflected in the African proverb:

“It takes a village to raise a child.”

However, I know that families are experiencing challenges now like never before. With the impact of the pandemic and cost of living pressures, care givers’ wellbeing and capacity are a major factor in providing nurturing care. We must therefore ensure that they get the support that they need. I am pleased that partners are already working on that across Scotland through the whole family wellbeing fund.

In Scotland, our families have the support of the health visitor pathway. That means that we get an early indication of concerns about early child development. Covid has pushed up those concerns, and we are determined to turn that around. I particularly want to see children in our most deprived areas thrive. Our early child development programme will ensure that more children develop to meet their potential.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the minister take an intervention?

Jenni Minto: I would like to make some progress.

By working together, we will create a culture, an environment and a society that enhance early child development. I saw that in action when I attended the picnic at the Parliament as part of Scottish breastfeeding week. Meeting staff and volunteers as well as parents and babies demonstrated the dedication and enthusiasm for that important work. The right support at the right time for mums makes a world of difference. I know that there is fantastic work across Scotland that looks at how we can create a more positive culture around breastfeeding. That involves everyone, not just mums.

We are building on the foundations of much excellent work in Scotland. For example, we have our brilliant baby box, which has reached more than quarter of a million families since 2017. That ensures that every family with a newborn has the essential items that are needed in the first six months of a child’s life. It helps our health visitors to support parents to help their children’s development, through using the contents of the box to have conversations on issues such as home safety and safe sleep and promoting actions

to support aspects of child health, such as teeth brushing.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The Scottish Government’s own research on the baby box found questions raised by professionals. Jenni Minto mentioned breastfeeding—questions were raised about how that can be improved through the box. What is the Scottish Government doing about improving the content and information on that?

Jenni Minto: That is a fair question from Mr Whitfield. We are gathering information so that we can understand the different requirements. We have a really strong process that we are working through to gain information from people who have been lucky enough to receive the box and to think about how things can change.

We know that things are hard for a lot of parents and that they need support. This week, a Queen’s Nursing Institute nurse told me how she can see the positive impacts on babies and their families when a wee bit of extra support can be given. We have delivered the internationally recognised family nurse partnership programme across Scotland for more than 12,000 young parents. That makes a real difference for them and their babies. Our best start maternity and neonatal programme, with the introduction of our neonatal transition care, keeps mothers and babies together, which is crucial for bonding and attachment.

I was very fortunate to open the best start learning event in the summer. Midwives and maternity teams from our health boards came together to learn from one another and recognise the success of continuity of carer in improving outcomes for women and their babies.

The introduction of our young patients family fund provides essential financial support for meals, travel and accommodation, and it supports families to stay with their babies and children when they are in hospital.

Meghan Gallacher: A leaked document from staff at a Lanarkshire hospital has shown that senior medics fear for the safety of babies if the specialised centre at the Wishaw neonatal unit is downgraded. Does the minister share my concerns that medics in the facility in Wishaw are concerned about those proposals? As a result, should that be reviewed?

Jenni Minto: We are currently speaking to medics in the neonatal unit in Wishaw. However, I take the opportunity to emphasise the important, evidence-driven changes that we are making in neonatal intensive care. Due to pioneering advances in medicine, babies who are born at the extremes of prematurity today stand a much better chance of healthy survival. Evidence tells us that

that complex care is safest in units that treat a higher number of babies, with co-located specialist services so that they can get the best chance in life.

We need to join up our policies and services, building a more strategic approach that is centred around the needs of children and families. That will build on so many examples of great collaboration, from the wonderfully fun bookbug sessions to the valuable and crucial care that we provide through our universal health services.

The transformational change programme will build on the significant approaches that we are already delivering, with a shared aim of improving early child development and clearly reducing the level of child development concerns. Without intervention to support babies, young children and adults who are affected by adversity, we hold back our nation in terms of both the long-term consequences for jobs and income and the health and wellbeing of our citizens.

We need to act collectively, and we need to act now, to support all the children, parents and carers who need help. Healthy and positive early child development requires family-friendly environments, services and supports that are focused on the needs and rights of babies and young families. Delivering that requires action across Government, with the support of health boards, local authorities and the third sector.

By working together, we will achieve outcomes that are greater than the sum of their parts. I believe that, with the right action, we could see the level of early child development concerns reduce by a quarter by 2030. I am sure that we can all, across the chamber, agree that creating a culture and environment that fully support every child's development is of utmost importance.

Children are the adults of tomorrow, and providing those future adults with the best life chances, the highest quality of life and the opportunity to contribute positively to the economy and to society must start even before they are born. I hope that members on all sides of the chamber can recognise the excellent progress that we have made, while agreeing that more is needed if we are to truly make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in.

I highlight a quote from the World Bank, which says:

“Investing in the early years is one of the smartest investments a country can make to break the cycle of poverty, address inequality, and boost productivity later in life.”

I whole-heartedly recognise that position. I and my ministerial colleagues are focused on ensuring that Scotland is a nation where children can develop, grow and reach their full potential. I

commend the motion to Parliament and thank all members here today for their continued support of measures to promote early child development, for our youngest children of today and future generations of tomorrow.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the need for an Early Child Development Transformational Change programme to build on the excellent and world-leading practice already delivered in Scotland, and to further act on the unique and critical period of child development from pre-pregnancy to age three, when experiences and the environment shape the foundations for life and population health, including physical and mental health and wellbeing, life expectancy, educational attainment and participation in the economy and community; is committed to focussing collective efforts on giving all babies and children in Scotland the best possible start by making sure that the Scottish Government applies the latest evidence and continues to invest in and improve its existing policies, to ensure that it is “getting it right for every child”; considers that it can build on the targeted investments that it has already made in support of families pre-birth to three and that joint working can create a culture, environment, economy and society that prioritises and enhances early child development, to realise its ambition of creating a more healthy, fair and equal society; notes the negative impact that the UK Government austerity measures and policies such as the two-child benefit cap continue to have on child development, and welcomes Scottish Government interventions, including the Baby Box and the Scottish Child Payment, to give children the best possible start in life.

15:37

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

As much as I understand that the Scottish Government recognises a need for an early child development transformational change programme, it is difficult to welcome, and even to debate, a programme that is nothing more than a voice of intent. I also understand that the motion affords Scottish National Party members the opportunity, over the course of an hour and a half, to enjoy a round of self-congratulatory pats on the back while berating the United Kingdom Government. One would be forgiven for thinking that there was an election on the horizon.

However, I am happy to talk about the commitment to focusing collective efforts on giving all babies and children in Scotland the best possible start. There is so much to say, and I know that my colleagues will expand on many of these points during the debate, but I will pick out three main points from the Conservative amendment to ensure that we are getting it right for every child, starting with pre-birth.

More and more evidence is coming forward about the importance of pre-birth support and the effects on the fetus from the environment and the detrimental health of the mother. We know about

the negative effects of cigarettes and alcohol on a baby's development within the womb; we can physically see how fetal alcohol syndrome causes brain damage and growth problems, and we know that those effects are irreversible.

There is also neonatal abstinence syndrome. Recent evidence on NAS states that babies born with opioid addiction, within the first few weeks after birth, are likely to suffer from tremors and convulsions, excessive crying, poor suckling or slow weight gain, breathing problems, sweating and lack of sleep, to name but a few.

That is nothing compared to the long-term problems that can drastically hinder a person throughout their life. Neonatal abstinence syndrome will result in brain developmental delays, motor problems due to poor bone, muscle and movement growth, behavioural and learning problems, speech and language problems, insomnia, ear infections and even reduced vision. Early detection is imperative. Antenatal and neonatal services are, therefore, so important.

