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Wednesday 10 January 2024

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 10 January 2024

[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time. The first portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture. I remind members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button or enter the letters RTS in the chat function during the relevant question.

Arts and Culture (Scottish Budget 2024-25)

1. **Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what feedback it has received from arts and culture stakeholders following its announcement of the Scottish budget 2024-25. (S6O-02926)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): We are increasing funding to the culture and heritage sector by £15.8 million in the next financial year, to £196.6 million. That is the first step on the route to investing at least £100 million more annually in culture and the arts by the financial year 2028-29. In 2025-26, we aim to provide an additional £25 million to the culture sector. That commitment to additional funding, despite the challenging budget situation, signals our confidence in the Scottish culture sector.

The board of Creative Scotland welcomed the proposed settlement for the agency of just over £68 million in grant-in-aid funding for 2024-25, which compares with £55 million for the current financial year, particularly given the continued pressure on the public finances. I welcome views from other stakeholders as part of the Scottish Parliament budget process over the forthcoming weeks.

Sharon Dowey: The Scottish National Party Government claims that it increased culture funding by £15.8 million in the latest budget, but the Campaign for the Arts said that £13.2 million of that funding was for restoring cuts. To cut through the SNP's spin, barely any of that funding was new money. Jack Gamble, director of the Campaign for the Arts, said:

"Amid a perfect storm of challenges for artists and organisations, the Scottish Government needs to go much further, much faster",

and it is nowhere near the £100 million extra for culture that the SNP pledged. Is that just another broken promise? What does the SNP have to say to disappointed businesses and organisations in the culture sector?

Angus Robertson: I point Sharon Dowey to the answer that I just gave about Creative Scotland's welcome for the increased funding that it is receiving.

If the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party has specific suggestions about additional funding that it believes that the culture sector requires, I would be very pleased to hear them from Sharon Dowey or the front-bench members. I would also be pleased to hear from them where they would identify cuts elsewhere to make those additional commitments. This Government has made commitments for increased spending. We are delivering it, and we will deliver more over the years ahead. I welcome the support of members in other parties in recognising that fact.

Scottish Government Overseas Offices

2. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work of its overseas offices. (S6O-02927)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Last month, I was pleased to publish an annual report on the work of our overseas offices covering the period 2022-23. That showed how Scotland's international network delivers crucial benefits to Scotland's people, businesses and institutions at home and abroad.

From international investment and growing our exports to facilitating cultural exchanges, promoting tourism and building our diaspora network, we continue to enhance our international reputation across the world. Most recently, that included delivering a successful series of events to celebrate St Andrew's day and preparing a programme of events for Burns night later this month.

I hope that Graham Simpson will join me in thanking all our international network staff and GlobalScots and wishing them well for 2024.

Graham Simpson: It is good to see the cabinet secretary in Parliament today. I wonder whether, this year, he plans to beat his record of travelling to six countries in the first seven months of last year, which cost £5,500. The Scottish National Party Government's budget for its overseas offices is increasing to £7.8 million. That is happening

while budgets for transport, councils and housing are being slashed. What is the return on that investment?

Angus Robertson: That is a very good question. I point Graham Simpson to the report that I mentioned. It is clear from the tone of his question that Graham Simpson has not read that report, because it lists the benefits, which are significant. For example, the work of Scottish Development International is predicted to generate £1.7 billion of trade revenue. The report goes on to list other benefits: the creation of 1,000 Scottish real living wage jobs through investments from the United States of America; the creation of 500 such jobs as a result of Chinese investments; £120 million of capital investment is planned as a result of our presence in Canada; and 190 new connections for Scottish businesses have been made through our Ireland office. I could go on.

I would welcome some consistency on the matter from the Scottish Conservative Party, because while its front-bench members request that we increase our presence internationally, its back-bench members criticise us. I make no apology for promoting Scotland internationally. I wish that members on Graham Simpson's side of the chamber would welcome that.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary provide any updates regarding what assessments have been made as to the real benefits that Scotland's international network brings to our economy?

Angus Robertson: I repeat that the report that was published last month on the work of our overseas offices is extremely important, and I recommend that all members take the opportunity to read what it says.

I pay tribute to—I am sorry that we did not hear this from the Conservatives, even though they had the opportunity to say it—and welcome the hard work of the people who work on our behalf, whether in Scottish Government offices, Scottish Development International offices, our GlobalScot network or as trade envoys. They are out there day in and day out, week in and week out, promoting Scotland, promoting our economy, promoting jobs and promoting tourism. We should get behind them rather than undermine them.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Scotland's international offices provide a great opportunity to connect Scotland with its diaspora and to share Scotland's unique culture across the world. They also provide a unique opportunity to seek out funding and collaboration opportunities for projects in Scotland. When the Scottish Government last reviewed the location of its international offices, did it measure the availability of funding

opportunities in the countries in which it has such offices in comparison with those countries where it has no international offices?

Angus Robertson: I commend Foyso Choudhury not just for his positive question and for recognising the good work that is done to promote Scotland, our economy, our culture and our tourism sector but for his thoughtful query about the network and where we have offices and people in situ. Incidentally, it is very positive that the Scottish Conservative Party's front-bench spokesperson has asked about that in committee.

There are parts of the world in which we do not yet have a presence, and I think that it is worth our while looking at that. We are committed to maintaining the network as it currently exists, and we are committed to establishing a presence in Poland—there is widespread agreement on why that is a good thing.

Beyond that, questions have been raised—for example, by Donald Cameron—about our having a presence in South America or in Africa. Given his expertise in the region, I have no doubt that Foyso Choudhury would make a strong case for our having a presence in the Indian subcontinent, to cover India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. That is very much worth looking at, and I welcome the positive contribution by those who wish to promote Scotland internationally, as opposed to those who want to undermine our international position.

Scottish Government Independence Publications (Lessons from Parliaments with Unelected Members)

3. **Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether, as part of its work to further the case for Scottish independence, any of its future publications on independence will cover any constitutional lessons that can be learned from structures used in Parliaments elsewhere that include unelected members. (S6O-02928)

The Minister for Independence (Jamie Hepburn): As is set out in the paper "Creating a modern constitution for an independent Scotland", the written constitution in an independent Scotland will be founded on democracy, human rights and equality protections.

We can learn many lessons from Westminster's House of Lords, with its membership of more than 800 unelected lifelong members, largely around practices that we should seek to avoid in an independent Scotland.

Only with independence can we ensure that sovereignty rests with the people of Scotland. We have no plans for any unelected element in an independent Scotland's legislature.

Alasdair Allan: Does the minister agree that, following Baroness Mone's disastrous television interview last month, the lesson that no Parliament, if it wishes to be accountable in any way whatsoever to the electorate, should have an unelected house has once more clearly—if rather painfully—been made?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, please speak to matters within your responsibility.

Jamie Hepburn: I agree with that. I should say that it is not just Ms Mone who has acted in a manner that is unbecoming of a person in public life as a member of the UK legislature. We have seen other issues, such as peers claiming expenses just for the mere act of turning up at Westminster.

However, there are serious questions regarding Ms Mone. First, there are questions around the judgment of the Conservatives in sending her to the Lords in the first place, and, secondly, there are questions regarding an individual who used her position as a member of the House of Lords—at a time of international crisis, when we saw many people in all communities across Scotland freely volunteering their time to support their communities—to seek to rake in millions of pounds for her own family and not declare an interest. That hardly speaks to a proper system of governance.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The focus of the question was on lessons to be learned

“from structures used in Parliaments elsewhere that include unelected members”,

and I think that we have kind of got the gist of that.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In reference to the question, which referenced “future publications on independence”, rather than commit to yet more papers on separation, which will inevitably end up out of date and in the political dustbin at a massive cost to the taxpayer, when will the Government focus its efforts on dealing instead with the issues that people actually care about?

Jamie Hepburn: I remind Mr Cameron that this Government has a mandate to pursue that work. We won the election and his party lost it. There are many benefits to be gained by Scotland becoming an independent country. We will continue to advance the case, which will include the case that we should not have a legislature with an unelected element, including minor nobility from Scotland. Mr Cameron will have to seek to continue to be elected to this Parliament.

Culture Sector (Investment)

4. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it

will provide an update on how it plans to further invest in the culture sector. (S6O-02929)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): As I have already confirmed to the chamber, next financial year we will increase funding to the culture sector by £15.8 million to £196.6 million. That is the first step on the route to investing at least £100 million more annually in culture and the arts by the financial year 2028-29.

The commitment has already been given by the Deputy First Minister in the recent budget that, in 2025-26, we aim to provide an additional £25 million to the culture sector. That commitment to additional funding is despite the challenging budget situation, and signals our confidence to the Scottish culture sector, including in Clydebank and Milngavie.

Marie McNair: I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to increased spending on culture.

I have met numerous arts and culture groups in my constituency. Those groups are so important because they not only create safe spaces in which creatives can thrive, but allow for development of meaningful connections that can reduce the social isolation that people face in our constituencies.

What approach is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that additional investment will be shared fairly across all communities?

Angus Robertson: I pay tribute to Marie McNair, who has been a doughty campaigner for the culture and arts community in Clydebank and Milngavie.

It is incredibly important that the benefits of funding for the culture and arts sector be felt throughout the whole country. An example of that is the Culture Collective programme, which is a Scotland-wide programme that we fund to develop in our communities grass-roots participatory arts experiences, including projects to reduce social isolation.

We want, through increased investment in culture over the next five years, to drive up opportunities for participation in creative pursuits—which, of course, includes those in Clydebank and Milngavie.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have received requests for three supplementaries, and I intend to take all three.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Despite what the Scottish National Party Government would have us believe—that the £6.6 million in the recent Scottish budget is increased funding—it is actually reinstatement of the 10 per cent cut to Creative Scotland that was revealed a

year ago, dropped in the spring, then reinstated in September. That is now being disguised as an increase in investment.

Following the announcement of £25 million for 2025-26, can the cabinet secretary say how much of that funding is genuinely additional and will actually be delivered?

Angus Robertson: We are committed to delivering all the funding. I am not sure that that was a welcome for the increase—I did not hear that. I know, from the role that he plays in committee, that Alexander Stewart is a strong supporter of culture and the arts. We all need to row behind the culture and the arts sector.

We want to provide the necessary funding. It is important that Creative Scotland has the funding that it requires; it will have it. I look forward to positive discussions, which I have offered to members and parties across the chamber. I will welcome any good ideas about how we can ensure that the culture and arts sector can thrive with the support of additional Scottish Government funding, and I will welcome the member's participation in that process.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I was pleased to hear the cabinet secretary's response to Marie McNair about every community benefiting from culture spend, because the analysis of EventScotland and Creative Scotland shows huge variations across the country. In Perth and Kinross, the spend is three times higher than spend in Fife, and in Stirling, it is four times higher. In Dundee, the spend is six times higher, in Glasgow it is 11 times higher, and in Edinburgh it is 14 times higher than the spend in Fife. What is the minister doing to make sure that every community benefits from that spend?

Angus Robertson: I commend Willie Rennie, because he has asked that question a number of times and wants to ensure that there is the maximum possible spend for the culture and the arts sector in North East Fife, and that the rest of Fife can be secure. I have said to him previously that it is important that we have separation between our arm's-length cultural organisation—Creative Scotland, which makes the decisions—and ministers. It is not for ministers to direct specific regional projects.

If Willie Rennie is aware of culture projects that are not being appropriately funded, will he please make me and Creative Scotland aware of them. I and my colleagues want to ensure that our culture and arts sector across Scotland is properly funded.

I welcome Willie Rennie's input and extend to him and his party colleagues an offer to input any suggestions that they might have about the increase in spending that we will undertake in the

years ahead. I welcome his input on where relative priorities should be.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Despite £2 billion having been spent on ticket sales across the UK, every week last year at least one grass-roots music venue permanently closed its doors. Other countries have shown that there is a way out of that decline through ticket levies supporting the development of grass-roots music and venues. Does the cabinet secretary agree that 2024 is the year in which to turn the situation around, including by accelerating progress towards establishing a ticket levy on arena and stadium tickets to support the grass roots?

Angus Robertson: That suggestion has been made and is being repeated, and it is being promoted very actively by some members of the cultural community. That community has suggested that the suggestion needs to be explored further, and I am open to learning about it. As I have said to the committee that Mark Ruskell serves on, we need to look imaginatively at all kinds of ways in which we could secure the necessary funding for the culture and arts sector. The suggestion, which Mark Ruskell has made a number of times, is one that merits further consideration. I look forward to the committee looking at it closely and to receiving more advice on it. No doubt we will look at it together with other suggestions, to ensure that the culture and arts sector receives the funding that it requires. I know that Mark Ruskell supports that. I certainly do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 5 was not lodged.

UCI Cycling World Championships

6. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how much it spent on the UCI cycling world championships in Glasgow in 2023. (S6O-02931)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The total funding for the 2023 UCI cycling world championships is in the process of being finalised and will be confirmed in due course. It includes contributions from the Scottish Government, UK Sport, British Cycling, Glasgow City Council and a number of other local authorities, as well as from commercial revenue streams. Any additional funding that might be required will be managed centrally by the Scottish Government.

Finlay Carson: I welcomed the UCI cycling world championships being in Scotland. Dumfries and Galloway, which is a region that has already etched its name in the history of cycling as the birthplace of the pedal cycle bike in 1839, played

host to the road competitions for paracyclists. South of Scotland Destination Alliance suggested that there might have been a £6 million boost to the local economy, but given the significant costs of hosting the event, including what we believe will be a significant overspend, what assessment has the Scottish Government made of the impact of that investment, and what work will it do with Dumfries and Galloway Council to ensure that it can deliver a long-term legacy?

Angus Robertson: The Scottish Government meets 2023 Cycling World Championships Ltd weekly to oversee the closing down of contracts and to achieve a final position on delivery costs. We expect a final position by the end of the financial year. We also expect event evaluation information—which goes to the heart of the question—on the economic benefit to Scotland, including the south of Scotland. That will be published in February.

I take this opportunity to record our thanks to the outgoing chief executive of the UCI world championships, Trudy Lindblade, and to wish her well as the new chief executive of Cricket Scotland.

“Building a New Scotland”

7. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the total cost to date of its “Building a New Scotland” series of papers. (S6O-02932)

The Minister for Independence (Jamie Hepburn): The Scottish Government is publishing the publication costs of all the papers in the “Building a New Scotland” series. Parliament has been informed of costs for the first nine papers in the series. The cumulative cost has been £151,657.40, which means that the average cost of each of the first nine papers in the series was £16,850.21. heating. *[Jamie Hepburn has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]* That cumulative total represents a value of around 0.00025 per cent of the total Scottish Government budget for the financial year. We will continue to publish the cost information for future papers once they are published, as we have committed to do.

Douglas Lumsden: So far, the Scottish National Party Government has wasted about £151,000 on nine independence prospectus papers. What a complete waste of taxpayer money, when the propaganda papers fail to answer any key questions about currency, the fiscal framework or pensions. Even the First Minister previously described them as material

“that frankly sits on a website and nobody reads.”

Does the minister agree with the First Minister’s comments? Can he explain to Scottish taxpayers

why that money would not be better spent on our schools, our health service or our police?

Jamie Hepburn: It is pretty clear that Mr Lumsden was looking for a figure that was rather higher than a value of around 0.00025 per cent of the total Scottish Government budget for this financial year. He was clearly not listening when I responded to Donald Cameron, so I remind Mr Lumsden that we won the last Scottish Parliament election and so have a mandate to take forward that activity. The Conservatives lost the last Scottish Parliament election, which is why the SNP is in government. The money is well spent.

Ireland has an income per head that is 24 per cent higher than that of the UK; in Denmark, income per head is 35 per cent higher than that of the UK; and in Norway it is 61 per cent higher than that of the UK. We have a boorach of a UK economy as a result of Brexit, and the Office for Budget Responsibility predicts that gross domestic product will be 4 per cent lower in the long run because of it. The only way that we can escape that mess is through independence, so we will continue to make the case for it.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Can the minister provide an update on how the United Kingdom’s gross domestic product per capita compares to that of the comparator countries that are used in the “Building a New Scotland” series of papers?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That was a bit wide of the question that is in the *Business Bulletin*, I am afraid, because we are looking for an update on the total cost of the actual papers, not the cost of the substance of the papers.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Having previously urged the Scottish Government to build a clear and credible independence strategy, former SNP minister Alex Neil now says that, in the view of many independence supporters, the SNP has

“abandoned any pretence of trying to get independence anytime soon”.

How does the Scottish Government justify the costs of the white papers and how does it hope to build consensus around its independence strategy—as set out in the white papers—when it cannot achieve consensus within its own party?

Jamie Hepburn: I have to say—not for the first time—that I disagree with Alex Neil. I believe that we are building a credible and compelling case for independence. I have already made the point about the advantages that countries that are similar to Scotland have as a consequence of their independence. I would have thought that the Labour Party might have agreed, because the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that

destitution is on the increase in the UK, but is being mitigated by the Scottish Government, and the Resolution Foundation has pointed out that if the UK had the average income and levels of inequality of similar countries, typical households would be £8,300 better off, which rises to £10,200 when we are compared with countries that are similar to Scotland. I had thought that Alex Neil, the Labour Party and other members would be able to see the benefits of independence. That is the case that we will continue to make.

Historic Environment Scotland Sites (Reopening)

8. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the reopening of Historic Environment Scotland sites following the completion of work to make them safe for the public, including when the remaining sites will reopen. (S6O-02933)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie): I am pleased to say that Historic Environment Scotland's inspection programme concludes at the end of March 2024. Once it is completed, Historic Environment Scotland will have a clearer indication of the scale of the challenge and of the resources that will be required to carry out conservation works.

There is now full or partial access at 53 of the 70 sites where access was restricted because of high-level masonry issues. I am pleased that Historic Environment Scotland continues to put the health and safety of individuals first and is reopening sites only when it is safe to do so.

Details of the inspection programme and site reopenings are published on the Historic Environment Scotland website.

Alexander Burnett: In my constituency, Corgarff castle, which played an important role in the Jacobite risings, closed at the height of summer last year because of staffing issues. According to Historic Environment Scotland, the issue affected a number of sites, especially sites in rural areas. The cabinet secretary asked earlier for examples that he would support. Can the minister guarantee that sites such as Corgarff castle and others in rural areas will not be affected by that issue this summer?

Christina McKelvie: I take into account the issue that Alexander Burnett has raised about the staffing of sites, particularly in his area. I have to say that Brexit is the biggest driver of the lack of staff in rural areas. We should take that into account.

On the reopening of facilities and historic properties, Historic Environment Scotland

publishes all the updates on its website. The information can be easily found by anyone, but I would be happy to make sure that Historic Environment Scotland updates Alexander Burnett on the issues that affect his particular case.

On a number of occasions, Historic Environment Scotland has offered to take individual members on visits to sites to talk through some of the issues, and I urge Alexander Burnett to take up that offer.

Justice and Home Affairs

GEOAmey (Staffing)

1. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands)

(Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether GEOAmey, the prisoner escort service provider, has offered any assurances that it will tackle the reported staffing challenges that currently mean that islanders acting as witnesses have to travel to jury trials on the mainland. (S6O-02934)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): We have been supporting the Scottish Prison Service and other partners in delivering an improvement in the GEOAmey contract that has resulted in early positive signs, with a slowdown in staff attrition and improved staff numbers.

Following the pausing of the post-pandemic reintroduction of solemn jury trials to the sheriff courts at Lerwick, Kirkwall, Portree, Stornoway, Lochmaddy and Wick, assurances have been given by GEOAmey that it will be able to properly resource the courts from spring 2024.

Ariane Burgess: According to a recent audit of the contract, GEOAmey's on-going poor performance is resulting in delays and inefficiencies across the justice sector, which impact on policing, prison services and the courts. It now requires direct funding from the Government. In the light of that, will the Government confirm that there is no question of extending GEOAmey's contract for a further four years, as would be permitted, and that its record will be taken into consideration during future bids for lucrative Government contracts?

Angela Constance: There is no doubt that GEOAmey's performance has been utterly unacceptable and that that has had huge impacts across the justice system. The criminal justice board has been engaged with issues relating to the contract and, as Teresa Medhurst, the Scottish Prison Service chief executive, stated at the Criminal Justice Committee last month, all options remain under consideration in relation to prisoner escort arrangements in Scotland.

GEOAmeys performance will definitely be a vital factor to be considered when decisions are being made about the future model of the prisoner transport service contract. The SPS continues to monitor the performance of the contract carefully to ensure that targeted thresholds are met and that we see an appropriate level of service that meets the needs of the Scottish justice system.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs will know from our correspondence during the summer of my concerns regarding the impact on local access to justice of the loss of sheriff and jury trials in the islands and rural courts. I welcome the fact that those will resume from the spring, although the duration of the loss is longer than anyone would have liked. Can the cabinet secretary offer reassurance that the changes to the contract with GEOAmeys will ensure that rural and island courts are not seen as the expendable end of the justice system?

Angela Constance: Mr McArthur and I have exchanged correspondence extensively on the matter—I have it here with me. We are seeing promising early signs. For example, there has been an increase by 40 in the number of police custody officers in the past three months, a number of officers are currently in training and staff attrition is down by 40 per cent. Nonetheless, we must closely monitor the situation. The point that Mr McArthur makes about the Highlands and island communities is well made. There have been particular issues in rural Scotland and in other areas of Scotland that we are focused on.

Domestic Abuse Victims (Protection)

2. **Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what protection is available to victims of domestic abuse when harassment and exclusion orders expire. (S6O-02935)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): A non-harassment order can be made in certain circumstances by a criminal court or civil court. The criminal or civil court can make a non-harassment order that runs for an indefinite period of time if it considers that to be appropriate. A person can apply for an exclusion order from a civil court to exclude from the family home their spouse or civil partner or, in certain circumstances, their cohabiting partner. Those orders end automatically in certain circumstances, such as when a couple divorce. Anyone who remains at risk of abuse or harassment after an exclusion order or a non-harassment order ends could apply to the civil court for a further non-harassment order or an interdict.

Oliver Mundell: I thank the minister for that answer, but that has not been the experience of a constituent of mine who has struggled to get legal representation and to navigate the court process. More needs to be done. I would be keen to understand from the minister when domestic abuse protection orders will be implemented by the Scottish Government. Does the minister agree that a two-plus-year delay in getting that additional measure in place sends the wrong message to victims?

Siobhian Brown: Non-harassment orders are intended to provide a means of ensuring that ongoing harassment can be prevented. They can be especially important in protecting victims from ongoing abuse by a partner or ex-partner who has been convicted of a domestic abuse offence, particularly if there are long-term coercive or controlling behaviours. However, discretion lies with the court in each individual case to determine whether to impose an NHO.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Women in Shetland continue to struggle to get legal support for domestic abuse cases, including to obtain harassment and exclusion orders. They are required, sometimes with great urgency, to find and engage a solicitor on the Scottish mainland who will take on legal aid cases. Does the Scottish Government agree that that situation is unacceptable, with island victims of domestic abuse facing unique barriers to justice at often critical and vulnerable times?

Siobhian Brown: Our current legal aid funding arrangement ensures that around 70 per cent of people are eligible for a form of civil legal aid in Scotland. Means testing remains an important lever to ensure that we retain the wide scope of cases for which legal aid is available in principle. We have invested significant funding in front-line services, and we work closely with statutory agencies to improve their response to victims and survivors. We also provide support to the Scottish Women's Rights Centre.

Police Stations (Proposed Closures)

3. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the proposed closure of Paisley, Ferguslie Park, Greenock, Bishopbriggs and Milngavie police stations. (S6O-02936)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Through the delivery of its estate strategy, Police Scotland is putting plans in place to modernise its estate to make it fit for purpose. We are supportive of plans to co-locate with other parts of the public sector, including local authorities, which promotes closer working and collaboration, delivering better outcomes for individuals and communities.

I agree with the deputy chief constable Malcolm Graham, who said that the presence of policing in communities

“is not defined by buildings but by the officers and staff who work there”

and I encourage anyone with an interest to respond to the consultation, which is available on the Police Scotland website.

Neil Bibby: It is important that the Scottish Government does not wash its hands of this or say that it is only an operational matter when my constituents in Paisley, Greenock, Ferguslie Park, Milngavie and Bishopbriggs are extremely concerned about the possible closures of their local police stations.

What financial support will the Government provide to protect local stations if the police and public deem them necessary? Where the police have indicated that they support a replacement presence—for example, in Paisley and in Greenock, where they are located in town centres, are open 24 hours a day, have criminal investigation departments and, as in the case of Greenock, have a custody suite—does the cabinet secretary agree that any replacement should be on a like-for-like basis?

Angela Constance: I recognise that, in some instances, people feel very strongly about the police estate and about police buildings in their local communities, hence the consultation. However, it is crucial, as we move forward, that we have modern and fit-for-purpose facilities and that we bear in mind that police officers tend to be mobile in their work.

Regarding Mr Bibby’s locality, it is important to recognise that there is a consultation and that Police Scotland is taking part in discussions with Renfrewshire Council about co-location and about identifying appropriate community engagement facilities. The consultation is about using co-location to enhance the effectiveness of policing and to enhance local partnership working, as well as to improve the visibility and presence of policing in our communities.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary says, Police Scotland has said that the selection of properties for possible disposal under the service’s estate strategy is part of moves towards co-location with partners, where that is possible, and to ensure that services are delivered in the most efficient and effective way. Will the cabinet secretary provide further detail of the success that has already come from co-location?

Angela Constance: We all agree that we want our public services to be effective and efficient. Co-location with suitable partners makes the best

use of the public sector estate and offers the opportunity for increased visibility and closer working.

There are more than 60 examples of successful co-location across the Police Scotland estate—which is around 20 per cent of that estate—and 13 of those co-locations are blue-light collaborations. There is a great example of that in my own constituency, in West Lothian, and there are also examples of co-location with Clackmannanshire Council in Alloa, with Aberdeen City Council and in Inverness, where there is a co-location with the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service.

It is also important to recognise that, in its pre-budget scrutiny report at the end of last year, the Criminal Justice Committee said that the police and fire services

“should explore the provision of newer co-located premises which offer improved facilities for officers, firefighters and staff”.

Police Officer Numbers (South Scotland)

5. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact that the Scottish budget 2024-25 will have on police officer numbers in the South Scotland region. (S6O-02938)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): As outlined in the recent budget, we will increase the Scottish Police Authority resource budget by £75.7 million in 2024-25. Although it is for the chief constable to decide how best to deploy police resources, I welcome her statement to the Criminal Justice Committee on 20 December that the budget settlement would allow the recruitment of officers to restart before the end of this financial year.

Police Scotland has recruited almost 600 officers in 2023 and around 1,480 new recruits since the beginning of 2022. As at 30 September 2023, there were 379 more police officers than in 2007. Scotland also has more police officers per capita than England and Wales and offers higher pay ranges, with 30 officers per 10,000 of the population compared to 25 per 10,000 in England and Wales.

Colin Smyth: We have seen police officer numbers plummet right across Scotland in recent years. In the smallest division, Dumfries and Galloway, numbers have been cut from 411 in June 2020 to just 354, which means that, at certain times, just a couple of officers are covering a huge geographical area.

Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether the recent budget means that we will return to the levels of June 2020 in Dumfries and Galloway?

Given that the SNP's commitment to maintain police numbers at the level when Police Scotland was established, a decade ago, now seems dead in the water, what exactly is the Government's current specific target for officer numbers?

Angela Constance: The establishment and agreement of officer numbers is, of course, an operational matter for the chief constable. When she appeared at the Criminal Justice Committee just before Christmas, she made it very clear that she welcomed the budget settlement and that it would enable Police Scotland to retain police numbers of around 16,500 or 16,600.

It is important to remember that we now have nearly 400 more officers than we had in 2006-07. In the Dumfries and Galloway divisional area, there were 354 officers as of 30 September 2023, which compares to 349 on 30 September the year before. I hope that that small increase gives some reassurance to Mr Smyth about the stabilisation of police resources in his area.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I met the divisional commander of Dumfries and Galloway just before the recess. He welcomed the fact that we have additional recruits in the region but noted that rurality poses huge challenges in relation to appropriate officer cover.

Will the cabinet secretary comment on whether Dumfries and Galloway could be considered a priority area for police recruitment after the end of the current recruitment freeze, given the challenges of rurality and officer coverage?

Angela Constance: It is important to recognise that there are particular challenges for particular workforces in rural Scotland. That is why Police Scotland has undertaken targeted recruitment, including in Stranraer and Dumfries last year. I hope that I demonstrated through the numbers that I quoted to Mr Smyth that there has been a small increase in and a stabilisation of police numbers across the Dumfries and Galloway divisional area.

It should be noted that the creation of a Scottish-wide single police service means that all communities have greater access to national policing capabilities than would otherwise be the case. Local area commanders can also draw on specialist resources to support local policing wherever they are needed.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The latest recorded crime statistics from Police Scotland show that, in the Ayrshire police division, overall crime jumped by more than 10 per cent at a time when police numbers have fallen in Ayrshire since the Scottish National Party centralised our police forces. How much more should crime rise in communities such as Ayrshire

before the Scottish Government starts properly resourcing our police?

Angela Constance: For the current financial year, resourcing for policing across Scotland benefited by an additional £80 million. We introduced the draft Scottish budget before Christmas. Once again, it saw additional resource and capital for Police Scotland.

It is important to recognise that there continue to be more police officers per capita in Scotland than there are in England and Wales. Recorded crime has reduced by 41 per cent since 2006-07, so Scotland under the SNP is a safer place.

Police Scotland (Budget 2024-25)

6. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how its budget for 2024-25 will support Police Scotland. (S6O-02939)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Protecting front-line services and supporting those who deliver them is a key priority for the Scottish Government. That is why, despite deeply challenging financial circumstances, the 2024-25 Scottish budget provides record funding for the Scottish Police Authority and Police Scotland.

We will invest £1.55 billion in policing in the next financial year. The police resource budget will be increased by £75.7 million, which is a 5.6 per cent increase, with the capital budget increasing to £64.6 million, which represents a 12.5 per cent increase on the 2023-24 budgets.

Gordon MacDonald: I welcome the real-terms budget increase for Police Scotland. However, with the continued squeeze on Barnett consequential and the disappointing autumn statement, will the cabinet secretary outline the impact that that will have on delivering a fit-for-purpose Police Scotland service in the long term?

Angela Constance: Last month's autumn statement was the worst-case scenario for Scotland, as it contained a fiscal settlement from the United Kingdom Government that undermined the viability of public services across the whole of the UK—including here, in Scotland. Our block grant funding for the budget has fallen by 1.2 per cent in real terms since 2022-23 and our capital spending power is due to contract by almost 10 per cent in real terms over the next five years. Nonetheless, protecting front-line services is a priority for the Scottish Government, and our budget is delivering for justice and for policing in particular.

It might be helpful if I quote what the chief constable said when she attended the Criminal Justice Committee and welcomed the budget

settlement. She said that this budget settlement is in

“recognition of Police Scotland’s value and the contribution that policing makes to Scotland being a safe place to live and work, with historically low levels of crime.”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 20 December 2023; c 2.]

I am very pleased to commend to Parliament a budget that, when we consider both resource and capital, has an increased investment of £92.7 million in policing for Scotland.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Every police officer in the UK has body-worn cameras, apart from in Scotland. They protect police officers and the public, support victims and witnesses and save time and money. Humza Yousaf has repeatedly promised them, but, due entirely to Scottish National Party budget choices, Scotland has been left behind.

Three weeks ago, the day after the budget, I asked the new chief constable whether the 2027 target date for full delivery would be met, but she could not tell me. When exactly will our officers finally get that basic kit?

Angela Constance: I would have hoped that Mr Findlay would welcome two facts. The first is that the roll-out of body-worn cameras for police officers will commence this coming calendar year. The second is the record investment in policing in Scotland. Surely that is good news that we can all celebrate.

Police Stations (Impact of Proposed Closures on Antisocial Behaviour)

7. Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact of the proposed closure of 29 police stations across Scotland on antisocial behaviour. (S6O-02940)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The deployment of police resources and operational matters are, of course, decisions for the chief constable. The Scottish Government has increased police funding to Police Scotland year on year since 2016-17, with £1.55 billion being committed in the 2024-25 budget.

We fully support Police Scotland and local authorities that lead on responding to antisocial behaviour, and we continue to encourage early intervention, diversion and appropriate support through multi-agency partnership approaches.

Foysoyl Choudhury: Police Scotland has confirmed that there has been a recent rise in antisocial behaviour in Linlithgow. Although it is often non-criminal, the impact that it has on the local community is undeniable. Linlithgow lost its

police station a number of years ago, and constituents are concerned that the lack of police presence is contributing to young people engaging in such behaviour. What specific action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that communities where police stations are earmarked for closure continue to feel safe and protected in their local area?

Angela Constance: Mr Choudhury might be aware that the police station in Linlithgow has been vacant for more than six years and has therefore been declared surplus by Police Scotland.

The member might be aware that Siobhian Brown, who is the responsible minister, has established a working group on antisocial behaviour, which brings together experts and practitioners to examine our strategic approach to the issue and to propose improvements. The group will report later this year. After 20 years of the existing antisocial behaviour legislation, we are due a review, and I look forward to all members’ contributions to that.

Retail Crime (Government Response)

8. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it and its partners are taking to tackle retail crime and its potential impact on communities, in light of the reported increase in retail crime caused by the cost of living crisis. (S6O-02941)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Scottish Government recognises the significant disruption and harm to businesses and individuals from retail crime and continues to support the innovative Scottish partnership against acquisitive crime—SPACE—strategy.

Police Scotland leads the partnership, working with retailers and other organisations including Retailers Against Crime and Neighbourhood Watch Scotland. The focus is on prevention, deterrence and, where appropriate, enforcement. The strategy seeks to minimise opportunities for that type of crime, to protect individuals and businesses, and to deliver clear advice and guidance on prevention.