Literally no number of baby boxes or child payments will ever be able to make a difference if children are born with completely avoidable syndromes. With Education Scotland's figures showing that between 3 and 5 per cent of learners have fetal alcohol spectrum disorders and recent information that more than 1,000 children have been born with NAS within the past five years, it is disappointing that the SNP has downgraded neonatal services, and that there are still almost 6,000 midwifery posts that have not been filled.

My second point is about access to child mental health services. The Scottish Government likes to talk about getting it right for every child, and it has done so again in its motion today. However, as is so often the case, the rhetoric very rarely meets reality. There is a mental health crisis among children and young people, which the Government has failed to get close to dealing with. On the SNP's watch, Scots across the country are waiting far too long for mental health treatment, and none more so than in child and adolescent mental health services. We should remember that the SNP has never met its CAMHS target for 90 per cent of children and young people to start treatment within 18 weeks.

In 2022, almost 9,000 children were refused mental health treatment. Between January and June this year, 4,640 referrals to CAMHS were rejected. In my region of Mid Scotland and Fife, in the quarter ending March 2023 alone, NHS Forth Valley rejected 225 CAMHS referrals. Long delays in accessing treatment can lead to more entrenched difficulties by the time a child or young person is able to access a service. Time and time again, we stand in the chamber and voice our collective will to keep the Promise, but that is

impossible if we do not recognise the connection to the mental health of the young people in Scotland.

Let us again look at the CAMHS statistics for Forth Valley in my region. Recent figures showed that NHS Forth Valley has missed a key child mental health waiting time target. Between January and March 2023, 42 per cent began treatment within 18 weeks, which is absolutely disgusting considering that the target is 90 per cent. Less than half of our young people are being seen within the allocated timeframe. More than two thirds are waiting over a year to begin treatment in the first place. Failing to solve the CAMHS crisis will lead to poor mental health outcomes for future generations.

My third point is about the early years. The proposal for the 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare was well discussed when I was a councillor, and we were constantly reassured that the only way to ensure the provision was to work actively and proactively with childminders and the private nursery sector. It was also highly stressed that the aim was to facilitate a blended approach, allowing parents to plan and utilise the correct variables and choices of childcare that were right for their child's needs.

It was always going to be impossible to meet the targets without the support of childminders and the private nursery sector. Therefore, I wonder what has happened. Why do we now have private nurseries closing, fewer centres providing funded early learning and childcare than in 2021, and fewer three and four-year-olds registered than in 2021? Why have a third of childminders quit the profession since 2016, and why are we being advised that the number will increase to 64 per cent, which means that almost two thirds of childminders will be gone within the next three years?

Audit Scotland found that the Scottish Government's previous flagship policy to reduce child poverty—the 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare—was now "fragile" due to

"budget pressures and risks around workforce and the sustainability of funded providers ... which are important to achieving the intended policy outcomes."

Surely, child poverty is still high on the agenda. I look forward to the Scottish Government sorting out that situation as a matter of urgency.

It is impossible for the SNP to get it right for every child and to achieve the transformational change to which the minister refers when its policies are failing young children across Scotland right now. When we eventually get some detail about the early childhood development transformational change programme, I hope that the SNP will stand up, recognise the implications

for the Promise and finally make tangible inroads on the outcomes for all Scotland's children.

I move amendment S6M-11053.2, to leave out from "the need" to end and insert:

"that work must be done to act on the unique and critical period of child development from pre-pregnancy to age three, when experiences and the environment shape the foundations for life and population health, including physical and mental health and wellbeing, life expectancy, educational attainment and participation in the economy and community; is committed to focussing collective efforts on giving all babies and children in Scotland the best possible start; regrets, however, that it cannot welcome an Early Child Development Transformational Change programme without the detail of what this programme entails; believes that there must be a new Early Years Framework, which was last updated in 2009; notes that, under the Scottish National Party administration, Scotland does not have an excellent and world-leading practice; understands that the Scottish Government has downgraded neonatal services across Scotland and is failing to support children and families pre-birth; acknowledges that the childminding workforce has declined by a third since 2016 and that an Audit Scotland report concluded that the early years and childcare sector is fragile due to budget pressures and risks around workforce sustainability; recognises the mental health crisis among children and young people, which can lead to significant problems later in life; is concerned that the Scottish Government failed to meet its target to clear Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) waiting lists, and calls on the Scottish Government to meet its target for 90% of children and young people to start treatment within 18 weeks, which it has never done before."

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Martin Whitfield to speak to amendment S6M-11053.1.

15:45

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate because, to echo what Jenni Minto said in her contribution, children are the most important people in Scotland. I hope that accountants will not think it unfair of me to say that children are the most important asset that we have. Most importantly, our young people are our future and we owe it to them to move heaven, earth, stone and water to ensure that they have the best life.

For a number of years, we have heard that Scotland should be the best place in the world to grow up. I absolutely agree with that, but I think today's debate is a missed opportunity to discuss the complex issue behind the question that it poses. The answer is not simply to get one part of the jigsaw correct: unless we put all the pieces in place, we are going to fail, no matter how successful certain elements are.

This is in no way a criticism of Jenni Minto, but I am slightly concerned about data. We had a short exchange about the baby box. In August 2021, the Scottish Government undertook a review of the

baby box scheme. Much of that is rightly successful, but the objective evidence showed that 26 per cent of the parents who were interviewed said that they needed additional support, specifically with breastfeeding. The Government has that data. Of the 72 per cent of professionals who had received training regarding the baby box, 37 per cent said that that was insufficient. With respect, the data is there. What is missing is the conclusions that might be drawn from that data, the strategies to improve those percentages and the policies that would make changes, which we should be debating here. After that, we can have an exchange about where training is needed.

Jenni Minto: It is important to recognise that the Government has invested an additional £9 million in breastfeeding and that 46 per cent of babies aged from six to eight weeks are now being breastfed, which is the highest ever rate. We also have far wider recognition and understanding that mothers can breastfeed in many different locations across Scotland.

Martin Whitfield: I am now concerned that we are having a debate in which we are being told that we are trying to find data when data actually exists. Could we not have had a debate about where and how that money is being spent and whether it is reaching the families who are most in need? As we heard in Roz McCall's powerful opening speech, significant numbers of young people are born facing challenges that we are not addressing. Out of respect for the people of Scotland, and particularly out of respect for our young people, we should be taking the opportunity to debate those facts. I look forward to the next debate.

Meghan Gallacher: Does the member agree that it would also be helpful if before today's debate, Opposition parties had been made privy to what the programme would actually mean for young people?

Martin Whitfield: Absolutely. Information is all.

Jenni Minto: Will the member accept an intervention?

Martin Whitfield: I will proceed or we will get stuck in a cul-de-sac.

Information is all and we must know what the ideas are. People in this chamber and across Scotland—professionals, parents and our young people—have a lot to contribute so that we can bring about the exceptional life that children truly deserve from us. We could have been having that debate, which might have been the start of a debate on those ideas. We will certainly have to return to this.

One challenge that I find, and which I raised in connection with evidence on the bill to incorporate

the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child into Scots law, is that so much time is wasted. That may be less important to an adult than to a child. We heard during First Ministers' questions today that a child may have left high school before there is an appropriate transition in place for them. We are letting down generation after generation and that is unfair on them, because they are looking to us and they expect more.

I realise that time is particularly tight this afternoon, Presiding Officer, so I am going to finish with a great point that will, no doubt, cause utter controversy across the chamber. It is worth remembering that the last Labour Government reduced by 2 million the number of children who were growing up in poverty in the United Kingdom—that is 200,000 children in Scotland. Despite all of the offerings from the SNP-Green Government to improve that, we are in a worse position now than we were then, and that disappoints.