I urge all retailers to continue to engage with Police Scotland and other partners to help safeguard their business and the people who work there.

Colin Beattie: In my constituency, there has been continued and escalating incidents of retail crime, resulting not only in a threat to the livelihoods of small business owners but in an unacceptable threat to staff’s physical safety while at their place of work. What additional support is

being put in place to ensure the safety and security of staff and property for retailers and to provide effective deterrent and punishment for criminals who take part in retail crime?

Siobhian Brown: We recognise the vital role that retail workers play in our society and we want to ensure that they are protected. Workers across all sectors should be safe at work and should never have to experience abuse or violence when simply doing their job.

The Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2020, which came into force in August 2021, created a statutory offence of threatening, abusing or assaulting a retail worker, ensuring that the seriousness of that behaviour is highlighted through a specific offence. From August 2021 to March 2023, 543 charges that were brought under the act led to a conviction in criminal court.

Although there has been a long-term reduction in levels of recorded non-sexual violence—25 per cent between 2006-07 and 2022-23—along with its partners, the Scottish Government is continuing to implement the violence prevention framework. That is backed by £2 million-worth of investment this year to fund a range of activities that will help to prevent and divert people away from violence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on justice and home affairs. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow front-bench teams to change position, should they wish to do so.

Asylum Policy and Legislation (United Kingdom Government)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11803, in the name of Emma Roddick, on the impact of UK Government asylum policy and legislation in Scotland.

I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible. I call Emma Roddick to speak to and move the motion.

14:53

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): We recognise that, unfortunately, asylum policy is currently reserved to the UK Parliament under the Scotland Act 1998. The Scottish Government has been clear through our building a new Scotland paper “Migration to Scotland after independence” that, in an independent Scotland, we would take a very different approach to asylum and migration, building a new system that is based on treating people with dignity and respect and on upholding our international and moral obligations.

The purpose of holding the debate today is to discuss and to highlight the impact that UK Government asylum decisions have had in Scotland on national and local government, as well as on the third sector’s ability to support asylum seekers who live here.

As the Scottish Refugee Council is fond of saying, powers are reserved, people are not. In Scotland, we are determined to support everyone who lives here to integrate into and contribute to our communities. We want to respect and protect the human rights of everyone and provide opportunity and equality, regardless of anyone’s background. Supporting asylum seekers and treating them fairly when they engage with devolved services is our responsibility, and we have made it our business. However, it is undeniable that UK Government decisions—I will soon speak to a few recent ones in particular—impact on our ability to do that successfully and in the best way.

Earlier today, I spoke, as I regularly do, with representatives from the Scottish Refugee Council and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about exactly that issue. I will lay out some of the most concerning examples that they have shared of the impact of UK Government decisions on their ability to do the work that they do. We discussed how seriously councils take their responsibilities to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and how lack of adequate funding to support that work is

impacting how well it can be done. I have also heard how lack of funding to support councils to work with newly recognised refugees is forcing people into destitution and putting councils in the difficult position of dealing with sudden spikes in homelessness presentations.

The UK Government claimed on 2 January that the legacy asylum backlog had been cleared. It published data suggesting that, in the four weeks from 10 November to 17 December last year, 20,481 initial asylum decisions were made. That is more than were made in the whole of 2021, and we know that thousands of cases remain unresolved. Through the Women's Integration Network in Glasgow, I have heard from people who have been seeking asylum for more than a decade—women who have not left Scotland since before Facebook launched, holding babies who were born here while they have no idea when they might receive permission to stay and to work to support those babies or what they might do if their application is refused.

We have long called for improving the speed and quality of decisions, but the approach of doing so without support or co-ordination with local councils has left people destitute and homeless. It means that receiving a positive decision can be as stressful as receiving a negative one. Suddenly, the very little support that people have disappears, and they have a very short move-on period. For many, the only option is to present as homeless to the local authority. Without communication and financial support from the UK Government, councils are struggling to do right by those who have been given positive decisions but have nowhere to turn and nowhere to live. The new Minister of State for Legal Migration and the Border confirmed to me on 3 January that the UK Government will not provide any additional funding as a result of the increase in asylum support cessations.

In this incredibly difficult situation, local authorities across Scotland are engaging with asylum dispersal; nearly half of Scottish local authorities are now taking part. There are, of course, housing pressures in many of those council areas, but that does not prevent Scotland from doing its part in continuing to support refugees and people seeking asylum. What it does is increase the importance of genuine engagement from the UK Government with local authorities on asylum dispersal and related matters to give them a fighting chance of supporting people to avoid homelessness and destitution—genuine engagement that is, sadly, still missing.

Similar difficulties arise in third sector support. I want to acknowledge, as always, the vital work that the third sector does in Scotland to support asylum seekers. It is one of the privileges of my

role to be able to work so closely with the Scottish Refugee Council, which is one of our partners, along with COSLA, in the new Scots strategy. The new Scots approach has now been in place for a decade. It is in the process of being refreshed, with a new strategy expected to be published at the end of March, to be followed by a delivery plan in the summer.

Throughout its life, the new Scots approach has held the core principle of supporting integration from day 1 of arrival in Scotland. However, it cannot directly address issues that are outwith the scope of the Scottish Government, Scottish local authorities and other Scottish organisations. UK Government decisions therefore have a significant impact on what can be done to support people seeking asylum and communities in Scotland, even in devolved areas. We are limited in that aim of supporting integration from day 1.

In a debate last year, I highlighted a comment from the Global Refugee Forum, in which I had been told that there are asylum seekers living in Scotland who have never heard of Scotland and are unaware of which country they are in. If someone is unaware that they are in Scotland, it becomes nearly impossible for us and for the third sector to communicate to them their rights and the Scotland-specific services that are available to them. All the while, the UK Government is seeking to restrict the right of people to seek asylum in the UK at all through the Illegal Migration Act 2023. The third sector and the Scottish Government are keen to mitigate, wherever possible, the worst impacts of that act, but UK Government plans to implement it remain unclear, which makes it challenging for us to consider the best way to do that.

That act, of course, follows the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. Two clauses in the Nationality and Borders Bill triggered a need for legislative consent, which the Scottish Parliament voted to withhold. The UK Government then made no changes in response to the views of, and the lack of consent from, the Scottish Parliament. Then we got the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill, which is the second piece of asylum legislation that was introduced last year that the Home Secretary could not guarantee would be compatible with the European convention on human rights. That led to flippant comments from some politicians down south about whether we should get rid of ECHR responsibilities altogether.

The Scottish Government has opposed plans to relocate people to Rwanda and to have protection claims considered there since those plans were announced in April 2022, because that undermines the 1951 United Nations refugee convention. The Supreme Court decision in

November to reject the Government appeal was important, but we have been disappointed with the UK Government's reaction since then, in doubling down and introducing emergency legislation to try to force through the measure anyway.

The UK was a founding signatory of the 1951 UN refugee convention, which is hard to picture now, given the current UK Government's constant attacks on the rights of people to seek safety and sanctuary here. We have a duty to uphold that convention instead of constantly trying to find ways out of it. However, it does not look as though we are anywhere near having a UK Government that will accept those facts. Files that were recently released by the National Archives in London outlined consideration given by the former Labour Government to accommodating asylum seekers in Mull.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am sure that the minister will want to note that that suggestion, which came from civil servants, was not taken forward by the UK Labour Government and was, in fact, dismissed. For the accuracy of the debate, she will want to acknowledge that.

Emma Roddick: I will certainly be pleasantly surprised if a Labour Government comes in at the next UK election and makes big changes compared to the UK Government that we have now. However, based on the rhetoric coming from the current Labour and Conservative campaigns, it seems to me that the First Minister was right to describe an apparent "race to the bottom" on immigration policies. No UK Government in recent memory has attempted to move towards a humane and dignified asylum system that promotes integration and welcomes people.

The broader rights and freedoms of asylum seekers are also a concern. People seeking asylum who would otherwise be destitute can apply to the Home Office for accommodation and financial support while they wait for a decision. Asylum accommodation is provided on a no-choice basis and, as of two days ago, we understand that asylum support rates have been reduced to £8.86 per week for people in catered accommodation, which is about £1.25 a day. New maximisation policies also increase risk and misery by requiring unrelated adults to share hotel rooms in contingency asylum accommodation. Further, there was a complete lack of engagement with Scottish local authorities prior to procurement of hotels in their areas for that purpose or, after that, on the decision to bring in the new maximisation policy.

People seeking asylum are restricted from working unless they are granted permission by the Home Office and, in most cases, we are prevented from supporting asylum seekers due to the application of the no recourse to public funds

system. We owe those people better. Their human rights are not being realised through the financial support of £1.25 a day, the inability to go out to work to earn for themselves and the terrifying uncertainty over their future, which casts gloom on every single thought that they have.

Every person who is living in Scotland and who does not have the right to work or enough money to support themselves is a huge waste of potential. All those people could be making positive change for others, running popular businesses, supporting our public services or contributing to our local economies. That is why we are developing a proposal for an asylum right to work pilot in Scotland, which analysis has told us could add an estimated £30 million a year to the Scottish economy and help to fill vital but currently vacant roles.

I discussed with the Scottish Refugee Council the impact of divisive rhetoric and inhuman language, and the importance of showing political leadership in promoting the positive impact that a fair and sensible approach to asylum and migration would have on Scotland. Together With Refugees recently commissioned research that showed that 80 per cent of people in the UK want an approach that is fair, compassionate and well managed. The current mess does not work for anyone, whether it is asylum seekers, employers, businesses or Governments. People want others to be treated with fairness, and they want those who live in Scotland to be able to engage with their local communities and employment opportunities.

That is exactly what the fair begins here campaign calls for, so I take the opportunity to welcome that campaign and direct all those with an interest towards it. I know that many of my constituents—and probably constituents of colleagues across the chamber—want to do their bit to make positive change for asylum seekers in Scotland, and I hope that others will join in sharing the spirit of that campaign and calling on the UK Government to deliver.

Having met a few of the people involved, I know that there are incredible success stories of where integration has worked in Scotland. MSPs across the country will be aware of such stories, too, so please talk about them and highlight the benefits of migration and supporting others. Let us shift the rhetoric to a more positive place.

Scotland should be a good neighbour and a contributor to global priorities. We should encourage migration to Scotland and enthusiastically welcome people who want to live here and contribute, but we cannot do that if we are seen as a country that sees incomers as worth less than others. Legislation such as the Illegal Migration Act 2023, as well as commentary that

suggests that human rights are optional or even unwanted, do no favours to the UK's international reputation, and Scotland is at risk of being dragged right down with it.

I am committed to continuing to raise issues relating to reserved asylum decisions, to pushing the UK Government to make sensible changes such as allowing asylum seekers the right to work, and to continuing partnership working with COSLA and the Scottish Refugee Council. However, I want to be clear that my job—whoever carries it out—will continue to be extremely difficult, with our future uncertain, while we remain in the United Kingdom and beholden to UK Governments with increasingly concerning ideas about how to treat asylum seekers and refugees. The only way to ensure that we meet our moral and legal obligations to the people who seek sanctuary here, the only way to direct resources and spending to where they are needed and the only way that Scotland will have an asylum and migration system that works for our needs is through independence.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the impact of UK Government asylum policy and legislation in Scotland, including the effect of the complex asylum system on people who have applied for protection, restrictions on the right to work and limited support available to people awaiting a decision, the increased reliance on contingency asylum accommodation caused by a backlog in Home Office decision-making, risks of maximisation policy and inadequate engagement with Scottish local authorities or public services prior to procurement of contingency accommodation, the streamlined asylum process and limited move-on period allowed once a decision has been made, and consequent impact on both newly-recognised refugees and local authorities, and the restricting of the right to seek asylum in the UK under the Illegal Migration Act 2023; is opposed to the UK Government's pursuit of plans to relocate people to third countries to have asylum claims considered there; recognises the ruling of the Supreme Court in relation to the safety of Rwanda, and acknowledges the comments of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that the Migration and Economic Development Partnership (MEDP) between the UK and Rwanda undermines the established international refugee protection system and that the UNHCR does not consider the MEDP to comply with the UK's obligations under international law; notes the engagement of Scottish local authorities in asylum dispersal, and agrees that the UK Government needs to engage positively with devolved governments, local authorities and public services across asylum matters to reduce negative impacts on people, communities and services.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I gently remind members who are looking to participate in the debate but have not yet pressed their request-to-speak button to do so now or as soon as possible.

15:07

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The United Kingdom has a proud history of supporting refugees. Since 2015, as a country, we have offered a home to more than half a million men, women and children who have sought safety, including those from Hong Kong, Syria and Afghanistan, as well as, most recently, those fleeing President Putin's illegal attack on Ukraine. To put that in context, it is equivalent to the population of Edinburgh being resettled in the UK. We all agree that it is right that we respond appropriately to the plight of individuals and families who are escaping violent, authoritarian and dictatorial regimes that systematically persecute and even execute their own people.

Recently, as a member of the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group on Bangladesh, I visited the Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I think that I speak for all MSPs who were on the trip when I say that it was a deeply humbling experience. It demonstrated not only the vulnerable humanitarian situation but the unstable situation that the Rohingya people continue to face. The ongoing civil war in Myanmar is deeply concerning, and an estimated 1.4 million Rohingya people have fled into neighbouring Bangladesh since 2017.

I pay tribute to the Bangladesh Government's response to the crisis and, indeed, to the global response, including the support that has been provided. I very much welcome the UK Government's leading role in that regard. Since 2017, the UK Government has provided £370 million to support Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh, and it has provided nearly £30 million to support Rohingya and other Muslim minorities in Myanmar's Rakhine state.

The UK Government is a force for good in the world and a global leader in supporting refugees. Although Scottish National Party and Green ministers do not wish to acknowledge that and have tried to make the debate about independence, the UK has a record that we should be proud of.

I agree with the minister that the backlog and the time that is taken to decide whether a person can remain in the UK are not acceptable. It is vital that agencies process asylum claims quickly and efficiently for the good of all concerned. It is welcome that the UK Government has taken steps in recent months to address that situation.

Emma Roddick: Given that the member has a keen interest in housing and homelessness issues, will he back our calls for the UK Government to extend the move-on period for

positive decisions to 56 days from the current period of 14 days?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for the intervention, Mr Briggs.

Miles Briggs: I will come to that point later in my speech. The briefings that were provided for the debate make a very important case for that extension and it is something that colleagues across the UK should look at. I am more than happy to assist in trying to find resolutions to improve that situation and create more safeguards.

With regard to the minister's comments about the 4,500 complex cases that have been highlighted, we know that those need additional checks and investigations. They are hard cases that often involve asylum seekers who present as children, where age verification must take place; with serious medical issues; or with suspected past convictions that need to be checked. There is therefore more complexity to those cases.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Does Miles Briggs recognise that the values that the UK Border Agency employs in matters such as age verification do not necessarily match the values that we hold in this Parliament, in that those processes often exist in an atmosphere of disbelief and people are required to evidence past trauma and even torture before their asylum claims are assessed?

Miles Briggs: How verification can take place has changed. That process has seen reforms from the UK Government recently, which should be welcomed. Documentation is a key aspect of that. If someone arrives in a country without a passport, it takes time to verify who they are and their age. I think that even the member would accept that our systems must be able to verify people, particularly with regard to past criminal convictions that would bar a person from asylum in this country. So far in this debate, I have not heard any member say that that should not be the case.

However, the UK Government has been directly helping people from regions of conflict and instability. The best help for the most vulnerable people is for them to come to this country through safe and legal routes. That will stop what can only be described as the evil criminal gangs—the minister did not touch on this—that are preying on vulnerable people, including children. That is where we need policy solutions. I have never heard SNP ministers say what they would do to stop criminal gangs preying on those people.

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie): Will the member give way?

Miles Briggs: I want to make some progress. I have taken two interventions and I am not sure that the Deputy Presiding Officer would give me that much time back.

Uncontrolled immigration and unchecked illegal immigration can have very serious consequences. We have seen that with the unacceptable loss of life in the English Channel. That is why it is right to find solutions to stop people putting their lives at risk by crossing the English Channel in small boats and coming to this country illegally. We must ensure that those who come to this country to seek asylum do so through legal routes.

The significant increase in dangerous journeys across the Channel is something that we in Scotland do not directly witness. However, working to stop people traffickers and those who put people's lives in such great danger should be a priority for us in this place, too. Those who are in need of protection should claim asylum in the first safe country that they reach, rather than risking their lives and paying people smugglers to take them on illegal and dangerous journeys.

We all want to see an effective asylum system, and it is wrong to suggest that the UK Government does not take the welfare of people in the asylum system extremely seriously. At every stage of the process, the UK Government seeks to ensure that the needs and vulnerabilities of asylum seekers are identified and shared with local authorities and health partners. That is why the UK Government has spent £3.7 billion in the current fiscal year alone to support refugees in the UK. The minister should maybe also reflect on the decisions that the Scottish Government has taken to cut council budgets and the impact of those on housing in Scotland. Both of our main cities have already declared a housing emergency.