15:50

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I will start with a quote from one of my favourite Nobel prize winners, the economist Professor James Heckman. He said:

“some kids win the lottery at birth, far too many don't—and most people have a hard time catching up over the rest of their lives.”

He went on to say:

“Early investment in the lives of disadvantaged children will help reduce inequality, in both the short and the long run”.

I do not think that anybody in the chamber would disagree with that.

There is a common understanding about what we are trying to do, and I accept that some of the work that the Government has done has been positive. The expansion to the 1,140 hours for three and four-year-olds and some two-year-olds is a good thing, and I think that it has made a difference to many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. I take some credit for the expansion to the disadvantaged two-year-olds, which I eventually persuaded Alex Salmond to adopt after considerable and repeated badgering in this Parliament over many months. The support for those two-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds is an important part of raising the life chances for that group.

Martin Whitfield: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: Let me just say this next bit.

It is a bit odd that today's debate is broadly about rhetoric rather than a plan. I like the rhetoric;

I could talk about rhetoric all day. However, we need a plan if we are going to have a meaningful discussion about what is next.

We have got into some of the detail today. I think that the Government's proposals for family nurse partnerships and breastfeeding are equally good. The steps on minimum unit pricing for alcohol—which deal with some of the points that Roz McCall was talking about in relation to alcohol and drugs—are helpful.

However, there are big midwife shortages and huge CAMHS waits. We have real problems around the issues that Oliver Mundell was raising about speech and language therapists. It would be good to have a plan about how will tackle those issues so that we can examine what is going forward.

I want to get some clarity from the minister on a really important point—that she will not be surprised to hear me make—about the private, voluntary and independent sector. We have had promises for a long time, including from the First Minister during the leadership hustings for his party, that he was going to solve the problem. I welcome the £12 an hour living wage increase—that is a good thing. However, the minister knows that that is not going to solve the problem on its own. The problem is that experienced staff are leaving the PVI sector because they can earn more elsewhere. That is threatening the quality of the education and care that those facilities provide. In future years, we might face some really negative Education Scotland and Care Inspectorate reports. We need to deal with the problem now so that we can avoid that in the future.

I will give an example. I received a report from Cambusbarrow village nursery near Stirling, which has been recruiting for a new member of staff. It found that the starting salary for early years practitioners in the local council was £16.02 an hour. The Government promised to fund £12 per hour starting salaries for the PVI sector. That leaves that nursery to fill a gap of £4 if it has a hope of getting anybody to work in that post—it is expected to cover a third extra. God knows where it will get the money from, because the sector is not rolling in money. The Government has somehow built in a discrimination that means that the nursery worker in Cambusbarrow village nursery will be expected to provide exactly the same quality service as the worker in the council nursery for £4 an hour less. Who is going to do that job? The Government has, by design, built that discrimination into its funding of the PVI sector. That has got to change. If we are going to have a hope of getting good quality, flexible private nursery provision, which is a major part of the Government's offer, the Government really

needs to solve that problem—ideally very soon and in the next budget.

15:54

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Scotland is leading the way in giving children the best start in life. I am proud to say that that is internationally recognised and evidenced through the groundbreaking baby box, the Scottish child payment and so much more.

Across the country, more than 250,000 baby boxes have been delivered since the start of the scheme in August 2017. Since August 2021, the Scottish Government has delivered at least 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare for all eligible three and four-year-olds, saving families £4,900 per year.

Children living in poverty can never flourish or have the best start in life. That is why the Scottish Government has invested £1.3 billion in the game-changing Scottish child payment, which is forecast this financial year to lift 50,000 children out of poverty—the figure is 90,000 when the payment is combined with other benefits. Currently at £25 per week, the payment has been increased by 150 per cent since its inception, and it is available for all children up to the age of 16.

The Scottish child payment is unique to Scotland, and it is one of the most ambitious policy interventions to reduce child poverty in recent history. That is despite the financial challenges emanating from the UK Government's callous cuts and the abhorrent two-child benefit cap, which affects almost 81,000 children across Scotland.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation believes that the Scottish child payment is significantly reducing child poverty. In addition to many other measures to promote wellbeing among children and families, the best start grant package has put more money in the pockets of 284,495 low-income families in Scotland.

We aim to go further on access to funded childcare, which is a game changer for families and for expanding our workforce. It will be expanded from nine months through to the end of primary school in early-adopter communities in six council areas. Fife and Shetland Islands will join the existing councils of Glasgow, Clackmannanshire, Inverclyde and Dundee City. That means that 13,000 additional children stand to benefit by the end of the parliamentary session.

As our motion says,

“the unique and critical period of child development”

is

“from pre-pregnancy to age three, when experiences and the environment shape the foundations for life”.

The early child development policy recognises that, because childhood development is fascinating and complex. One size never fits every child, as they each develop at different rates in different ways. The one thing that they all have in common is the need for attachment, love and care. Attachment is crucial in the early years for healthy development. I have seen children at first hand who have not been lucky enough to experience that, and it often leads to a variety of problems during the course of their lives.

Nothing is more important than attachment and a stable, loving start in life. That is why all measures taken by this Government aim to provide that to support families that are often struggling in the most difficult circumstances, particularly now, during a Tory-made cost of living crisis.

I am aware that my contribution is highlighting the achievements and aspirations of this Government to get it right for every child. I am very proud of them. I am sorry if they sound self-congratulatory, but I think that they are worth repeating at any opportunity. However, it cannot be overlooked that, over the past six years, the Scottish Government has spent £733 million to mitigate the worst impacts of UK Government policy, such as the bedroom tax and benefit cap, with £127 million being invested this financial year alone.

It is plain to see that, if we could use that money to promote our wellbeing policies, reduce poverty, build more schools and create a climate-friendly environment, we must have the power to use our resources—our taxpayers' money—to do that, rather than spend them mitigating the UK Government's wrecking policies. The only way to do that is for Scotland to be independent.

15:58

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate. It is personal to me, having two relatively young daughters and many friends who have children in this age bracket.

I will always be exceptionally grateful to those individuals who have supported my family, but, having been through the system recently, I have no doubt that it is under great pressure and huge stress. That leads to many people experiencing patchy delivery and poor outcomes. There is a growing sense that our health and social care system is now in a position where it is good at responding to emergencies but it is not always there to meet the care needs, particularly of mums and their babies. That should make us pretty sad.

I have spoken previously in a debate about support for the whole family. I do not think that we

can even get to that point, because we are failing at the first hurdle when it comes to pre-birth and post-birth support.

We know that when families get off to a bad start it makes everything more difficult and can have lasting impacts for children. The quality of services and support on offer for mothers and young children, both clinical and in the community, causes me serious concern. I say that on the basis of my experience in my constituency and listening to colleagues in debates around the country.

We cannot fault the Government when it comes to ambitious rhetoric. Like other speakers, I do not aim this criticism at Jenni Minto—I have a great deal of respect for her and believe her to be a very hard-working minister. However, we are doing families and our young people a disservice if we do not own up to the reality that we often fall a long way short when it comes to delivering a Scotland that is the best country in which to be born and grow up.

I do not want to fall into the trap of getting bogged down in petty debate about the baby box. Equally, we have to be grown up enough to say that, although the baby box is nice and is helpful for many people, it does not fundamentally shift the dial for many of our most vulnerable families. After 16 years, if that is the best that things get, we need to be asking serious questions.

Rona Mackay: Does the member recognise any good policies that the Scottish Government has introduced? Does he recognise that some of the ones that I have just listed are helping families?

Oliver Mundell: I recognise them, and I am saying exactly that, but I cannot understand how the member can come here and trot off that political spiel without recognising that we have a national shortage of midwives, that neonatal services in this country are being cut and that they are struggling to provide the level of service that their many dedicated and hard-working staff members would like to offer.

Parents in my constituency are fundraising for key hospital equipment. Families are struggling to access national health service services that are near enough to their home, so they are having to travel for hours to access those services, and are then struggling to find accommodation and keep their family together.

We have had promises of flexibility. Willie Rennie made a point about the childcare policy; it is a really positive policy, but having it means nothing if you cannot access it. Those sorts of policies get announced in Parliament but they evaporate the minute we leave the chamber, because they cannot be delivered on the ground.

What about people who are trying to find a dentist for their child or to get them the chance to see a doctor quickly? What about the pressure that health visitors are under? Health visitors are great, but if they must look after more children than they personally can manage to cope with and support, they find themselves overburdened, stressed, stretched and completely disheartened. They are unable to provide the bespoke support that families who most need that help and intervention are trying to access, never mind provide access to speech and language and mental health services. I do not think that members across the chamber need new evidence to know that those services are in crisis.

The Government has the power to do something about all that now, and it really should.

16:03

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to discuss our shared ambition for making Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in. I understand and believe that everyone who is contributing to this debate is doing so in good faith and with that aim in their hearts and heads as they speak.

Pre-pregnancy to three years is a unique and critical period of child development, during which experience and the environment shape the foundations for life and health. Future physical and mental health and wellbeing, life expectancy, educational attainment and participation in the economy and community are all impacted by those early experiences. Our understanding of that should ensure our continued commitment and focus in this area. Every child, regardless of their circumstances, should get the best start in life.

The importance of pre-pregnancy to three years covers a simply massive range of issues and policies. Today, I would like to focus my remarks on play. I have spoken about that before as I feel that it is a really important area for our children. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrines a right to play, and play and meaningful interaction between a child and their parent or carer are essential for early mental and social development. Initiatives such as PlayTalkRead and the bookbug programme are intended to facilitate play, learning and connection during a child's early years.

There is clear, compelling and robust evidence that play times at school and around the school day are very important. Play is not just something that is nice to have and it is not simply a shame that children do not play outdoors as much as they used to. It is a bit more serious than that. Through playing outdoors, our children can improve their physical health. Children are two and a half times

more active when they are outdoors than when they are inside, and they sustain physical activity for longer.

Another important benefit is to mental health, which we are all concerned about. We instinctively know that being outdoors makes us happier. We can think about how we feel when the sun shines on our face. Multiple research studies from around the world have shown that, whatever the weather, as long as we are dressed right, children and adults feel less stressed, more relaxed and happier if they have been outdoors. Being outdoors regularly often helps children to identify safe, quiet places where they can reflect. Being outdoors and away from screens helps children to build positive relationships, to make and sustain friendships and to develop the social skills that they will need throughout life.

Outdoor play can improve academic progress. Children need time to assimilate learning, and after play time outdoors they are more attentive to lessons and more on task, and they behave better. A study of more than 2,500 children in Spain found that exposure to total surrounding greenness was associated with a 5 per cent increase in progress in working memory, a 6 per cent increase in progress in superior working memory and a 1 per cent reduction in inattentiveness.

Importantly, outdoor play also helps children to connect to the places that they live in and to the planet around them. We love only what we know. Regularly playing outdoors for sustained periods often leads to greater care and concern for the environment, and having more green space in urban neighbourhoods in Scotland is linked to lower levels of perceived stress and physiological stress.

Moving forward, I ask the Scottish Government to include play in its thinking on children and child development and to do what it can to support and increase opportunities for our children to play.

16:07

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The early years are pivotal for children's future development and opportunities. Their experiences and the environment at that stage of their lives shape the foundations of their futures. It is therefore critical that every child in Scotland has the opportunity to thrive. There should be no class or glass ceiling and we must work tirelessly to smash it in the earliest years. To do that, we need to have a laser focus on improving childcare and early education and we need health and family support that reaches beyond the child and extends more widely to their parents and families and the communities in which they live.

However, to recognise the challenges that hold too many children back is not, on its own, enough. We also have to find and then implement solutions to address those challenges. The ways in which we can do that have been demonstrated before. In 1997, a Labour Government took office with the objective of giving every child the best start in life. As Martin Whitfield highlighted, the legacy that it left behind was one of great success. Sadly, however, that progress has since been squandered.

In government, Labour introduced sure start centres because we recognised that parents needed a source of support that was truly wraparound, integrated and connected. We engaged with and listened to parents and carers and we designed our policies to meet the needs that they identified. We did that on the basis of their continuous involvement, as well as co-operation from all the sectors that impact on the crucial early years of a child's life. We listened when they told us that they needed better access to support and advice on parenting, information about services that were available in their area and access to specialist, targeted services, and we ensured that the sure start centres delivered that.

We recognised that, alongside that, they needed easy access to child and family health services, and we made sure that that was also there. When parents told us that they wanted help to get into training and employment, we made sure that centres had strong links to Jobcentre Plus. We understood that people in the most disadvantaged areas faced greater struggles in accessing appropriate childcare, so we also guaranteed provision of childcare in those centres.

The Government's current childcare offer is, however, not delivering for those families. They need a more flexible system to work around their lives but, because of the Government's approach, the private and voluntary sectors that are needed to give some of that flexibility are struggling. The Government must address that if we are to give young people the fighting start in life that they need.

By listening to parents and putting all the services that they need in one place, Labour broke down barriers and removed the need for parents to jump through hoops just to get the support that is needed. In contrast, right now in Scotland, education can be disconnected and health and social care are far from integrated. Too many families fall between the cracks.

Earlier this week, I met a group of parents from different backgrounds and circumstances who told me how hard it can be to find the information that they need or to even know what information they are looking for. That, they said, leaves them

disengaged, lost and overburdened. That is why the one-stop shop of a sure start centre was so successful. We have to see children once again in the wider context of their family and community. They need healthy, happy, empowered parents and carers, and both need supportive, encouraging and inclusive communities.

I recently met representatives of Govan HELP, an organisation that supports people to learn, volunteer and access support, advice, guidance and counselling all under one roof. It is providing hope and opportunity for people who have been left behind. A Labour Government would support and nourish such organisations, knowing that, in so doing, we would also be supporting the families who use them. However, in Glasgow, the SNP is still sitting on some tools to do that. Eighteen months into a four-year pilot, not a penny of the whole family wellbeing fund has been commissioned.

The success of sure start is what any future reform of early years should aspire to. Those policies saw children get physically healthier and living in more stimulating and less chaotic home environments. That is the sort of success that we have to replicate now. To do that well, as well as ensure that childcare is flexible and services are connected, we have to fully understand the problems that we are trying to solve. We need robust and comprehensive data and to empower parents and carers to tell us what it is like to be them. Neither of those things is happening enough just now. Until we fix that, the goal of giving every child the best start in life will be harder to achieve.

I urge the Government to reach out to children and their families, empower them to share their stories and solutions, listen to them and, most importantly, act on what it hears. Then and only then will we build the system that is needed for the challenges ahead and that will, once again, spread opportunity for everyone.

16:12

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I am pleased to be taking part in the debate. I hope that my previous experience can add to the conversation.

I will start by acknowledging some of the good stuff and the positive impacts, and then I will go on to suggestions that I make as a critical friend. I pay tribute to the best start grants, the food payments, the baby box and the Scottish child payment, which have inevitably made significant differences. I welcome the expansion in childcare.