There has always been a need to review policies and look at how support can be provided, working closely with the national health service, local authorities and non-governmental organisations to ensure that people can access healthcare and the vital support that they need. In my casework since I was elected, I have come across the need for mental health support in particular. We know about the challenges with regard to mental health services not just for those who are seeking asylum, but for all of us in this country.

Asylum seekers have access to health and social care services from the point of their arrival in the UK. All asylum seekers, regardless of the type of accommodation that they are in, have the same access to free NHS services as British citizens and other permanent residents. Getting access to those services is often the problem. The Home Office also operates safeguarding hubs to

support vulnerable individuals in quickly accessing healthcare services and information.

I also pay tribute to the third sector, which is doing much good work in the policy area. A number of organisations made important points in the briefings that they provided ahead of the debate, including the British Red Cross's call for the Scottish Government to better monitor, inspect and regulate the use of housing in Scotland by empowering local authorities and regulatory agencies such as the Scottish Housing Regulator. We should look at that. Conservative members would be open to considering it actively as part of the housing bill, which the Government is still to introduce.

Delivering a modern and responsive immigration system for people who are seeking asylum is not easy but, in an ever-changing world and with growing pressure from the global movement of people, such a system must be based on people coming through safe and legal routes. We understand the pressures that our asylum system faces, but I hope that the Scottish Government and the UK Government will commit to working together this year to put solutions in place.

I move amendment S6M-11803.1, to leave out from "the impact" to end and insert:

"that the topics of immigration and asylum are reserved to the UK Parliament and that it is therefore not within the competence of the Scottish Parliament to legislate on these issues; further recognises that the UK Government spent £3.7 billion in the fiscal year 2022-23 to support refugees, that it continues to provide asylum seekers with financial support to cover essential living needs and that it is committed to delivering an asylum system that protects individuals from persecution based on their protected characteristics; agrees that the Scottish Government must engage positively with the UK Government, local authorities and public services across asylum matters to reduce negative impacts on people, communities and services; expresses concern over both the pause of the Scottish Government's Super Sponsor Scheme for displaced Ukrainians and the Scottish Government's inability to renew the £10 million in funding initially granted to local authorities to support resettlement for displaced Ukrainians, and calls on the Scottish Government to declare a housing emergency, given the increase in homelessness applications by 9% and the record number of children placed in temporary accommodation for the fiscal year 2022-23, which is likely to be exacerbated given the recent cuts to the housing budget."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we have a bit of time in hand, so members who take interventions will get the time back.

15:16

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): We gather in a new year but, in many ways, not much has changed on the issues that we are debating or the approaches that are being taken to asylum

policy and legislation. Prior to Christmas, we had no fewer than five debates on asylum, which covered issues ranging from the Illegal Migration Bill—now the Illegal Migration Act 2023—and the provision of free bus travel for asylum seekers to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's important inquiry into the experience of asylum seekers and refugees and the Scottish Government's latest independence paper on migration. Those debates have been most beneficial when we have found consensus on our approach and discussed how we can use the Parliament's powers to make a real difference to the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland and continue to support them. I point to the important recommendations in the committee's report in that regard.

On each of those occasions, and in many other debates last year, Labour members condemned the shambolic and uncaring asylum system that the UK Conservative Government operates. On each of those occasions, we reiterated the need for a more humane approach to asylum processing and migration and that migrants, refugees and asylum seekers should feel safe and welcome when fleeing persecution, war and violence. Each time that we have come to the chamber to debate those issues, Labour members have asked the Scottish Government what more it can do to support asylum seekers, address the issues that are outlined in the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's report and respond to the challenges that are posed by the Illegal Migration Act 2023.

It may be a new year, as I said, but we have not seen a new approach from the UK Government, which continues to press ahead with the Rwanda scheme despite it being ruled illegal. Next week, it will again be rushed through the House of Commons in its new form. Suella Braverman may have gone as Home Secretary, but the pernicious approach persists, with Tory MPs now battling it out to see how the plan can be made even more deplorable. We have a Prime Minister who now privately thinks that it does not work but clearly sees culture wars as his last throw of the dice this year. I quote Yvette Cooper in the House of Commons yesterday:

"In the end, the only deterrence that the Prime Minister believes in is deterring his Back Benchers from getting rid of him. It is weak ... and the taxpayer is paying the price.

It is a totally farcical situation: a Prime Minister who does not think it is a deterrent, a Home Secretary who thinks it is 'batshit', a former Home Secretary who says it will not work, a former Immigration Minister who says it does not do the job and everyone"

else who thinks that it is a complete

"sham".—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 9 January 2024; Vol 743, c 228.]

Labour has been clear that we would scrap the Rwanda scheme. It is unethical, unworkable and extortionate. We need real policy changes to deal with the challenges that we face, not the gimmicks that the Conservatives continue to pursue. That is why Labour has set out a five-point plan to fix the asylum system—to form cross-border policing units to crack down on the smuggler gangs that are trafficking people and putting people into unthinkable situations; to clear the backlogs, which we have heard about, to end the long waits and the expensive use of hotels; to reform legal routes for refugees coming to this country; to negotiate new returns and a family reunion agreement with France and other European countries; and to tackle humanitarian crises at source and better support refugees in their own regions. It is simply disingenuous—

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the member give way?

Paul O’Kane: I will finish this point and then I will give way. It is disingenuous to say that there would be no change with a Labour Government.

Donald Cameron: Would a future Labour Government—were the hypothetical situation to arise in which we had a Labour Government—process applications abroad?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that, even if they are quoting other members, there are still requirements that must be met with regard to the language that is used in the chamber.

Paul O’Kane: I am very sorry, Deputy Presiding Officer. I blame Yvette Cooper rather than myself, but I take the point, which was well made. I apologise to any colleagues who may have found the language in question offensive.

I want to answer Donald Cameron’s question directly, because there was some commentary on the issue over the Christmas period. It is clear that the processing of asylum claims in third countries can and does happen in a number of scenarios. For example, people from Ukraine and Hong Kong can have their cases considered while they are in those countries. We can certainly look at the processing of people’s asylum claims when they are in a safe country. For example, it would be worth looking at whether the asylum claim of an asylum seeker who had arrived in France could be considered while they were there. What the Labour Party is absolutely clear about is that we should not offshore asylum claims to third countries such as Rwanda. We stand against the proposal that the Conservative Government continues to make in that regard.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, I want to focus on the approach that we should take in this Parliament. Over several debates, I have

raised my concern that we must do more to ensure that our local councils and communities are able to support asylum seekers when they live in those communities, and to ensure that we are taking the action that we can take against the Conservatives’ Illegal Migration Act 2023 and its immigration policies.

I have raised with the minister a number of times the importance of having a mitigation plan and the work that the Scottish Refugee Council is calling for in that regard. In our most recent exchange, the minister committed to engaging in on-going work with the Scottish Refugee Council. It is clear that commencement of the IMA is definitely upon us in 2024, so I am keen to hear more from the minister or Christina McKelvie in her summing up—

Emma Roddick: Will the member give way?

Paul O’Kane: I will.

Emma Roddick: I would absolutely love to be able to provide more information but, as the member will know, we are still in the position in which we are desperately asking the UK Government to give us more information. As soon as we know what the plans for implementation are, we will know what we can do to mitigate the worst impacts.

Paul O’Kane: That said, the Scottish Refugee Council has highlighted a number of issues on which action could be prepared and planned. It is incumbent on us and on the Government to ensure that those preparations are well advanced, because we know where some of the most serious impacts will arise.

Given that time in the chamber is limited, it would be productive, as I said, for us to focus on some of the work that we can do. The minister mentioned the new Scots and ending destitution strategies and the fact that a refreshed new Scots strategy is due in March. It is important that we continue to scrutinise that work and ensure that the voices of lived experience and the third sector organisations that are so crucial are heard in the formulation of those strategies, and that we push them forward to ensure that we provide good support to asylum seekers and migrants in Scotland.

Our amendment outlines the challenges that exist in relation to local authority budgets and the provision that local authorities can make, not least in the context of the challenges that exist in housing. The promise to provide 110,000 affordable houses by 2031 is unlikely ever to be met by the Government after it cut the affordable housing supply budget by 30 per cent in real terms this year. It is crucial that it is borne in mind that the decisions that are taken in that regard will have a knock-on impact on all our communities,

including on the members of those communities who are new Scots or people who are seeking refuge and asylum.

It is clear to me from speaking to people in local authorities that they are really struggling to keep services on the road and to ensure that populations are being well looked after. It is therefore crucial that we get to the nub of the issue, which is the need for sustainable local authority funding and for local authorities to have the resources that they need to support all their citizens.

It is important that we continue to call out the UK Conservative Government for its failed policies and its callous approach. It is clear that change will come with a UK Labour Government, which will take a different approach to our asylum system and ensure that we treat people with dignity. However, for our part, here in Scotland, we need to ensure that we use all the powers of this place to support asylum seekers and our local communities.

I move amendment S6M-11803.2, to insert at end:

“; acknowledges the pressure placed upon local government budgets after a decade of Scottish Government cuts; calls for fair funding settlements from the Scottish Government for local authorities; notes that Scottish Government commitments to provide safe and secure accommodation for refugees must come with support for local authorities to provide suitable long-term housing, and acknowledges that Scottish Government cuts to affordable housing budgets will negatively affect local authorities’ ability to provide adequate accommodation for refugees.”

15:24

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am grateful to the Government for bringing the motion to Parliament this afternoon. As Paul O’Kane said, here we are again. It is vitally important that this chamber comes together as often as possible to reassert our collective view on the UK Conservative Government’s policy moves in this area.

So many times in debates such as this, I have leaned into the words of another. I will do so again, with the words of the author Dina Nayeri, who was just a child when she was forced to flee from Iran. She said:

“It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks.”

The “obligation”—her word. I last spoke about our obligation to those seeking safe harbour on our shores when the chamber debated the Equalities and Human Rights Committee report on asylum seekers in Scotland. That has been referenced several times this afternoon, and rightly so. I was heartened by the debate that we had on

that occasion, which fostered a largely consensual tone.

Sadly, quite the opposite was true last month in the House of Commons, when the ruling Conservative Party—among them all six Scottish Conservative MPs, including Douglas Ross—voted to pass the Government’s Rwanda plan bill on its second reading. The bill would see planeloads of vulnerable people who have sought refuge and asylum here deported 4,000 miles away to a country that the UK Supreme Court has deemed to be unsafe for them. We hear a lot about moral panic in our society, but I want to see a moral panic about that.

Instead of backing down and seeing the error of his ways, Rishi Sunak is pressing on with ill-fated attempts to pass a bill that states that Rwanda is a safe country—a policy that it now appears he disagreed with when he was UK chancellor. The bill prevents judges from ruling otherwise and lays aside key aspects of our human rights legislation. That, in turn, would bypass the Human Rights Act 1998 entirely, undermine the independence of our courts and, indeed, damage our reputation internationally—if there is much of a reputation left. The bill has yet to reach the amendment phase, where extreme factions of the Conservative Party will undoubtedly attempt to make it even more odious.

We have badly forgotten the obligation that Dina Nayeri writes of. Douglas Ross and his colleagues have forgotten that this country is made up of those who came here from other shores and that the proudest moments in our nation’s history have been defined by offering shelter to those in need, such as those who came here on the Kindertransport during the second world war, or those from Biafra.

Instead, we have asylum seekers living on barges that look more like prisons. The conditions there foster a feeling of such hopelessness that a 27-year-old on one even took his life in the very week that we debated this policy last, at the end of last year. A fellow asylum seeker, and that 27-year-old’s roommate on the barge, Yusuf Deen Kargbo, spoke just today of how those living there

“don’t have any hope for their lives ... that place is not good for them. Every day their stress is increasing, getting worse.”

In 2021, the number of asylum applications in the United Kingdom reached more than 81,000, largely due to war and conflict. Asylum seekers are entitled to a roof over their head and little more. They are not allowed to work and have no access to public funds in the form of benefits and social security. Those rights are only granted if those people are recognised as refugees, which, due to horrendous Home Office backlogs, can still take months or even years. Those who are not

granted asylum often find themselves in destitution and at risk of exploitation, with only charities to rely on for support.

Scottish Liberal Democrats believe that we have a human duty to offer protection and safe legal routes to people who are fleeing torment. We need the next UK Government to create a dedicated, arm's-length unit to make asylum decisions quickly and more fairly, with a new right to work for those who are seeking asylum if they have to wait longer than three months for a decision on their case, in order to treat them more humanely, give them the chance to integrate in their communities and save the taxpayer tens of millions of pounds. Those are people who are hungry to contribute back to the society that is giving them refuge.

We also welcome the recommendations of the recent report, "The Human Rights of Asylum Seekers in Scotland".

Those seeking safe harbour should always be treated with our utmost respect. Our approach should be guided by compassion and rooted in human rights and respect for international law. Asylum seekers should be entitled to education and information about their rights, particularly in relation to health and mental health. They should not be asked to travel the length and breadth of the British Isles for an assessment interview. Scottish local authorities should be given the resources that they need to provide the language and interpreter services that are vital in helping people to settle here.

We should also offer support to the third sector organisations that often provide the safety net for those whose applications are denied. Liberal Democrats will always stand up for those who are marginalised and demonised. We care passionately about people on the other side of the planet whom we may never meet, some of whom are making their way here with hope and a promise of home. We stand against the dangerous rhetoric that we have heard from the Conservative members of Parliament in London—that is our obligation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we move to the open debate, I give a timely reminder to members who are participating in the debate that they should remain for opening and closing speeches, unless they have the permission of the chair.

15:30

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Article 14 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads:

"Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution."

The United Kingdom played its part in drafting that declaration, which, today, the UK Government sadly undermines at each and every turn. It is important to remind ourselves, often, and without apology, of the context in which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted—a world that was riven by violence and hatred, and full of displaced people and those fleeing persecution in the chaos that followed a war that we must, again and again, commit ourselves never to repeat.

As we look on from Scotland at the conflicts in Europe and the middle east, it is hard not to ponder the solemn reality that it could be us, our children and our friends, or, as is the case with the First Minister, our own relatives, who are affected. History tells us that these conflicts do not occur in a vacuum, and that we must play our part as a responsible member of the global community.

It is heartbreaking to witness the UK Government continuing its vindictive campaign against those who need our help most, despite what we see happening in the world right now. I want to take time today to dispel some of the myths that are peddled by the UK Government and its Conservative defenders here, in Scotland.

They say that we do not have enough room, but let us look at that a bit more closely. Many of Scotland's communities, particularly in rural Scotland, already experience acute depopulation and labour market challenges, in part because of Brexit and the end of freedom of movement. Scotland is far from full, and we are ready to take our share of those seeking refuge, but we are unable to do so due to the fact that this is a reserved matter.

The UK Government must cease its culture wars, fulfil its international obligations and invest in tackling the asylum backlog. Providing additional staff and ensuring more humane and efficient processes could mean a system that is fit for purpose. Instead, it has spent hundreds of millions of pounds on its inhumane and illegal Rwanda policy, which has resulted in what, precisely? Not a single thing. It is an abhorrent and immoral waste of taxpayers' money.

The Conservatives tell us that we are being overrun, often in the most inhumane ways. Former Prime Minister and now Foreign Secretary Lord Cameron once referred to

"a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean."

Sadly, he is not alone. A former Home Secretary has referred to migrants as a "hurricane" and an "invasion".

The Conservatives are trying to normalise such dehumanising language. Othering the most vulnerable in society is one of the oldest and, in my view, most despicable tricks in the Tory

handbook. That will not wash here, in Scotland, and we will see that reflected in the upcoming general election, when we will see an end to the Scottish Conservatives.

The Conservatives ask us how we will pay for all the migrants. People fleeing conflict and persecution and seeking asylum on our shores have much to offer our communities, culturally and economically. It is therefore a shame that the UK Government continues to deny those seeking asylum the right to work and to contribute to our country.

As is noted in the “Building a New Scotland” paper that looks specifically at migration, we know that leaving the European Union has cut off a valuable and ready supply of workers to fill key posts. There have been fewer births than deaths registered in Scotland since 2011, so it is clear that we need inward migration to ensure that our communities are vibrant, diverse and thriving and to support local economies and the public sector.

Last month, I met fisheries stakeholders to discuss the detrimental impact that the proposed UK Government immigration rules would have on the seafood processing sector. During that meeting, there were numerous examples of seafood processing businesses—some of which are based in my constituency—comprised of workforces of up to 90 per cent migrant workers. The one-size-fits-all, Britain-bursting-at-the-seams narrative simply does not ring true in Scotland. With a hostile governing party and an indifferent Opposition, it is clear that the only way for Scotland to have the levers to reverse projected population decline is in an independent country.