We know that investment in early childhood, families, prenatal care and that crucial stage of bonding in the early stages after birth makes a huge difference. As the Dalai Lama says, the

foundations of our lives are laid in our childhood, so it is really important that we get it right.

From that point of view, I would like to touch on attachment. The motion in front of us talks about child development, but it does not mention anything about attachment theory. We know that that is really important, so I want to link it in with staff training. Although I welcome the expansion in childcare, I would like the early years staff that we have to be fully trained in attachment theory. That is especially significant at the moment, because we know that our children suffered during Covid, and that it had an impact on their speech and language. I speak to teachers regularly—I was in a nursery last week—and the challenges around that are immense.

Oliver Mundell: I am grateful to Kaukab Stewart for bringing up that issue, because I ran out of time to do so during my speech. Does she think that the response to that crisis has been sufficient, or does she feel that more resource is needed in speech and language?

Kaukab Stewart: I am going to push for an additional response and investment in speech and language. I have to do that—my conscience tells me to ask for it—because there is a knock-on effect on communication, obviously, but also on children's ability to self-regulate.

We have had a bit of a debate about the impact of speech and language challenges on children's behaviour. If children are not able to communicate properly, and if staff are not trained and do not have enough exposure to the right materials to support the whole family, that will have a knock-on effect on behaviour. It is really important that we invest in speech and language therapy, to reduce the stress levels of children who cannot communicate and of their parents. I know that brilliant work on that is being done by Children 1st, for instance, which has a parent line that parents who are struggling can take advantage of.

I will touch a wee bit on play—I will not go into it too much, although I could talk about it a lot. I echo the remarks made by my colleague Ruth Maguire on the importance of outdoor play in particular. I will give a wee shout out to the investment that has been made in our playgrounds; I can see the result of that.

We have not talked about the impact of adult behaviour on children. I came across a study that was published at the beginning of October on the impact of verbal abuse of children by adults. It was by Professor Peter Fonagy, and it discovered that more than 40 per cent of children are exposed to verbal aggression or hostility from adults. Half of those children are exposed to that each week and 10 per cent are getting screamed and yelled at every day. We know that children will grow up to

have increased levels of anxiety and stress from that. That takes us back to attachment theory, which leads to separation anxiety, and we know that that is coming through in our schools.

What can the Scottish Government do about that? I have suggested investment in staff training that is attachment-theory led, so that staff are fully au fait with that. There should be more investment in speech and language, psychological support services and early intervention.

We need more detail on that when we get more flesh on the bones of the programme. I know that the Scottish Government will absolutely be able to do that.

16:17

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): As the minister has said, experiences and the environment in early childhood shape the foundations for life. The Government has made a number of positive interventions to reduce inequalities at that stage in life, which is to be welcomed.

However, if we are to create a culture, an environment, an economy and a society that prioritise and enhance early child development, we must not forget rural areas. Killin, in my constituency, sits at the south-west end of Loch Tay. It has a population of just over 700 people and its amenities serve many other nearby communities.

Killin nursery was, until recently, one of the few council nurseries providing care for zero to two-year-olds in the whole of Stirling, which was to be applauded. However, in the council budget in March, that provision was cut by the local administration. There was no prior consultation with the community, and families only found out when they were trying to apply for a place. The nearest council nursery is an hour away by car and hard to access by public transport. Private alternatives, as we have heard in the debate, are costly and can be far away, and most are already full.

Opportunities for socialisation are key to the healthy development of babies and children. Without any baby groups or soft-play areas within a reasonable distance, the Killin nursery provides a crucial space for socialisation. Research by NHS Health Scotland has found that children in quality non-parental childcare have better vocabulary and social development by the age of three. With provision being cut, rural children risk being left behind. Without the opportunities that access to childcare affords parents, entire communities will be left behind, too.

The comprehensive childcare offering in Killin drew in many young families who contribute to the

community, several of whom have told me that their decisions about whether to start their family or to grow it were made on the basis of that childcare being available. I spoke to a constituent who works remotely from Killin and fulfils a vital role as an on-call firefighter. She now faces a difficult decision about whether to sacrifice her career or to move away from the community in which she grew up.

Staffing of other vital services, such as the pharmacy, has relied on that childcare being available, and the provision of those services is at risk without it. The programme for government promises childcare for two-year-olds from next year. If nothing changes in the meantime, there might be neither demand nor staff in Killin by then.

Therefore, the decision to cut provision at Killin nursery seems extremely short-sighted. Residents are concerned about the impact on numbers in the primary school in years to come. If the primary school closes, families will move away in droves. Rural communities across Scotland see their populations ageing faster than urban ones, and they can face issues with recruitment and retaining key workers across many sectors.

I very much welcome the Scottish Government's early childhood development programme, but we must ensure that the needs of rural communities are heard, understood and embedded in policy. When other key services that are under the purview of the council, such as local bus routes, are also under threat, we must consider how to work closely with local authorities to ensure that children who live in rural areas also get the best start in life.

16:22

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I thank members for their contributions thus far. It is notable that it has been a reasonably constructive debate, which is welcome.

I will start on a note of agreement with the Government. Its motion—which I appreciate that we are trying to alter somewhat—says that the Government wants to create a society in which we can look forward to having

“a culture, environment, economy ... that prioritises and enhances early child development”.

Those three key words—“early child development”—will form the basis of my contribution. I whole-heartedly support that aim because of the obvious benefits that early intervention will reap for society further down the line.

In its motion, the Government also promises

“to build on the excellent and world-leading practice already delivered”.

I do not disagree with some of that—I accept that good work has been done.

However, I will now diverge from the consensus for the rest of my comments. It has been refreshing to hear Government back benchers talk about their concerns about some of the live issues that they face in their communities. Our problem is that it is often hard to get the statistical data that we need in order to be able to have frank and honest conversations. I know that those conversations are difficult for Governments to have, but they are ones that we must have in this Parliament.

Over the past few weeks, I have taken to submitting an awful lot of written questions, for which I apologise to the civil servants at the back of the chamber, because I have had a bit more free time on my hands. It has been interesting to discover what information is elicited from such questions. We should not have to go that far to get such information—the Government should be more forthcoming with it.

An answer that I got back last week shone an interesting light on children's dental care in this country; unfortunately, it showed it in quite a dim light. I want to point that out because I do not think that people realise how shocking and precarious the situation is. Last year, 43,000 letters were sent to parents to advise them of the state of their children's mouths after inspection at school. One in 10 of those letters were classed as grade A letters. Basically, a grade A letter alerts the parent to the urgent need for their child to see a dentist immediately because of severe decay or an abscess. One in four of the letters that were sent to parents were type A or type B letters. Type B letters also require medical follow-up because of problems of decay. Tooth decay was found to be three times more prevalent in our most deprived communities than in our least deprived. I am sure that that is not a surprise, but it represents a monumental increase in the amount of decay.

Of course, it is not just about dentistry. Problems about access to CAMHS and other children's services have been well rehearsed. One thing that struck me this year was the frankness of comments by Scotland's former Children and Young People's Commissioner, Bruce Adamson. He did a great job in office but, in his parting shots to the Government, he did not hold back. He was asked by journalists whether he believed that, over the period of the previous First Minister's Administration, the lives of children had truly been improved.

I see that the clocks have gone off. Does that mean that I can keep speaking forever, Presiding Officer? I will carry on and will try to keep to time. I assume that we are still broadcasting; however,

even if we are not, I hope that the minister is paying attention.

Bruce Adamson said that he felt that there were real failures of "constant broken promises". His main concern was that actions did not always follow words. In other words, the endless cycle of press releases, promises, manifesto commitments and programmes for government did not always come to fruition. He really did not hold back in those comments.

It is hard to illustrate that without digging deep. When I dug deep, I discovered another statistic last week, which, I hope, will horrify every one of us. The number of children aged five to 15 who were hospitalised due to intentional self-harm was four times higher last year than a decade ago. That is world leading—a world-leading failure.

The Government's motion misses out many of the statistics that we should be talking about. We do not talk about the number of children who are in temporary accommodation, which is at its highest ever—more than 9,500 children are in that situation. We do not talk about the levels of breakfast provision in our schools—40 per cent of our schools do not make such provision, compared with 7 per cent in Wales, 18 per cent in England and 27 per cent in Northern Ireland.

We do not talk properly about the attainment gap in numeracy and how that compares to the position when the Government took office.

The Presiding Officer: Will you conclude, please?

Jamie Greene: I see that I have gone over my time.

I will make a final point. The Government is learning the hard way that all those policies cost money. Social security accounts for a quarter of all UK public spending. That is an expensive game to play in. Of course, one-off payments are welcome, but they are not the solution to long-term problems.

I end by saying simply—

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude, Mr Greene.

Jamie Greene: No matter what the Government says in its motion, we need to have more honest and frank conversations, such as the one that we are having today.

16:27

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): We are debating a very full motion from the Scottish Government. It is summed up in the Government's ambition—which we all should have—of making Scotland the best

place in the world to grow up in. To look at how the SNP-led Government has helped to bring that ambition closer to reality, I have only four short minutes. That will not nearly be enough, but I will give it a try.

As we all know, a child's early years are fundamental to how they develop and grow. Their early years will have a huge influence on the rest of their lives. An individual's health, wellbeing, social and economic metrics and even life expectancy all have a strong correlation with factors in the early years.

In Scotland, from the moment they are born and regardless of their circumstances, a child is eligible for a baby box. Since the start of that ambitious scheme six years ago, more than a quarter of a million babies have received the box, which contains some of the essentials for the early months of their lives. There has already been a pretty full debate on the baby box.

An even more ambitious scheme that we have already talked about is the Scottish child payment. As of June this year, the families of more than 316,000 under-16s have benefited from that payment. The Scottish Government is investing £1.3 billion, which is forecast to lift 50,000 more children out of poverty in this financial year alone.

Those schemes have helped to give some peace of mind to thousands of parents, guardians and children across Scotland who are concerned about the rising cost of living and the effect that that will have on their health and wellbeing. I know personally that those policies have had a great impact on many families in Coatbridge and Chryston as well as more widely across Scotland, and they will continue to do so.

I will speak briefly about nurseries and the early years sector. The roll-out of the 1,140 hours of provision has been game changing, and I completely support the First Minister's plans to expand that. Some of the local authority nurseries in my constituency are excellent, including the provision at the brand-new Riverbank community facility in Coatbridge, which I had the pleasure of visiting recently.

The private, voluntary and independent sector plays a vital role in achieving our current and future ambitions for the early years sector. The minister knows that I have been meeting nursery owners in my area, some of whom are part of the 2020 together campaign, and I know that other members have mentioned the subject.

The minister knows that I have raised before in Parliament such nurseries' concerns about the current funding model, which I recently wrote to her about again. I know that the sector is grateful for the minister's on-going engagement, but it seems clear that PVI sector staff are not as well

paid as local authority staff are, which is leading to difficulty in retaining them in such settings.

That is just one issue that arises from the current model, and I have only four minutes for my speech. We must do more to resolve the situation, as we will need the PVI sector if we are to fully realise our ambitions. I encourage the Government to work with all in that sector to try to find a solution.

I fully welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to free school meals; I know how much that benefits my constituents and people across Scotland. I welcome the pledge to roll that out to all who are in primary school, which cannot happen soon enough. I also full-heartedly support the roll-out to all pupils in Scotland. Free school meals for secondary pupils could be yet another game-changing Government policy, and I encourage the Government to find a way to make that happen.

I will speak about other issues. A main policy of the organisation Upstart Scotland, which I think that Kaukab Stewart recently hosted in the garden lobby, is to raise the school starting age, which I support. The SNP has debated that at conference, so I hope that there will be more movement on that important area, which links in exactly to Ruth Maguire's discussion of outdoor play.

Scotland is well on track to be the best country to grow up in. It is even more of a testament to the Scottish Government when we think that its achievements have been made in the context of Brexit and mitigating some of the UK Government's cruellest policies, which seem designed to keep people in poverty.

Across the chamber and across Scotland, we must all work to make our country the best place to grow up in. I hope that we can all support that.

16:32

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to close the debate for Labour. It is right that we have taken the time to debate such topics, and we have had some interesting discussion. However, as has been mentioned, it would be helpful to focus more on policy and debate that in the chamber. This is an important area of cross-portfolio working, so we should have such discussions in the chamber.

When Labour members talk about poverty, we often talk about Labour's proud record of delivering for the early years. As my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy said, the Labour Party in government lifted millions out of poverty, including many children, through the delivery of the innovative and life-changing policies of sure start and the national minimum wage.

As a lifelong member of the Labour Party, I remember that, at that time, I was always pleased but I was never satisfied. I always wanted more for those who were living in poverty, and we must all be driven by that ambition.

Labour members recognise that policies such as the Scottish child payment, which I pick out, the whole family wellbeing fund, which my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy mentioned, and the expansion of childcare hours, which Willie Rennie mentioned, have had successes. We want to support that, but it is our role to call out the Government to address issues and make enhancements when it can go further. I welcomed the points that Ruth Maguire and Kaukab Stewart made about challenging their front benchers, because that is how we will change outcomes for young people in our society.

We all recognise the need, which we have heard about today, for an early childhood development transformational change programme. The path to its success must involve driving our ambitions further and further. We know that there are barriers in front of infants and their families at the moment. We know, too, that, for early childhood development to work and to have the impact that it can have, other services have to operate at a high level. We hear from professionals, voluntary groups and families that the reality on the ground is not as the minister described it in her opening remarks.

Jamie Greene mentioned the former Children and Young People's Commissioner's comments on the Government's actions. We must acknowledge those, because doing so is the first step to being able to move matters forward.

Early-stage educational provision must be as accessible in rural and urban areas and deprived communities as it is in our affluent areas, to make early development matter and allow skills to continue to develop throughout a young person's life. We have heard that said so many times in the chamber in the debate, and we all need to work to that ambition.

I will pick up on Evelyn Tweed's contribution. Councils need to be adequately funded to provide local facilities and hubs that will allow development to flourish and create potential. We must consider how we move towards local government funding. The idea is strong and has the support of members, but the infrastructure is sorely lacking due to the decisions that the Government is currently making. It feels as though there is a lack of ambition, or perhaps there is just an acceptance that we can go on doing what we have done because we have done it a bit better or done a certain bit well. We need to do more.

I reiterate that Scottish Labour recognises the value of early childhood development, which is absolutely crucial. As my colleague Martin Whitfield said, it is part of a jigsaw.

I believe that the scale of health inequality in Scotland will continue to restrict childhood development until we see radical change. Just this week, a report from National Records of Scotland highlighted that death rates are almost twice as high in the most deprived areas of Scotland as they are in the least deprived. Research published by the Health Foundation earlier this year found that infant mortality has increased in our most deprived areas since 2014. We know that, in 2021-22, there was an increase in the proportion of children with developmental concerns at all three review points. We have a lot of work to do, and we need to acknowledge that.