Although the Conservatives scream, “Stop the boats!”, and “dream” and “obsess” about front pages full of planes taking off to Rwanda, Scotland has a different dream; our dream is for an asylum system that is founded on equality, opportunity and community. Those three words are a bedrock for the Scottish Government in all that it does. I remind members that that could be us seeking asylum. If it were, would we not want those from whom we were seeking asylum to treat us with the fairness, dignity and respect that we deserve and to be treated as we would wish to be treated ourselves?

15:36

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am delighted to take part in this debate, but not because of the Scottish Government’s position in its motion. Its attack on UK Government migration policy was predictable and the minister’s conclusion was predictable, with its jarring and inappropriate reference to independence.

I point out to Karen Adam that the SNP Government’s 2013 independence white paper said that an independent Scotland would have a “robust” asylum policy that would include the need for “forced removal” of failed asylum seekers. It is ironic to be lectured about dignity, equality and opportunity when those words can be found in the prospectus for independence that the SNP put forward to this country.

However, the debate allows me to shed a little light on the asylum system from a personal perspective, as a result of professional experiences that I gained as a lawyer representing asylum seekers in Scotland. As an advocate in that regard, I refer to my entry in the register of members’ interests.

My experience was gained in the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal—as it was then called—in Bothwell Street in Glasgow. Interestingly, that was at a time—I am betraying my age here—when the Labour Party was in government at Westminster. It is important to remember that the Labour Party ran the system for many years.

In the late 2000s, representing asylum seekers was a challenge for any lawyer. I never won a case arguing for asylum to be granted. It was almost impossible to consult with clients beforehand or even to meet them face to face. Asylum seekers were kept in that tribunal, in what most people would view as prison cells, and they would be brought out for their cases before being returned.

Cases would be dealt with very swiftly—too swiftly, in my opinion. The Home Office presenting officer—or HOPO, as they were known colloquially—would present the case on why asylum should be refused. The immigration judge would respectfully listen to people such as me, but it was hard to make submissions about the facts on the ground in countries in the developing world and argue that asylum should be granted in the UK in light of dangerous or risky conditions in the applicant’s home country that were directly applicable to that particular individual, such as fear of persecution, and to do so with any credibility and confidence.

What can we draw from that experience? I can only speak about how it was in the late 2000s. The system did not appear to work for those who were seeking asylum, and it did not answer the wider legitimate concerns that many people had and still have about migration. Even looked at impartially and independently by a professional simply trying to work in the system, it did not appear to be effective. Trying to act in the best interests of a client was undeniably a challenging experience. I wonder whether much has changed in the 15 years or so since I was in that tribunal.

However, there have been some changes. There has been an administrative overhaul of the tribunal system and, in defence of the UK Government, it should be recognised, as our amendment states, that the UK Government spent £3.7 billion in the fiscal year 2022-23 to support refugees. It should also be recognised that the same UK Government continues to provide asylum seekers with financial support to cover essential living needs and that it is committed to delivering an asylum system that protects individuals from persecution based on their protected characteristics.

On the other points that have been raised in the debate, I have very little to add to Miles Briggs's skilful and measured opening speech and the fundamental point that he closed with—that the Scottish Government and the UK Government should work together. It is a shame that we are yet again debating a reserved matter and not a policy that falls within the Scottish Government's remit.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): On partnership working, Glasgow could face having to welcome hundreds of families who have had positive decisions on their asylum claims entering Glasgow's homelessness system at the same time, without one single penny from the UK Government to support them and Glasgow. Does Donald Cameron think that a partnership working funding model should mean that the UK Government should contribute to that?

Donald Cameron: My response to that is to point Bob Doris to the comments of his party colleague Susan Aitken, who said that she would fight plans to relocate more asylum seekers in Glasgow.

I would like to develop one theme that has not been—

Bob Doris: On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. I apologise for this, because you will probably tell me that this is not a point of order, but Mr Cameron has just made a really important comment and I genuinely could not hear it. It is quite important to the debate that I hear what he said, so could he please repeat that comment?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: For the record, that was not a point of order.

Donald Cameron: I will just continue because I am running out of time, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I would like to develop one theme that has not been covered: Ukraine and the supersponsor scheme. When the minister gave evidence to the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee last month, I asked her about the scheme and whether there was any intention to restart it. She said that the Government had been

reviewing the pause and that the next review would happen this month. Perhaps she can answer now or in closing whether that review has happened. Are we any closer to reopening the scheme?

I suggest to the minister that that has been a failure by the Scottish Government. The scheme was announced with great fanfare, but it has been beset by problems. Earlier last year, there were reports that some 7,500 Ukrainians, including almost 1,900 children, were stuck in temporary accommodation. We know that the SNP Government slashed the resettlement budget by more than £25 million and that it will not renew the £10 million in funding that it initially granted to local councils to support Ukrainian resettlement. I think that the City of Edinburgh Council described that as a betrayal. What was dressed up as a warm Scots welcome and a warm Scots future has, in many cases, ended up being neither.

It is a shame that the debate has already descended into an attack on UK Government policy. These are important issues, especially around housing in Scotland, which is crucial. I am sorry that the debate has taken the course that it has. Instead, we should be concentrating on what the Scottish Government and local government can do here and now in Scotland to make life better for asylum seekers.

15:44

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I am fortunate to represent Glasgow Kelvin, which is one of our most diverse constituencies. People from all corners of the globe pay Scotland the ultimate compliment of choosing to call our country their home. Although we set out our vision of an internationally responsible, welcoming and compassionate country, we do so under the blatant, hostile narrative set by the UK Government, which seeks to constantly undermine that vision.

Those who come here do so at the mercy of an unimaginable, cruel Tory UK Government that is determined to vilify foreigners and to use them as a scapegoat for its own woeful mismanagement. It is a Government that, in the past year, has traded one Home Secretary who dreamed of deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda for the current one, who reportedly thinks that the policy is complete bat stuff—but is pursuing it anyway. Who knew that Rwanda would be the hill on which the current Prime Minister would choose to stake his reputation? That is the flagship Tory policy that will do nothing to address the plight of the desperate who are being put in great danger at the hands of organised criminals in the English Channel.

Members are aware that, last year, the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee published its report on the lived experience of asylum seekers in Scotland. That report made several recommendations, which I am encouraged to see the Scottish Government is taking seriously—notably, the commitment to provide concessionary bus travel, which I welcome.

My colleague Mr Cameron mentioned having budgets that fund asylum seekers. I do not know anyone who thinks that £9.58 a week, which is what asylum seekers receive if they are housed in accommodation, can provide any way of getting by. With no recourse to public funds, asylum seekers are expected to meet all the weekly costs that life brings with less than a tenner. That is simply not enough.

Asylum seekers are, of course, forbidden by UK law from taking up employment to support themselves and their families while their applications are being processed. That process can last for many months or even years—and that is after the Home Office has conducted what it calls a “substantive review”.

A ban on asylum seekers taking up employment is not the norm. The USA, Canada, Germany, Australia and many other nations allow those who are applying for asylum the chance to get a job and earn a living. People should be able to earn a living and integrate into their new communities. The new Scots refugee integration strategy recognises the strengths and skills of asylum seekers as well as committing to the provision of better access to essential services for them.

I turn to the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which, in my view, is one of the most callous pieces of legislation that has been introduced by a UK Government in living memory. In a country that has no legal system of applying for asylum, beyond a select few nation-specific schemes, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 means that someone who is seeking asylum faces being detained indefinitely, left in a permanent state of uncertainty, and under constant threat of deportation. For those who are victims of human trafficking, the new act simply wipes away the protections that are given in the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015.

Andy Sirel of JustRight Scotland told the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee:

“This is a situation in which victim-centred support in a devolved area, which has been provided for the past eight years and is working fairly well, will be extinguished with the stroke of a pen in Westminster”.—[*Official Report, Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee*, 25 April 2023; c 27.]

Those who will be most affected include women who are victims of sex trafficking and young men who are coerced into engaging in organised crime.

Bronagh Andrew of TARA—the Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance—has stated that the Illegal Migration Act 2023 will disapply the powers of the Scottish Government to create a national referral mechanism. It will limit its ability to link women with Police Scotland to have access to justice.

In its 2017 report, “Hidden Lives—New Beginnings: Destitution, asylum and insecure immigration status in Scotland”, the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, which was convened at the time by minister Christina McKelvie, looked in detail at the many challenges faced by those who go through the asylum system in Scotland. It included access to healthcare and the links between destitution, exploitation and psychological trauma, as well as the protection and care of the children of asylum seekers. I would be grateful if the minister could update members on the work that the Scottish Government has done to address the recommendations in that report.

This year marks 14 years since the Tories came to power. However, the chipping away at asylum seekers’ rights did not start with them. The so-called “hostile environment” was started by Labour—the phrase was coined by the then Labour immigration minister, Liam Byrne, in 2007.

This may well be the year in which we see the Tories put out of government. So far, Labour is not offering anything different, but I was pleased to hear today that it would scrap the Rwanda scheme. My challenge to Labour is as follows. A Labour Government should devolve immigration to Scotland so that we can build a better and fairer system that meets our needs. It should work with the SNP to establish a fairer system for applying for asylum in the UK, with safeguards and legal routes. It should commit to supporting asylum seekers’ right to work while they are here, and it should scrap the awful Illegal Migration Act 2023.

I believe that an independent Scotland would offer the opportunity to ensure that asylum and migration policy would be made according to Scotland’s needs and that the proposals that are set out in the Scottish Government’s “Building a New Scotland” series would allow us to be good global citizens and to create a sensible, open, fair and welcoming migration system.

15:50

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Asylum is normally granted in the UK if a person is unable to live safely in any part of their own country because of potential persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or anything

else that puts them at risk due to the social, cultural, religious or political situation in their home country. At least, that was the policy that we had for many years. As the minister said in her opening speech, the UK signed up to treaties that reflected those principles.

Priti Patel is long gone, but the UK Government's current immigration plans could not be more against such treaty principles. It is disastrous, callous and completely inefficient into the bargain, and it is becoming an international joke on the back of the recent court decision on the Rwanda policy. We are paying millions of pounds to the French to get their co-operation in preventing migrants from coming here, but even the French are saying that the UK is failing. I echo the Scottish Refugee Council's principle that we are a strong and resilient nation and that we can, and should, do far better.

There is a correlation between geopolitical matters, including conflict, and the extent of migration. That is a highly sensitive political issue that requires all politicians to understand that world affairs, including climate change and war, have implications for migration.

We know that, after 40 years of conflict, and the recent return of a Taliban Government, Afghan refugees have become the third largest displaced population in the world. More than 1.6 million such refugees, for whom Britain had some responsibility, fled the country in 2021. We did not serve the Afghans well and many were not allowed to flee to the UK.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, 38,000 Ukrainians have taken advantage of the UK Government sponsorship programme, so there have been some very welcome programmes that show that we can support people fleeing persecution in other countries.

We are now witnessing the longest and deepest offensive that has ever been seen in the Gaza strip. There will be geopolitical consequences of the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population. Although we must robustly resist any forced evacuation of the occupied territory of Gaza, which faces obliteration, a percentage of that population will inevitably seek refuge in the rest of the world, so we must live up to our responsibilities.

There are 5,500 people in asylum-supported accommodation in Glasgow and 1,800 people living in 21 institutional hotels across 13 local authorities in Scotland. On average, people live in those environments for at least nine months and are often stuck in state-imposed severe poverty and forced unemployment because, as we have heard, very few people are permitted to access any work.

There is a backlog in Home Office decision making on asylum cases, which never seems to be under control. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of months that people spend waiting for their claims to be processed. The Home Office has also begun its hotel maximisation policy. One of the aspects of the policy that makes me most uncomfortable is compulsory room sharing for hotel and hostel residents in Scotland. That is totally unacceptable. It does not fit the principles of any treaty that the UK has signed up to and can be extremely traumatising for individuals. Those hotels are often in isolated areas, making it more difficult for the people living in them to access the community support services that they need.

We have seen tragedies unfold as a result of such conditions: back in 2020, the asylum seeker Badreddin Abdalla Adam made 72 calls for help to the Home Office and the charity Migrant Help before he killed six people in the Glasgow Park Inn—an absolute tragedy.

During the pandemic, leading up to the tragedy, Glasgow asylum seekers were removed from their residences to be placed in hotels, simultaneously being stripped of their £35 weekly support allowance. Three years later, that figure is down to £9 a week. I do not regard that as being a dignified existence. In that particular accommodation, residents were unable to socially distance or to buy things such as mobile phone top-ups in order to stay in touch with their families back home or, indeed, their lawyers.

Sixteen other people have died in asylum-seeker accommodation in Scotland since 2016, some of whom took their own lives. Such events should never happen, which is why it is important that local authorities are funded adequately to play the role that they want to play. I am proud of my city of Glasgow, which has historically played an important role in relation to asylum seekers.

On the Rwanda policy, which many members have talked about, it is important to understand the Supreme Court's decision. One of the reasons that the Supreme Court came to the view that it did is because it did not believe that Rwandan authorities would make fair decisions in relation to claimants. It is important to note that, even in cases in which the person had a successful application, they would never see the United Kingdom. It is a bizarre, strange and completely callous policy.

Across Europe, many countries are facing similar challenges, and immigration is often talked about in a negative way. However, I think that many members of this Parliament—I think that there is some common ground here—see immigration as a positive thing. Scotland should play its role, and we can play a role as a devolved

Parliament. I look forward to hearing the other speeches in the debate, because I think that Scotland can do more and play a more strategic and positive role in relation to immigration and asylum seekers.

15:57

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Scotland should rightly be proud of its record on welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, as well as migrants more generally. We should acknowledge the moral responsibility of nations—including, of course, Scotland—to meet our international humanitarian obligations and the imperative to have an ethical and humane asylum and immigration system.

We should be clear about and acknowledge the huge contribution that migrants to Scotland make to our society and the vital roles that many migrants play across society, be that in the care sector, our NHS, science and technology, research and higher education, our business community or many other areas. Just think what more they could do if they were all allowed to work. We should also acknowledge the contribution that migrants make to our arts and cultural communities and how they enrich society more generally. I want to express my thanks for the contribution that migrants make to the communities that I am privileged to represent.

Scotland's national responsibility is clearly complicated by the reserved nature of immigration and asylum policies. Let us be clear that the UK Government's responsibility is to fund appropriately the support that is required across Scotland's local authorities to ensure that vulnerable refugee families who have come to Scotland and our wider communities are appropriately supported.

I will spend much of my speech focusing on that matter, but, before I do, let me put on record what I consider to be the UK Government's approach to asylum and immigration more generally, which my constituents expect me to do. I find it repugnant. Trying to offshore to Rwanda our moral obligations to refugees, seeking to demonise those who come to our shores on boats despite the dearth of any legal routes to the UK that they could use and tacitly encouraging the normalisation of right-wing rhetoric across society are just some of the aspects of the UK's discourse on immigration that I am deeply concerned about.

As imperfect and flawed as the current asylum system is, and despite its being a reserved matter, the Scottish Government and our councils have a clear duty to do all that they can to provide a welcoming, integrated and inclusive approach to the immigration and asylum system. Not only is it

the right thing to do, it is in our self-interest, given the needs of our economy and our public sector. We need a committed, skilled and growing working-age population, and migration to Scotland makes a key contribution in that respect.

The Scottish Government has, rightly, highlighted in its motion concerns over the increased reliance on contingency asylum accommodation that is caused by a backlog in Home Office decision making, as well as various other concerns. However, I will focus on the streamlined asylum process and the limited move-on period that is allowed once a decision has been made—the fast-tracking that we have heard about in the debate.

What does that mean for Glasgow? Rather than a manageable flow of asylum seekers staying in the city and requiring to be rehoused from Mears accommodation into mainstream accommodation after they secure a positive decision, there will be a significant spike in the numbers for the city to manage without one penny of additional financial support from the UK Government. Let us remember that that spike is due to the UK Home Office having a dreadful record over many years of failing to determine asylum decisions timeously.

I have referred to a spike, but we are talking about vulnerable asylum-seeking families in very large numbers having to move from the designated asylum accommodation that they are currently in to a homelessness system without the UK Government offering any financial support. That cannot be fair on anyone.

When I met Mears at the start of December last year, it indicated that there were 560 overstayers, mainly in Glasgow, who are defined as people in Mears accommodation 28 days after that positive decision. I am unclear how many of those overstayers with a positive decision are now homeless.

To have no UK funds following a positive decision was always unfair on councils, but to potentially have hundreds of families being made homeless within a short space of time with no UK Government financial support is scandalous. It is not fair on the families who are facing homelessness, whether they are asylum seeking or not, and it is not fair on Glasgow.

There is an acknowledgement from the UK Government that there are initial costs for local authorities when they first host a vulnerable asylum seeker. Every time a bed is identified, it triggers a payment of £3,500. Why is there no acknowledgement of the need to offer support to local authorities when vulnerable asylum seekers are at a point of transition into our mainstream system? It makes no sense.

I also discussed with Mears how it works with councils across Scotland to ensure that we have a Scotland-wide approach to supporting asylum-seeking families. It was encouraging to hear that councils outwith Glasgow are working constructively to identify 2,000 additional bed spaces in around 600 to 700 properties.

That led to a discussion about how Mears or Glasgow City Council could work with asylum-seeking families ahead of any positive decision in order to prepare them for transition. For example, could Mears or the council help them to save for a deposit for a private rented property in the future, if only they were allowed to work? Could councils discuss with them what their housing options might be more generally? Would families wish to remain in Glasgow? It is understandable if they do, because kids might be at school and families might have put down roots in communities, but could families be asked if they would consider moving elsewhere in Scotland? What support package could be offered for them to do so? What would accommodation options look like? What would schools look like? What are the local amenities in any given area? Are there support networks elsewhere in Scotland, should families wish to move there? I should put on record that I am happy for those families to stay in Glasgow, but options should be discussed.

The response that I received from Mears was that not only are such systems not in place but Mears is specifically restricted by the Home Office from having any conversation of that nature whatsoever. That is crazy, that is wrong and that is unacceptable.

I understand that there is a test of change group, which includes Glasgow City Council, the Home Office, the Scottish Refugee Council and Mears, to look at solutions to housing issues. I would welcome an update from the Scottish Government on where that has got to.

In the chamber this afternoon, much has been made of the polarised debate about visions for an immigration and asylum system and the kind of society that we want to be. That is absolutely the case, but I also live in the here and now. In my communities, vulnerable asylum-seeking families need support in the here and now. That has to involve partnership working between the UK Government, the Scottish Government, Scotland's councils and all our stakeholders, including those with lived experience.

I commend the Scottish Government's motion.

16:04

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank those organisations, communities and individuals who work day in and day out to

support asylum seekers, and I pay tribute to Grampian Regional Equality Council and Dundee International Women's Centre for their work across the north-east—and, of course, to the Scottish Refugee Council.

We have heard that we should not be having this debate and that we can, because immigration is a reserved matter, cheerfully and with a clear conscience leave it to the wise men and women of Westminster. However, this is one of those moments when history will judge us by what we say and do or by how we keep silent, because the scandal that is UK asylum policy and legislation is already having disastrous impacts at multiple levels—internationally, for the UK, for Scotland, for our communities and, most of all, for the people and families whom the asylum system is supposed to protect.

Globally, passing the Illegal Migration Act 2023 represents a serious blow to the UK's standing. Although the British reputation for decency and fair play has often been undeserved, it is the case that people and organisations in the UK have played significant roles in developing international human rights and asylum systems. It is the greatest of insults to those hard-working and courageous pioneers that their country is now seen as a rogue state—a reputation that will, now that it has been gained, be very hard to lose.

Who would have thought that it would be possible that a UK Government would pass laws that admit on their very face that they are not compliant with our most basic human rights? That reputation is an international humiliation, but it is worrying that other Governments might be tempted to follow the UK's lead. If the UK, with all its prosperity and advantages, can disregard shared humanity and international law, others will ask why they should not do the same.

In the UK, the policies and the rhetoric behind them are doing incalculable damage to our political and public discourse. The crude violence of the "Stop the boats" messaging would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. The level of opposition from moderate Tories and the official Opposition has been woefully weak. It is my profound hope that their consciences will overcome their cynical calculations of electoral advantage—not least because those calculations are very likely to be wrong.

Despite the extraordinary media messaging over many years—messages of spite, bile and blatant untruth—most people are not xenophobic border obsessives, but are compassionate citizens who recognise themselves in those who are seeking refuge, and welcome them as neighbours, colleagues and friends.

In Scotland, we have long recognised the value of people coming from elsewhere for our community, culture, identity and economy. That tradition of welcome and mutual enrichment is deeply rooted and remains strong and vibrant, though its practical manifestations are made much more difficult by the actions of the UK Government. As politicians, we know—commentators in England seem to have forgotten this—that, demographically and culturally, we need new Scots. The motion recognises that the pernicious impact of Westminster policies is especially painful for our local authorities—those that already host and support people who are seeking asylum and those that want to do more. Our councils are—impossibly—being prevented from carrying out their fundamental duties in providing essential services to those who are most in need.

Finally and most importantly, those inhuman and illegal policies are having tragic effects for our new and potential Scots neighbours and on people seeking asylum here, including people who are in situations of deep danger and who are longing for refuge; those who have embarked on long and perilous journeys; those who are already here and are awaiting decisions from a cruel and dilatory Home Office; those who have received their refugee status; and many others who are affected by the hostile environment and discourses of demonisation.

Those blows fall most heavily upon vulnerable people, especially on victims of trafficking, whose rights and means of redress have, in essence, been shredded by the Illegal Migration Act 2023. They fall upon children, including young teenagers whose age is disbelieved by the Home Office, and the youngest babies and toddlers who are placed in institutional accommodation where they have few or no opportunities to play, crawl, walk and reach the other essential milestones of child development.

UK policies represent a failure of compliance with international law, a failure of humanity and a failure of imagination. I implore all those who think that the policies are acceptable to take a moment to imagine themselves being faced with the horrific choices that must be made by those who are in danger of persecution, imprisonment or death. I ask them to think about the dangerous journeys that are made, and about the homes, families, friends and lives that are left behind. I ask them then to imagine that, when they finally reach what should be a place of safety, the fear continues—fear of attack by hostile far-right actors; trauma being reawakened by windowless rooms that feel like cells; and anxiety and sleeplessness being triggered by having to share rooms with strangers.

Think about the simple actions that we take for granted because we have sufficient money to catch a bus to an essential appointment, to phone a family member or to buy a child a small toy or treat. Think about having studied and worked for years, perhaps in a much-needed medical or caring role, but not being allowed to use those skills for the community around you. Think about not being allowed to work at all, but instead being left, maybe for years, in a limbo of indignity and lack of information. Then imagine that, at the end of all that waiting, when the decision finally comes that what you said was true—that you are, indeed, a refugee—the decision comes along with the news that you have but a few days before you will be evicted from your accommodation, with little hope of finding a home or escaping further destitution.

Those are the realities behind the brash slogan of “Stop the boats”: not boats stopped, but lives, families and communities broken and bereft. Asylum seekers—and all human beings—deserve better.

16:11

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands)
(SNP): Presiding Officer,

“I cannot see a rationale or justification for an approach to asylum determination that takes years, costs the taxpayer extraordinary amounts and that prevents the individual from contributing to the economy and society”.

Those are not my words but those of Helena Kennedy KC, as chair of the Independent Commission of Inquiry into Asylum Provision in Scotland.

We should at this point remind ourselves that the UK is a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, which serve to protect refugees. The convention defines a refugee as someone who has a

“well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”

and

“is outside the country of”

their nationality.

The latest figures that have been published for the 12 months to September 2023 state that 75,340 asylum applications, relating to 93,296 people, were made to the Home Office. In number of asylum applications per head of population, the UK ranks 20th highest in Europe. That is very far behind other countries including Cyprus, which topped the table for asylum applications per head of population.

The Refugee Council identified that the top five countries of origin of people seeking asylum in the UK are Afghanistan, Iran, Albania, India and Iraq. Two of those countries are where British troops engaged in armed conflict for many years and one is where human rights abuses, in particular against women and girls, have been well documented. The others are on the list as a result of crackdowns on independence movements or sectarian violence. That is why 75 per cent of people who apply for asylum in the UK are granted protection on their initial application.

As of September 2023, 124,000 people were waiting for the conclusion of their asylum applications. Meanwhile, the same people who are seeking asylum are banned from working and, in many cases, are provided with only £9 a week from the UK Government to cover the cost of their basic necessities. That is at a time when, across the UK, 949,000 vacancies need to be filled to help the Scottish and UK economies to grow. Why are we not allowing individuals who have been granted protection in this country to work to support themselves?

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research, in its discussion paper “The Economic and Social Impacts of Lifting Work Restrictions on People Seeking Asylum”, highlights that

“The UK is one of six European nations who grant asylum applicants the right to work after they have been waiting for an outcome of their application for longer than a year”,

unlike most other countries, which have a restriction of six months. However, the UK

“is the only country to impose further restrictions on what jobs a person seeking asylum can apply for once the right to work has been granted, by allowing people to take up jobs only on a ‘shortage occupations’ list.”

The report found that the annual impacts of allowing people who are seeking asylum the right to work in the UK would be to increase tax revenue by £1.3 billion, to reduce Government expenditure by £6.7 billion and to increase the UK’s gross domestic product by £1.6 billion. As Helena Kennedy stated in the final report of the commission,

“What an utter waste of human potential and of resources. Particularly in a country that has an urgent growth agenda and massive skills shortages.”

She continued:

“The UK needs care workers, HGV drivers, butchers and other technically and professionally skilled workers. We need to honour our commitments to protect people and we need people who want to play a role in our economy and society. Canada’s recently announced 2023-25 Immigration Levels Plan embraces a strategy of immigration to manage future social and economic challenges. They are seeing immigration as an opportunity not a threat; in contrast the UK seems short-sighted on multiple fronts.”

Many refugees are highly skilled and want to contribute to their new country and to give thanks for the opportunity to rebuild their lives. Instead, the UK Government has left more than 56,000 of them languishing in hotel rooms, which is resulting in increased mental health issues, on-going trauma and a loss of wellbeing, which has resulted in their requiring more support from our already stretched NHS.

Under the Scottish Government’s recently published immigration proposals in the “Building a New Scotland” series, we would welcome asylum seekers and provide support so that they could more easily integrate into communities. People who are seeking asylum would be given the right to work and would therefore pay taxes, which in turn would allow access to public services, including employability support. The result would be increased tax revenue for the Scottish Government, lower expenditure on asylum support and increased productivity.

The UK Government’s repugnant policies on asylum and immigration in no way reflect Scotland’s values of compassion, humanity and upholding international law, nor do they take into account the fact that migration benefits Scotland’s economy and our public services. An independent Scotland would be able to establish a humane approach to supporting refugees and people who are fleeing conflict and persecution, who deserve our compassion and aid, and it would be aware of the need for equity for the global south in our approach to migration. We would be able to do that with the values of dignity, fairness and respect at the heart of all aspects of immigration policy.

16:17

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): As the Conservative UK Government descends into electoral oblivion, it has resorted to ever more desperate acts, most notably its cynical project to make the asylum system as inhumane as possible by shipping off to Rwanda people who are seeking safety from horrendous situations such as war and persecution. That has been not only an appalling waste of public money but a waste of life. Three quarters of asylum claims are granted at the initial decision, and more than half of appeals are successful, which means that almost nine out of every 10 people seeking asylum in Britain end up being granted refugee status.

The UK Government has already paid £140 million to Rwanda, yet not a single asylum seeker has been sent there because, in November, the Supreme Court—thankfully—ruled the policy unlawful. However, the public funds that have been wasted on that atrocious scheme work out at £1,500 for each of the 93,296 people who sought

asylum in the UK in the past 12 months. Just think what we could have done with that money instead.

The eccentric and unlawful Rwanda gimmick is just one element of the cruel Tory asylum policy, which strips people of all hope and humanity when they need it most. We just have to look at the conditions on the Bibby Stockholm barge to see the aim of the UK Government's asylum policy. It demonstrates nothing but hostility to people who we should be opening our arms to. Those asylum seekers, who are banned from working to pay for their own lodgings and are instead housed in barges and hotels, do not feel safe. Where is the empathy in forcing people who have fled war and persecution into rooms without windows for long periods of time? It is no wonder that asylum seekers are at heightened risk of experiencing depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The UK Government's efforts to clear the asylum backlog while cutting the so-called move-on period, in which refugee status is granted and asylum accommodation provisions end, heighten the risk of mass homelessness and destitution for people seeking asylum in Scotland. We must do everything possible to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers do not end up homeless.

We must do all that is possible to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers do not end up homeless. That is why it is bitterly disappointing that the Ukrainian resettlement team in Glasgow is winding down its operations in order to merge with the general asylum and refugee team. The work of the specialist Ukrainian resettlement team is vital in ensuring refugees' smooth transition from asylum accommodation. The merger will only increase the chance of Ukrainian refugees slipping through the cracks and ending up without a roof over their heads.

The Scottish Government promised a warm welcome for all Ukrainian refugees but, with homelessness rates higher among Ukrainians than among the wider population, it is clear that it has fallen short of its promise. The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's report on asylum seekers and refugees in Scotland suggested that the Scottish Government could do much more to ease the situation for them. The decision to introduce concessionary bus travel for asylum seekers is welcome, but other practical improvements must be explored.

Bob Doris: I hope that Mr Sweeney will take the opportunity to put on the record that he agrees that, when there is a positive decision by the UK Home Office to allow a family that is seeking asylum to transition to the mainstream system in Glasgow or in another local authority, the UK Government should provide a financial payment to support that, and that it would be reasonable for

any future UK Government to support such a policy.

Paul Sweeney: What Mr Doris has proposed is not unreasonable in the slightest; in fact, I would be inclined to support his suggestion. However, the situation will not be helped at all by the Scottish Government's recent announcement that it will cut the capital budget for housing and seriously constrain council budgets, which means that councils' ability to manage the transitions will be seriously harmed. We need to seriously address that issue, and the Scottish Government should take responsibility for such decisions.

The Home Office keeps family members who have been separated in the desperation of conflict apart and wondering whether they will ever be reunited. I will raise a particular case that has been brought to my attention recently, which involves the on-going plight of Kaltouma Haroun Ibrahim. Mrs Ibrahim is a much-loved member of the Gorbals parish church in Glasgow. She studies English at Anniesland college and works part time with disabled children for Glasgow City Council.

In 2014, alongside her husband and five children, Mrs Ibrahim boarded a boat in Libya that was bound for Italy after fleeing war-torn Sudan. Tragically, the boat sank and two of her children, Mohammed and Faisal, drowned. She was separated from her three surviving children and her husband in the aftermath of the tragedy and, after being forced to give up her search to find her family, she returned to her birthplace of Chad. However, Chad is terrorised by the violent Islamist militant group Boko Haram, and she was again forced to flee, to France and then on to London, claiming asylum there in 2016. Mrs Ibrahim moved to Glasgow in 2017 and secured refugee status in 2019.

Thanks to a humanitarian charity, Mrs Ibrahim managed to track down her husband and teenage children, who are living in war-torn Sudan. About 15 months ago, her lawyer submitted the required paperwork to the Home Office so that her family could join her in Glasgow. Within that time, horrifically, her 13-year-old daughter, Safa, perished in a rocket attack near her home in Khartoum.

The situation that Mrs Ibrahim and her family are in is deeply distressing, as I am sure all members will agree. It is astonishing that it should take so long to process such a case. I therefore ask whether the minister would be willing, on behalf of Mrs Ibrahim in Glasgow, to take direct action and make representations on behalf of the Scottish Government to the UK Government, so that we can end a decade of torment and tragedy and reunite what remains of that shattered family.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Rona Mackay is the final speaker in the open debate.

16:23

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The UK Government's asylum policy and legislation are a muddled mess and create anxiety for, and downright hostility towards, those who come here looking for safety and security. The complex and inhumane system denies people who come to Scotland the right to work, raise their families and settle into our society.

Make no mistake—we need immigration; Scotland is not full. We welcome the diversity and enrichment from everyone who comes to these shores. The Scottish Government's vision for Scotland is one of an internationally responsible, welcoming and compassionate country. That is in complete contrast to the UK Government's disgusting policies, which in no way reflect Scotland's values of compassion, humanity and upholding international law and do not take into account the fact that migration benefits Scotland's economy and our public services.

The Scottish Government is developing mitigations as far as possible within our devolved powers and budget, including through our new Scots refugee integration strategy. As the minister outlined, work is under way in partnership with the Scottish Refugee Council and COSLA to inform the refresh of the strategy.

In her opening speech, the minister spoke about the plight of women and babies who have no idea what their future will be. What a desperate situation.

With independence, we can focus on Scotland's priorities, create a system that eradicates human trafficking and create a migration system that has fairness and dignity at its heart. In one of our recently published "Building a New Scotland" papers, we proposed that an independent Scotland would have humane, fair and compassionate refugee and asylum policies. A flexible visa system would help Scottish businesses to attract and retain the international talent that they need to thrive.

I recently met a young asylum seeker who had gained a degree in computer science and was looking to complete her masters in that subject. Her asylum appeal had not been confirmed, but she was desperate to stay here and contribute to our society. Why on earth would any country not want her to do that? However, we need not only the brightest brains but people who want to work in all sectors of our society, as Gordon MacDonald outlined, and to educate and bring up their children here in a safe environment.

Scotland has a long history of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers and recognises that it is a human right to seek asylum in another country. What does it say about a society when it cannot welcome those who are fleeing conflict and persecution? I cannot fathom the mindset that thinks that it is acceptable to create a hostile environment and look for ways to turn people back or export them to an entirely unsuitable country, such as Rwanda. Despite the Supreme Court ruling in relation to the safety of Rwanda, the UK Government persists in trying to prove it wrong—knowing better—in order to complete that incomprehensible plan. That says it all.