The motion rightly highlights the importance of the early years. As many members have reiterated, the motion states that they last

"from pre-pregnancy to age three, when experiences and the environment shape the foundations for life."

I fully agree. Given that we have a dire Tory Government at Westminster and that there has been a lack of urgency and boldness from the SNP Scottish Government, both of our Governments have fallen short of the mark for children.

I will conclude by referring to the contribution of Rona Mackay. As she said, it has become clearer by the day that Scotland is in desperate need of a fresh start and a move away from two failing Governments. A change of Government at Westminster would truly make a difference to the delivery of child development measures in Scotland. I urge members to think about what we, in this Parliament, can do about that.

16:38

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):
Presiding Officer,

"Giving children the best possible start in life"—

those are words that we can all get behind, regardless of where we sit in the Parliament. We have all heard them from the Scottish Government before. In 2009, a similar programme, the early years framework, was launched, which also promised to give

"all our children the best start in life."

That leads me to Willie Rennie's earlier point about rhetoric. It is all well and good for the Government to launch documents and programmes that intend to improve the lives of children and young people. However, what are its aims? What will the Government do, in addition to

the policies that are already in place, to make such improvements? How will success be measured? Those are key questions that I am not sure have been answered in the debate.

I reflect on a quote from the Government motion, part of which my colleague Jamie Greene picked out earlier. The Government states that

“it can build on the targeted investments that it has already made in support of families pre-birth to three and that joint working can create a culture, environment, economy and society that prioritises and enhances early child development, to realise its ambition of creating a more healthy, fair and equal society”.

Joint working with whom? And how will joint working lead to the creation of a more healthy, fair and equal society? Detail is everything if the Government wants people to come with it on its early years journey.

The minister mentioned Government policies that are already in place. Some of them are good and some—well, we will leave that for later. However, when will we see the outcomes? Martin Whitfield was spot on when he mentioned data, and I am beyond fed up with the Government’s lack of data capture, especially across portfolios. Carol Mochan mentioned that during her speech.

Throughout the debate, we have travelled through the stages of raising a child, from pregnancy to early years, and policies and ambitions have been mentioned. However, as Oliver Mundell has rightly said, we are falling at the first hurdle. That was evidenced just last week during First Minister’s question time, when I asked the First Minister about the Pregnant Then Screwed campaign. The First Minister had no answers for parents who have had to reduce their hours or leave the workforce because work and childcare are incompatible. He has no answers for the 43 per cent of parents who cannot afford to have any more children. It has already been forecast that the number of births will drop over the next decade. The Government needs to realise that current policies are not working for parents but are working against them.

Martin Whitfield: In last week’s First Minister’s question time, I asked the First Minister about the PVI model in early years. Does Meghan Gallacher think that the PVI model actually works in early years? I have asked the Government that question and I have not had a response, yet it holds the information that should enable it to know whether, economically, it is a viable model.

Meghan Gallacher: No, it does not work, as was referenced by Pregnant Then Screwed. The research from the charity that I have in front of me shows that it is due to childcare issues that parents are choosing not to have any more

children and that parents are finding it difficult to manage that work and childcare balance.

Ruth Maguire: I do not diminish anything that Meghan Gallacher is saying, but does she share my feeling that employers need to do a bit more to support families with children in their workplace in terms of flexibility?

Meghan Gallacher: I agree that discussions need to take place around that, because we need to have a whole discussion on the issue of early years. I go back to the point about detail, because many such issues have not been mentioned today. That is why I think that the Government needs to have more open conversations with the whole of the chamber instead of having debates and not really informing us what it is trying to debate during its Government business.

I turn back to the point that I was making with regard to Pregnant Then Screwed. Carol Erskine, its head of policy and campaigns, said:

“there is a price on being a parent today is brutal. It is truly shocking that almost two-thirds of Parents are being forced to reduce their hours or leave the workforce entirely due to the cost and availability of childcare, and there is no end in sight.”

That view is coming not from politicians but from parents who are completely fed up about the fact that the system is working not for them but against them.

That brings me on to nurseries. Like Willie Rennie, I will raise the issue time and again until the Government finally gets it and sorts the problems that exist around the 1,140-hours policy. When we look at the various issues that were mentioned today around the policy, we can see that there are politicians on the SNP benches who get it: Fulton MacGregor and Evelyn Tweed get it, and I praise them for their honest assessment of childcare issues in their communities. Evelyn Tweed is right that rural communities have been left behind when it comes to nursery provision, and they have also been left behind in relation to other issues relating to pregnancy and bringing up a child. We need only look at Dr Gray’s hospital in Moray and the Caithness general hospital to see how hard it is for rural mums to bring up a family.

I realise that time is tight and I do not have much time left. There is much more that I would have liked to mention today, because there have been some really good conversations. Oliver Mundell mentioned speech and language therapy and said that the Government needs to sort those issues out, and Jamie Greene rightly mentioned the issues surrounding child dental care. There are many more issues that we need to resolve in relation to early years development as a whole, but, my goodness, this Government has a long way to go.

16:44

The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don): I thank my colleague the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, Jenni Minto, for opening this important debate, and I am grateful for the contributions from members on this extremely important topic.

Although I do not agree with all the points that have been made this afternoon, I think that the passion that has been shown in the debate demonstrates the importance that we all place on early child development and getting it right for every child. I advise members who have not accessed the briefing on the transformational change programme that it can be viewed on the Scottish Parliament information centre section of the intranet. In response to Meghan Gallacher, I say that the aim of the programme, as was set out by Jenni Minto in her opening speech, is to reduce early child development concerns by a quarter by 2030. That is included in the briefing.

In Scotland we are globally recognised for our work to prioritise early child development and support families. However, I fully recognise the need to do more for our youngest children, and the transformational change programme will do just that. It will strengthen the importance of early child development across Government portfolios. We will work with services and practitioners to hear about what they need and when they need it. We will also listen to parents and children, and we will do all that we can do to give them the capacity and agency to make choices and achieve their life goals and aspirations.

I will try to respond to as many as possible of the points that members raised in the debate.

First, I want to consider poverty. We need to continue a relentless focus on reducing child poverty. Many families who are affected by poverty have very young children, and evidence shows that younger parents and single parents are disproportionately affected. We know that the actions that the Scottish Government is taking are making a difference. I appreciate that members raised that point in the debate.

Oliver Mundell: I have tried hard to listen to what has been said. At the start of the debate we heard about how there has been great success in Scotland with breastfeeding—that 46 per cent of mothers are breastfeeding. When we dig into the statistics and look at the detail, however, we find that twice as many mothers from the most affluent areas as mothers from the most deprived areas are breastfeeding. The figures are 63 per cent versus 31 per cent. I find it hard to hear things from the Government about deprived communities and deprivation when such statistics are covered

up in what is presented to us, as happened at the start of this debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): You can get the time back for that, minister.

Natalie Don: I agree with the sentiment of that point. I absolutely agree that we have to increase breastfeeding rates across the board. Breastfeeding rates are increasing in areas of high deprivation—that is certainly something that we are focused on and that I have been focused on. We want improvements in that area, and we are working towards that.

Going back to the anti-poverty measures that I was referring to, it is estimated that under the Scottish child payment around 90,000 fewer children will be living in poverty this year. The actions that we are taking are making a difference. We are removing the income thresholds from the best start foods scheme from February 2024, thereby supporting an additional 20,000 pregnant mothers and children to access healthy food and milk. Our three best start grant payments provide financial support to low-income families at three key transition points in their children's early years. We are doing all that we can do, with our limited powers, to lift people out of poverty. I was pleased to hear recognition of that in some speeches this afternoon.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Does the minister think that her Government will hit the child poverty targets?

Natalie Don: I am very confident that we, in Scotland, are doing everything that we can do. However, that is not helped by decisions that have been taken by the UK Government. We have austerity, inflation and an inadequate benefits system. As I said, I am confident that we are doing everything that we can do in this Government. However, I lack confidence in the UK Government.

I will move on to infant mental health and perinatal mental health. We recognise the importance of good infant mental health and the impact of poor parental mental health on early child development. Since 2019, we have overseen a significant programme of change to support the mental health needs of parents, infants and families across Scotland. I appreciate the concerns that have been raised about CAMHS, however, and that we still have work to do, but I want to highlight that the past five quarters have featured the five highest figures on record for the numbers of children starting treatment. We are moving in the right direction—we are seeing better performance and we will continue to consider how we can improve that further.

I really appreciated Ruth Maguire's comments on play. We will continue to promote the

importance of play in supporting early child development—physically, socially and cognitively. We have continued to support national initiatives such as “Play, Talk, Read” and bookbug, which are supporting thousands of our youngest children up and down Scotland with books and low-cost activities. Through my work in Government and my personal connections—as most members know, I have two young children at home—I hear about the difference that those initiatives are making and about how appreciated they are by families and parents across Scotland.

Our investment of £60 million to renew play parks across Scotland will make play more accessible in our communities, which will provide families, grandparents, carers and friends with spaces in which to spend precious time together. I assure members that I will continue to promote and push the importance of play for children as a way to support positive mental health and a healthy lifestyle, to build positive relationships and to lay the foundation for future years’ growth and development.

I have been on a number of visits recently, seeing at first hand how nurseries and schools are embedding play and, importantly, outdoor play in their settings.

What is also important and encompasses many of the efforts that I have just laid out is the need to support both the child and the family through promoting bonding relationships as a key factor in improving child development, and supporting parents and carers to build strong relationships with their children by giving them opportunities to do so.

Early learning has been raised by a number of members from all sides of the chamber. I wholeheartedly recognise the issues that were raised by Willie Rennie, Fulton MacGregor, Oliver Mundell and several other members.

I am actively engaging in, and working to support, our hugely valued PVI sector. As a critical first step towards addressing the recruitment and retention issues that are facing the sector, we are funding pay of £12 per hour for ELC professionals in that sector.

Meghan Gallacher: Will the minister give way on that point?

Natalie Don: I am sorry—I really need to make progress.

I know that we need to do more, however. The Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities have undertaken a review of the sustainable rates that are paid to providers to deliver funded ELC, and I will consider carefully the findings of that review when it reports later this year. I want to do everything

that I can do, and everything that it takes, to support the sector, because it is fundamental both to our current offer and to our further expansion of childcare.

Martin Whitfield: Will the minister take an intervention?

Natalie Don: I am sorry—

Oh, okay.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to Natalie Don for giving way. Does she believe that the PVI model is financially viable at the moment?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I will give you the time back, minister.

Natalie Don: I believe that there is work to do. As I said, I am positive that the actions that will be taken as a result of the rates review will help to support the sector more.

However, I highlight that our nursery offer for three and four-year-olds is positive—it is universal and has a 99 per cent take-up rate. As has been noted, the programme for government goes further than that, because we know that parenting support and enriched early learning opportunities will improve outcomes for children and families.

I am running out of time, but I will try my best to get through the issues. I know that members raised issues around health visiting. I point out that, over the past few years, we have invested more than £40 million to increase our health visitor workforce by more than 500, and that we have more health visitors than ever.

The issue of speech and language therapy waiting times was also raised. I assure members that we continue to work with speech and language therapists across Scotland to try to understand the reasons for increased waits. Work is under way to improve early speech and language development of children prior to their starting school. For example, we have appointed seven regional speech and language therapy leads, and we will develop an action plan in order that young children in Scotland will experience language and communication nurturing environments.

This Parliament does not yet have the full powers over many areas that impact on child development. Westminster’s austerity policies continue to limit public spending, and UK Government welfare policies such as the two-child cap are pushing children and families into poverty, but we are taking action where we can, and we are determined to go further. Indeed, we are determined to do everything that we can, in the context of the powers that we have available to us.

If we want to make a difference in the lives of those who need it most, we must all work together

to remove barriers, challenge existing beliefs and assumptions, and listen to the voices of families and communities on how our precious resources could and should be used to make sure that every child grows up loved, safe and respected.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

I note that, not for the first time, we have only six Conservative members in the chamber. In other words, 80 per cent of Conservative members are not present at decision time. Do you share my dismay that that shows disrespect for Parliament?

The Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order, Ms Grahame. Members will be aware, and I can confirm, that remote participation is a facility that is available to all members.

Appointments of the Chair and Commissioners of the Poverty and Inequality Commission

16:55

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-11054, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on appointments of the chair and commissioners of the Poverty and Inequality Commission. I call Shirley-Anne Somerville to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament notes the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's consideration and recommendation of three short-term appointments to the Poverty and Inequality Commission at its meeting on 5 October 2023, and, in accordance with the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, approves the appointments by the Scottish Ministers of Professor Stephen Sinclair as Chair of the Poverty and Inequality Commission, for the period from 12 November 2023 to 30 June 2024, and Tressa Burke and Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick as Commissioners to the Poverty and Inequality Commission, for the period from 11 November 2023 to 30 June 2024.—[*Shirley-Anne Somerville*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Motion without Notice

16:55

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4 of Standing Orders, Decision Time be brought forward to 16:56 pm.—[*George Adam*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:56

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I note that Martin Whitfield did not move his published amendment, therefore there are three questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-11053.2, in the name of Roz McCall, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11053, in the name of Jenni Minto, on early childhood development transformational change programme, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

16:56

Meeting suspended.

16:58

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment S6M-11053.2, in the name of Roz McCall. Members should cast their votes now.

The Presiding Officer: The vote is closed.

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the voting app. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Hyslop. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)

Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 30, Against 86, Abstentions 0.

Motion disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-11053, in the name of Jenni Minto, on early childhood development transformational change programme, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)

Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Haicro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the need for an Early Child Development Transformational Change programme to build on the excellent and world-leading practice already delivered in Scotland, and to further act on the unique and critical period of child development from pre-pregnancy to age three, when experiences and the environment shape the foundations for life and population health, including physical and mental health and wellbeing, life expectancy, educational attainment and participation in the economy and community; is committed to focussing collective efforts on giving all babies and children in Scotland the best possible start by making sure that the Scottish Government applies the latest evidence and continues to invest in and improve its existing policies, to ensure that it is “getting it right for every child”; considers that it can build on the targeted investments that it has already made in support of families pre-birth to three and that joint working can create a culture, environment, economy and society that prioritises and enhances early child development, to realise its ambition of creating a more healthy, fair and equal society; notes the negative impact that the UK Government austerity measures and policies such as the two-child benefit cap continue to have on child development, and welcomes Scottish Government interventions, including the Baby Box and the Scottish Child Payment, to give children the best possible start in life.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-11054, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on appointments of the chair and commissioners of the poverty and inequality commission, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the Social Justice and Social Security Committee’s consideration and recommendation of three short-term appointments to the Poverty and Inequality Commission at its meeting on 5 October 2023, and, in accordance with the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, approves the appointments by the Scottish Ministers of Professor Stephen Sinclair as Chair of the Poverty and Inequality Commission, for the period from 12 November 2023 to 30 June 2024, and Tressa Burke and Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick as Commissioners to the Poverty and Inequality Commission, for the period from 11 November

2023 to 30 June 2024.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:03.

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