Those fleeing conflict and persecution should be protected and welcomed. We cannot turn our backs on people who are impacted by conflicts across the world, people who are being killed trying to escape or who face illness due to a lack of clean water and medical assistance. Whether people come from Sudan, Gaza, Ukraine or Afghanistan, the UK should be providing sanctuary for the most vulnerable, not holding them in hotels or trying to ship them off to Rwanda to be put in even more danger. We are talking about children and families here.

The financial support that is provided to people seeking asylum should reflect the real costs of daily life, including digital access and travel costs. The Scottish Government has also raised concerns about the impact of the UK Government's streamlined asylum process. As we heard, the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees wrote to the UK Government to request urgent funding for local authorities and that it work constructively with them to ensure that people who receive a positive asylum decision are supported to move on from asylum accommodation. Instead of creating a culture war that attacks the most vulnerable, the Tories should be investing in clearing the backlog and creating safe and legal routes for those fleeing war and persecution.

I would like to mention our many amazing third sector organisations that are working flat out to support migrants every day. We need them, because Westminster has made it clear that it could not care less about some of the most vulnerable people in the world. The Human Rights Act 1998 is a key protection for every citizen in the UK and the rights of asylum seekers.

I also want to highlight the scandal of the fact that migrant women in the UK who are fleeing domestic abuse have no recourse to public funds. Do they not matter? Should they not receive care and protection in the country where they are living?

The Scottish Government cannot amend restrictions that are placed on people who are seeking asylum while they await a decision. That

includes long-standing UK Government policies to restrict the right to work and access to public funds. It is therefore high time to devolve immigration to Scotland so that we can ditch the appalling Illegal Migration Act 2023 and show some compassion and respect to refugees, because refugees are desperate people fleeing war and persecution and Scotland has repeatedly voted for a more compassionate and welcoming approach. As Karen Adam said, it could be any of us—it could be us. Therefore, we need the chance to implement the policies that reflect the values of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: We move to winding-up speeches.

16:29

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Recent hostile UK Government policies have contributed to Scotland being painted as a country that does not welcome refugees. Those policies have encouraged hostility and bad feeling towards the most vulnerable in our society. The “fear of the other” rhetoric stokes racism, puts immigrants in danger and deprives the UK of the benefits that migrants bring.

Just this week, there were reports that a far-right activist had posed as a Home Office inspector to get information about a Dumfries hotel that was housing refugees. Even more shockingly, the Scottish Refugee Council has reported that suicide among asylum seekers in Home Office accommodation has doubled in the past four years. That is due to a series of UK Government asylum policies that seek to address migrants as a horde of illegal people coming to the UK, instead of safeguarding the wellbeing of migrants who are already in the country.

As Miles Briggs mentioned, the CPG on Bangladesh recently visited the Cox’s Bazar refugee camp—I refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests. It was great to see the positive impact of foreign funding for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. It is disappointing that that has not been reflected in the Home Office’s recent asylum policies.

Labour wants to see an end to the costly and unacceptable asylum policies set out by the Home Office. Despite being a reserved matter, UK Government asylum policy directly affects Scotland and many devolved areas of competence within it. Under the recent UK hostile crackdown on migration, many asylum seekers in Scotland will be required to seek legal aid and to seek housing and help from Scottish local authorities. That is not to mention the potential for Scotland’s only immigration detention centre, Dungavel house, to be overwhelmed.

The minister, Emma Roddick, outlined that 80 per cent of Scots want a well-managed approach to asylum. Labour wants the immigration system to work for all parts of our country. We want a fair, controlled asylum system that supports refugees fleeing persecution while keeping our borders secure and ensuring that all accepted claims are legitimate. Currently, the Tories are outsourcing border security to criminal smuggler gangs. That is why a UK Labour Government will reform and strengthen the Migration Advisory Committee with appropriate input from across the UK so that the visa system works for all its nations and regions, including Scotland.

Kaukab Stewart outlined how, as it stands, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 can disapply the power of the Scottish Parliament. When the UK Government announced the act in March last year, the Scottish Government promised action to mitigate the damage that it would do in Scotland. We are close to a year from then, and JustRight Scotland, among others, continues to warn of the danger to unaccompanied minors and victims of trafficking in Scotland under the act.

The UK Supreme Court recently ruled the so-called Rwanda plans to be unlawful. However, strict rules around asylum and leave to remain have left many asylum seekers in limbo—not being removed but unable to access concrete help. The UK Government continues to career down a path of policies that strip refugees of their rights and ship them to third countries—a move that, as Alex Cole-Hamilton rightly observed, bluntly laid aside key aspects of our human rights legislation. Karen Adam spoke of how the UK Government does that instead of investing in tackling the asylum backlog.

As Paul O’Kane mentioned, the report by the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee recommended that the Scottish Government use powers within the competence of the Scottish Parliament to improve the lives of asylum seekers in Scotland. The harm caused by UK Government asylum policies can be mitigated in Scotland.

However, the decade of underfunding of local authorities has put the vital service that is provided to refugees at risk. The Scottish Government’s future refugee strategy must seek to protect refugees in all devolved areas and ensure that help is provided with housing, transport, employability, access to healthcare—including mental health care—and protection from organised crime.

16:35

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): It frustrates me no end that we seem to spend an incredible

amount of time in the Scottish Parliament debating issues that are not within our competence. We are gathered here, this afternoon, to talk through an issue that is reserved to Westminster. We could be talking about Social Security Scotland's woeful processing times and the impact that those have been having on the most vulnerable in Scotland. We could be talking about the tumbling education standards in Scotland, which have come about as a result of the Scottish Government's failures over the past 16 years. We could even be talking about the massive squeeze that local authorities are staring down the barrel of as a result of the refusal by the SNP and the Greens to allocate appropriate funds to them. Instead, we are talking about an issue that is not in our portfolio, which is being used as nothing more than an excuse for the SNP and the Greens to take cheap shots at the UK Government in order to distract from their own disastrous record.

The truth is that the Scottish Government has failed to protect the most vulnerable in our society at every opportunity. Miles Briggs and others have highlighted the importance of local authorities, yet, as Mr Briggs pointed out, the Scottish Government has again cut their funding, particularly in relation to housing.

In his usual skilful manner, Donald Cameron spoke about his personal experience in such difficult situations and showed us that, in fact, things were worse under Labour.

Many members have congratulated the third sector. I agree and pay tribute to third sector organisations for all the work that they do across Scotland in this area, but they need more, not less, funding from the Government if they are really to reach out.

Other members, including Alex Cole-Hamilton, seemed to argue for a completely open-door policy that would not restrict anyone from coming into the UK for whatever reason.

As always, the Scottish Government likes to talk a big game when it comes to its commitment to refugees, but, as with everything else, we are left wanting on delivery. As other members have mentioned, we should look at the Scottish Government's commitment to those fleeing the war in Ukraine. The SNP Government went to great lengths to assure everyone that there would be no limit on the number of refugees it would welcome. It wanted to contrast itself with the big, bad UK Government. Once again, it ran into the hard-nosed reality of life and a hard dose of reality. Why do I say that? Because in July 2022 it paused the scheme. Funnily enough, it has still not been recommenced.

In addition, as of April last year, more than 7,500 Ukrainians were stuck in temporary

accommodation in Scotland. The Scottish Government made a promise to them that they would find safe and permanent accommodation here. However, thousands have been stuck in limbo, not knowing when or if they will get a stable home.

There can be no doubt that this Government is on very shaky ground when it comes to giving lectures on how to care for the vulnerable. One need only look at the chaos that has engulfed the Government as it has rolled out devolved social security benefits.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I want to clarify whether Jeremy Balfour can see his screen. I have tried to intervene on him several times and I do not think that he has been aware of that. He has certainly not acknowledged it.

The Presiding Officer: That may not be a point of order, although your comment is on the record. I ask Mr Balfour to continue.

Jeremy Balfour: I apologise to my colleague and am, of course, very happy to take an intervention from him.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am very grateful to Jeremy Balfour for giving way, and I am loth to interrupt his speech. It must have sounded great when he was looking in the shaving mirror this morning, but it is not landing as well as I think he suspected it would in the chamber this afternoon, not least because some of the rhetoric that he is using is playing to the dog-whistle politics of the hard right of the Conservative Party in London.

The Liberal Democrats' policy is not an open-door "come all ye" to our country. It is about safe and legal routes for people who are legitimately seeking safe harbour in these islands because they are fleeing war and persecution. Jeremy Balfour diminishes himself and the chamber with the rhetoric that he is using.

Jeremy Balfour: I thank the member for his second speech. I was referring to what he said in his first speech. That might not be the policy, but that is what came across when I was listening carefully to his contribution earlier this afternoon.

There can be no doubt that this Government is on shaky ground when it comes to giving lectures on how to care for the vulnerable.

We are all in agreement that those who are fleeing persecution in their home country should be able to find refuge here, but we must have a system that meets two criteria. First, the system should be functional and deliver for those in need, ensuring a fine balance between generosity and affordability. Secondly, it should make sure that those seeking refuge come through safe and legal routes. Neither of those is optional, and there is no

workable solution that does not meet those criteria.

We cannot follow the same pattern that the Scottish Government has set over its 16-year tenure—of promising the world and delivering an atlas. We need to have grown-up discussion. The fact that the SNP has used this opportunity as a mud-slinging exercise to try to promote independence does not bode well.

I am happy to say that I will support the Conservative amendment at decision time.

The Presiding Officer: I call Christina McKelvie to wind up the debate.

16:42

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie): The debate has been an opportunity to recognise the impact that UK Government asylum policy and legislation has here in Scotland on people seeking asylum, local authorities, public services, third sector support organisations and communities. Like Rona Mackay and others, I thank the Scottish Refugee Council, COSLA and the many other organisations that keep us briefed and work every day to support those who are seeking sanctuary in Scotland.

It is important for this Parliament to discuss these matters because of the impact on devolved services and the support that is in place in Scotland. That was recognised by Foysol Choudhury in his summing up but, sadly, not recognised by the UK Government's representatives in this Parliament—the Scottish Conservatives. As the Scottish Refugee Council briefing says,

"We recognise that asylum is a reserved matter, but people are not."

Miles Briggs: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I think that the minister needs to revisit her language. We are not representatives of the UK Government; we are Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party members.

The Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Briggs for his point of order. Minister, if you would like to continue.

Christina McKelvie: Scotland has sought to take a different approach in order to support integration for refugees and people seeking asylum from day 1 of arrival. I agree with Maggie Chapman and Karen Adam that we need many more new Scots. The new Scots refugee integration strategy is a partnership that is led by the Scottish Government, COSLA and the Scottish Refugee Council. It recognises that we can do more together to support people who have been forced to find a place of safety. I hope that

members across the chamber welcome and support the right to work pilot that was proposed by my colleague Emma Roddick in her opening remarks. As Kaukab Stewart and Gordon MacDonald said, the right to work works effectively in other EU countries and adds to their economic growth. Why would we not want to have the same?

I know the Maryhill Integration Network, which has been championed by Bob Doris, and I know that it will welcome the pilot, because it has called for it for many years. Bob Doris also asked about the challenges in Glasgow. The housing minister is working closely with Glasgow City Council, and I will ask him to ensure that he responds to Bob Doris in more detail on that issue and to others who raised it in the chamber.

We need to be clear that we are talking about people who have applied to the UK Government to have their refugee status recognised or to access humanitarian protection because it is unsafe for them to return to their country of origin.

Paul O'Kane asked about the 2023 act's implementation and the mitigations that we are considering. I wish to update him on the fact that the Government continues to work to consider all the available mitigations that are within our devolved powers and within the law. We are doing that as we speak, and we will continue to engage with all stakeholders. If Paul O'Kane wishes to add any positive ideas to that, we would be willing to hear them, and we thank him for that.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I recognise that the Scottish Government has put in place a number of things to mitigate the excesses of the UK Government's asylum and refugee policy. However, one thing that has made that much more difficult is the no recourse to public funds legislation that the UK Government has put in place. How much of an impediment does the minister think that that is to helping these most vulnerable people?

Christina McKelvie: I thank Kevin Stewart for that timely intervention. He will know from our past work together on the issue, whether as back benchers or as members of the Government, that we have challenged the UK Government on the use of no recourse to public funds, and we will continue to do so. A prime example of that is a woman fleeing domestic violence who is not allowed to access refuge when she needs it. That is disgraceful and is a prime example of why no recourse to public funds is not acceptable in any compassionate society.

It is right that there is a process for considering and determining asylum applications, but the UK needs an effective and efficient asylum system that delivers for people who may be highly

vulnerable. That asylum system should ensure that the UK upholds the 1951 UN refugee convention. The experience of Mrs Ibrahim, which Paul Sweeney told us about today, is testament to why we need a system that works. Paul Sweeney asked in his speech for an update on how we can contribute to the work that he is doing, and the Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees is willing to speak to him about that. If the member drops her a line, she will pick up that issue with him in more detail.

The 1951 convention does not prescribe a specific mechanism through which states should determine refugee status. According to international law, everyone who satisfies the definition that is set out in the convention is a refugee, and signatory states have responsibilities to recognise and protect refugees. It also does not require someone to seek asylum in the first country they come to—that is a dreadful misrepresentation of asylum law.

As Gordon MacDonald reminded us, the UK does not take anywhere near the numbers of people seeking sanctuary that our close European neighbours do. The UK Government's asylum policy and legislation increasingly seek to undermine the established international refugee protection system. That damages the UK's international reputation and puts people in need of protection at risk.

The Rwanda policy makes decisions on the basis of someone's mode of transport, not their protected characteristics or their vulnerability, and certainly not on the reasons why they seek sanctuary. There are no safe routes to the UK, apart from some specific programmes—I challenge members to tell me that there are, because no one can find them. Instead of pushing back the boats and using all the rhetoric about trying to keep people safe, the UK Government should create some safe routes, then people will be safe and they will not need to go to people traffickers.

The focus of the debate is the impact of UK Government asylum policy and legislation in Scotland. The hostile environment and the Government's dangerous rhetoric have a direct impact on people who live in our communities. I share Kaukab Stewart's and TARA's concerns about the impact on trafficking victims of the legislation that the UK Government has brought in.

People seeking asylum are members of our communities who live with constant uncertainty about when they will receive a decision and what it will say. They live in contingency hotels and dispersal accommodation. They are restricted from working and rely on low levels of financial support—£1.25 per day. Health and wellbeing are particularly challenging for people in such

situations, and there are key concerns about people who are in institutional situations.

Some members have mentioned the Bibby Stockholm barge. We heard today that Leonard Farruku lay dead for 12 hours on the Bibby Stockholm barge before anybody realised. That is a disgraceful situation to be in, and it should be nowhere near anything that we want to be recognised for in the UK.

There are further challenges for people who are granted asylum and who become newly recognised refugees, as the UK Government removes support and accommodation after only 28 days. However, according to the Scottish Refugee Council, sometimes that is shortened to 14 days and, in some cases, seven days. I was glad to hear Miles Briggs recognise that issue; I hope that he will ask his pals at Westminster to fix it.

We also know that many people are receiving late notice of that removal of support. As was raised by Bob Doris, the minimum notice period and increasingly late notification are creating significant pressure for local authorities as newly recognised refugees present for mainstream housing support. The UK Government's streamlined asylum process is exacerbating that, and it has not provided any additional funding to support local authorities.

That is before we take into account the needs of unaccompanied children. The UK legislation rides roughshod over our established child protection responsibilities and it treats cases with disbelief. I remember well when the UK Government proposed X-raying children's wrists to determine their age. Please do not let us hear anything like that ever again.

People should not be at risk of homelessness and destitution at the point that the UK Government recognises their need for protection as refugees. That is not a new issue either. We heard that from Kaukab Stewart, in the committee that I chaired, in 2017. We have all wanted to tackle it. The 2017 report created the strategy that we have now, and I am happy to update Kaukab Stewart that the refresh of that strategy will be available in March this year. The UK Government's asylum policy and legislation will continue to impact on all devolved areas. I encourage members to agree to the debate motion to recognise that impact and to oppose the UK Government's pursuit of its plan.

The impact assessment cost for Rwanda was initially £169 million for 1,000 people, which is a sum of £169,000 per person. That cost has now topped £290 million. Imagine what COSLA and other organisations in Scotland could do with £169,000 per person. That would transform

services and the work that they do to support people. The UK Government must recognise the engagement of Scottish local authorities in asylum dispersal and agree that the UK Government needs to engage positively with devolved Governments, local authorities and public services across asylum matters to reduce the negative impact on people who come to our communities.

Maggie Chapman, Kaukab Stewart and Karen Adam gave us a timely reminder of the dehumanising effect of language such as “Stop the boats” and words such as “swarm” and “invasion”. Such words have a dreadful impact on those who are most vulnerable. That is why we welcome the Together With Refugees campaign. The campaign has a set of principles that align with long-standing Scottish Government positions and with Scotland’s new Scots refugee integration strategy, which was developed by and delivered in partnership with COSLA and the Scottish Refugee Council. I ask everyone in the chamber to get behind the Scottish Refugee Council and the refugee integration strategy.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the impact of UK Government asylum policy and legislation in Scotland.

Bob Doris: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Earlier, Miles Briggs took exception to being called a representative of the UK Government. I can well understand why—I, too, would take offence—but, in doing so, he might inadvertently have misled Parliament. Mr Briggs stated that he is a representative of the Scottish Conservative party. This afternoon, I checked the Electoral Commission’s website and can confirm that no such party exists. The only such party that exists is the Conservative and Unionist Party. How can Mr Briggs correct that inadvertent misleading of Parliament, under the standing orders?

The Presiding Officer: Thank you for your contribution, Mr Doris. I am sure that, at this point in the session, members are very well aware of the mechanism that exists to correct potential inaccuracies. We will move on to the next item of business.

Miles Briggs: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I think that Mr Doris needs to get a life and understand that we are in Parliament to represent people.

The Presiding Officer: Members, we will continue to treat each other with courtesy and respect. We now move on to the next item of business.

Business Motion

16:55

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-11821, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (George Adam): Thank you, Presiding Officer, and a happy new year to you.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 16 January 2024

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions (if selected)
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 1 Debate: Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Financial Resolution: Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members’ Business

Wednesday 17 January 2024

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy; Finance and Parliamentary Business
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Labour Party Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.10 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members’ Business

Thursday 18 January 2024

11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister’s Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Members’ Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Debate: Scottish

Rural and Islands Youth Parliament

followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 23 January 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 24 January 2024

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands;
 NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 25 January 2024

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Social Justice
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 15 January 2024, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

16:55

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motion S6M-11822, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, motion S6M-11823, on designation of a lead committee, and motion S6M-11824, on committee meeting times.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Wine (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Automated Vehicles Bill.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Finance and Public Administration Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament between 11.40 am and 12 noon on Thursday 18 January 2024.—[George Adam]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

Motion without Notice

16:56

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice that, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, decision time be brought forward to now, and I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.56 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:56

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is that amendment S6M-11803.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11803, in the name of Emma Roddick, on the impact of United Kingdom Government asylum policy and legislation in Scotland, 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.

16:57

Meeting suspended.

16:59

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment S6M-11803.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11803, in the name of Emma Roddick. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app was not working, but I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Choudhury. We will ensure that that is recorded.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app was not working, but I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Dornan. 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)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 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, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 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, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (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)
 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)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 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)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (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)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (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)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 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)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11803.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 30, Against 88, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-11803.2, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11803, in the name of Emma Roddick, on the impact of UK Government asylum policy and legislation in Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine 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)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (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)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11803.2, in the name of Paul O'Kane, is: For 20, Against 97, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-11803, in the name of Emma Roddick, on the impact of UK Government asylum policy and legislation in Scotland, 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)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 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, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)

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, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (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)
 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)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 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)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (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)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 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)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

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)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 89, Against 30, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the impact of UK Government asylum policy and legislation in Scotland, including the effect of the complex asylum system on people who have applied for protection, restrictions on the right to work and limited support available to people awaiting a decision, the increased reliance on contingency asylum accommodation caused by a backlog in Home Office decision-making, risks of maximisation policy and inadequate engagement with Scottish local authorities or public services prior to procurement of contingency accommodation, the streamlined asylum process and limited move-on period allowed once a decision has been made, and consequent impact on both newly-recognised refugees and local authorities, and the restricting of the right to seek asylum in the UK under the Illegal Migration Act 2023; is opposed to the UK Government’s pursuit of plans to relocate people to third countries to have asylum claims considered there; recognises the ruling of the Supreme Court in relation to the safety of Rwanda, and acknowledges the comments of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that the Migration and Economic Development Partnership (MEDP) between the UK and Rwanda undermines the established international refugee protection system and that the UNHCR does not consider the MEDP to comply with the UK’s obligations under international law; notes the engagement of Scottish local authorities in asylum dispersal, and agrees that the UK Government needs to engage positively with devolved governments, local authorities and public services across asylum matters to

reduce negative impacts on people, communities and services.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on the three Parliamentary Bureau motions. Does any member object?

As no member objects, the final question is that motion S6M-11822, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, motion S6M-11823, on the designation of a lead committee, and motion S6M-11824, on a committee meeting time, all in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Wine (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Automated Vehicles Bill.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Finance and Public Administration Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament between 11.40 am and 12 noon on Thursday 18 January 2024.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Jobs (East Kilbride)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate—[*Interruption.*] I ask members who are leaving the chamber to please do so quickly and quietly, because we are in session. Thank you.

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-11664, in the name of Collette Stevenson, on protecting Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office jobs in East Kilbride. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the decision by the UK Government to relocate the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) out of East Kilbride; understands from reports that FCDO officials had been in discussions with the local authority about opening a new site in the town, and that this decision was unexpected; believes that Abercrombie House, in East Kilbride, has been home to a dedicated workforce in the field of international development and foreign affairs for over 40 years and that around 1,000 staff are currently based there; understands that the UK Government estimates that the office's presence generates approximately £30 million for the local economy; notes the view that the decision to relocate jobs out of East Kilbride will have a negative impact on East Kilbride's economic recovery; further notes the reported campaign by local staff and trade unions against previous UK Government plans to remove HMRC from East Kilbride, as well as other towns in Scotland; recognises that the UK Government's Declaration on Government Reform commits to "... relocating jobs and areas of activity across government to places including ... East Kilbride"; believes, therefore, that the FCDO announcement goes against the UK Government's own policies; notes the view that this move is a betrayal of the people of East Kilbride, including FCDO staff living and working in the town, and further notes the calls for the UK Government to scrap its plans immediately and maintain the FCDO's substantial presence in East Kilbride.

17:08

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I am grateful to have the opportunity to lead this debate on the need to protect civil service jobs in East Kilbride. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has had a presence at Abercrombie house for more than four decades. About 1,000 people currently work there—the number has increased in recent years, and I welcome that. However, a few weeks ago, the Tory Government announced that the FCDO would be leaving Abercrombie house. That is a hammer blow to East Kilbride, and it could, according to the United Kingdom Government's own figures, cost the town's economy £30 million.

I am, therefore, grateful to Scottish National Party, Green and Labour colleagues for supporting my motion. However, it is sad that no member of the Conservative Party has done so, including the Conservative members who live in and represent East Kilbride. I have raised the matter in the chamber previously, and the Tories tried to diminish it. I am standing up for East Kilbride in the face of Tory plans to remove 1,000 jobs from my constituency.

I will set out the context. First, the UK Government's "Declaration on Government Reform" commits to

"relocating jobs and areas of activity across government to places including ... East Kilbride",

so the Tories are even breaking their own policy commitments.

After the announcement of the closure of the FCDO base at Abercrombie house, many people—including Tory politicians—said that it was no big deal, as HM Revenue and Customs would be moving in. However, HMRC has been based in East Kilbride for decades. Those are not new jobs for the town, and HMRC staff have faced their own challenges with the Tories.

In 2014, the UK Government announced that HMRC would be leaving East Kilbride and other towns across Scotland to move into regional centres. That led—quite rightly—to a huge backlash; indeed, Conservative MSP Graham Simpson called the move "misguided". The Public and Commercial Services trade union launched its "Stay in EK" campaign, backed by the *East Kilbride News* and by local politicians on a cross-party basis. Following that hard-fought campaign, we managed to keep HMRC jobs in the town.

It beggars belief, therefore, that the UK Government will instead cut 1,000 jobs from East Kilbride by removing the FCDO. After its U-turn, HMRC recognised that keeping a presence in East Kilbride made the "best sense". I hope that today's debate, as well as all the concerns from staff, which I will come to next, will help the FCDO to see sense, too.

A big issue with the UK Government's announcement was the lack of respect that was shown to the workforce. I understand that there was no prior consultation with staff about the potential move, and reports suggest that trade unions were given just one hour's notice of the announcement. Local staff are upset about the decision. One employee told the press that

"you could not get any lower morale than there is at Abercrombie House just now"

and that people were at "rock bottom".

I have spoken with FCDO staff, who are worried about their future. I have heard stories of people

who left jobs in Glasgow to work closer to home and of some who even moved to the FCDO from HMRC, given the threat of those jobs moving out of town. The UK Government should have given the experiences of its staff some thought before seemingly rushing into the decision.

Civil servants were not the only ones who were caught off guard by the announcement. My understanding is that the FCDO had been in discussions with South Lanarkshire Council about a new site in the town, so the decision to abandon East Kilbride altogether left the council "astounded". The whole thing seems to be ill thought through.

The HMRC saga showed that politicians of different parties can, and must, work together to stand up for the areas that they represent. I have had productive conversations with the Labour leader of South Lanarkshire Council, Joe Fagan, and the Labour MSPs Monica Lennon and Mark Griffin supported my motion. Conservative politicians, on the other hand, seem to have lost their voice. After the department—which is headed by the unelected Lord David Cameron—made its decision, I wrote to Graham Simpson and to another unelected Tory, Lisa Cameron MP, to ask whether they stood by their previous remarks that FCDO jobs must stay in East Kilbride. I also wrote to Alister Jack, the Secretary of State for Scotland, to seek assurances. I have received nothing back from any of them.

I hope that, over the Christmas break, Tory politicians have been able to reflect. They must recognise the concerns not just from me and the council but from the local staff who carry out the Government's work.

To sum up, the UK Tory Government's plan to close down the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in East Kilbride is a betrayal of the town. It has already caused unnecessary stress for many employees, and it could lead to millions of pounds of damage to the East Kilbride economy. With this debate, I hope to bring more attention to that reckless decision and give a voice to the staff, who feel as though they have been overlooked in the process.

The UK Government must engage meaningfully with the workforce, with trade unions and with all interested local representatives. It must ensure that an impact assessment is carried out in relation to the workforce and the potential harm to East Kilbride's economy. In my view, the UK Government must scrap the plans immediately and avoid a further broken promise to the people of East Kilbride.

17:15

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I pay tribute to my colleague Collette Stevenson for lodging this important motion for debate. As she has set out, the detrimental impacts of the proposals on her constituency would clearly be significant, and we all support her efforts, and the wider efforts by trade unions and others, to get the UK Government to reconsider its decision.

However, in speaking today, I want to emphasise something more: the wider beneficial impact that the workers in East Kilbride—the diligent, capable, focused and highly motivated civil servants who work in that office—have made, not only in furthering Scotland’s reputation as a good global citizen, and in diplomacy and building a more internationalist world and outlook, but in respect of the lives that have been saved and the people who have been helped, and the significant contribution that has been made in support of international organisations that are highly thought of such as the United Nations and the World Food Programme.

That is because the office in question, when it was previously occupied largely by Department for International Development staff members, and in its current status as the FCDO, has, in the past quarter of a century, played a huge role in making a global difference. Examples include leading the world in tackling the Ebola crisis and, in recent years, especially in the past decade, providing aid to the people of Syria and responding to other humanitarian crises elsewhere.

The UK Government’s decision in 2020 to close the Department for International Development was a mistake, and I fear that another mistake is being made now. As colleagues will know, I served as a Scottish Government minister between 2018 and 2023. Between 2018 and 2020, I had the great privilege of being responsible for Europe, migration and international development. In that role, I met a high number of staff, not just in the Scottish Government but in other organisations, who had begun their careers in East Kilbride. Indeed, when I worked in other roles in other departments, there were civil servants who had begun their careers in East Kilbride.

That shows the impact of the office—not only the impact of the direct work that comes out of Abercrombie house on an international scale, but the impact on the quality of civil servants and on those at the beginning of their careers, and the impact that all those who have worked at the office for some time make when they go on to work elsewhere in the civil service.

East Kilbride is a strategically important workplace, and it has within it a network and a

culture. All of that will be detrimentally affected by dissipating and relocating the workforce. That office is important for East Kilbride and for Scotland more widely, for our civil service and because of the impact that it has made internationally.

It is important that we and other politicians consider those wider effects, as well as the negative impact on the people of East Kilbride if the decision is not reversed and the mistake that the UK Government is making happens.

17:20

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I start by congratulating Collette Stevenson for securing the debate. She has mentioned me a few times and I will come on to that.

Earlier today, I was speaking to pupils on a school visit to the Parliament and I told them how I first got involved in politics when I was at school—a long time ago. When I was at school in 1980, a report known as the Brandt report came out, written by a group headed by Willy Brandt. It was all about international development, and we learned about the north-south divide. The message of the report was how important it is for developed nations to help less-developed nations and how that benefits us all. I read that report—all of it. I supported that message, and my views have not changed since.

I have been a supporter of international development for over 40 years, so I have felt a sense of pride that the UK’s international development programme was being delivered from the town that I have represented as a councillor and MSP since 2007. If I have a frustration, it is that what was DFID, and is now the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, reaches out to the world but does not reach out to its Scottish home very well. To my mind, it has a great story that it has not really sold.

In 2015—I think it was 2015 and not 2014—the HMRC threatened to leave East Kilbride and go to Glasgow, so that was a similar situation. As we have heard, a campaign was launched, which was called “Stay in EK”. I got involved in that, as all parties did. We worked with the trade unions; I have not heard from the trade unions on the current issue. I do not know whether it was a result of the campaign or something else, but that decision about HMRC was reversed in January 2022. Anyone who represents the town must have been delighted by that, as I was.

The announcement by the FCDO at the end of last year that it intends to move out of Abercrombie house and go to Glasgow came as a shock. It certainly came as a shock to me; I cannot stand here and say that I was delighted about

that—of course I am not delighted. I would rather that it stayed in East Kilbride. The decision is a result of the lease ending on the current HMRC building at Queensway house. That lease is ending, HMRC—

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: Yes, I will, provided that I get more time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, that is okay.

Monica Lennon: I have been waiting all day to hear that story at the start of Graham Simpson's speech because he and I did the same school chat this morning and he promised that there would be a story.

The union that he refers to, PCS Scotland, commented in December that its members were given just an hour's notice of the decision before it was announced on 7 December. As we have had the Christmas period and people, including trade union officials, have had time off work, we might hear more this week. Does he recognise that giving an hour's notice for a plan that is not a real plan—because there is no named location in Glasgow for the move—is really ropey? Rather than have a go at trade unions for not saying more, we should be taking it back to the UK Tory Government in order for it to give a proper, coherent explanation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will be able to give Mr Simpson a good minute for that intervention.

Graham Simpson: I was merely making the point that I have not heard from PCS. We heard from PCS during the campaign to get HMRC to stay in East Kilbride, so there might be good reasons why it has not been in touch this time. I would encourage it to get in touch with everyone. That is what it should be doing.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: Yes, I will.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It will have to be much briefer than the previous intervention.

Clare Adamson: I will try, Presiding Officer.

I compliment my colleague Collette Stevenson on her passion for her constituency and for the jobs in her constituency. That passion was shared by her predecessor, Linda Fabiani. In 2014, when I was a regional MSP, I was involved with PCS and met it about the proposed closures. Does Mr Simpson recognise that, at that time, the jobs at HMRC and at what was then DFID, were held up as a benefit of the union and, indeed, as the jewel

in the crown of the argument for staying in the union? It would be a tragedy if those jobs were added to the long list of promises that were made at the time of the referendum that have been broken.

Graham Simpson: That is an unfortunate intervention from Clare Adamson, because it shows that she has precious little knowledge of what is going on. No job losses are being suggested. In fact, there will be more jobs. The plan is not to get rid of jobs but merely to move them to Glasgow. Clare Adamson seems to be unaware of that.

Collette Stevenson: Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: No, I am not going to take any more interventions—unless I get loads more time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I appreciate that you have been generous, Mr Simpson, but you have now had six minutes. I will give you an extra minute and a half. We need to respect the allocated time.

Graham Simpson: You are being extremely generous, Presiding Officer.

Unfortunately, the only contact from within the constituency that I have had is the letter from Collette Stevenson that was previously referred to, which was, frankly, a stunt. I do not respond to stunts—[*Interruption.*] I am hearing lots of muttering from Kevin Stewart—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members, please do not shout across the chamber.

Graham Simpson: If, at any point, Collette Stevenson wants to know what I think about anything, all that she need do is pop along to my office—our offices share the same corridor. I do not respond to stunts, which is why I have not responded to her letter. She could have just come to speak to me, as she has done on many other occasions.

Fortunately, I have spoken to the town's Conservative MP, Lisa Cameron, who has not indulged in such antics. We have both been in discussion—[*Interruption.*] Members should do me the courtesy of listening.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes. Members, could we please allow the member who has the floor to conclude his remarks?

Graham Simpson: Thank you very much.

We have both been in discussion with the FCDO. I have spoken personally to the minister, Andrew Mitchell. We will work—and I am quite happy to work with Collette Stevenson if she

wants to do it properly—to do all that we can to see whether anything can be done for staff locally.

If staff are to move, the key thing is that they must be treated properly. I have been involved in an office move. There are issues such as parking, extra costs for transport, childcare and whether people can work from home.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Simpson, could you please bring your remarks to a close?

Graham Simpson: I will bring my remarks to a close.

At the end of the day, more people will be employed. However, we must work with the staff. I encourage staff to get in touch with me; if they want to do so, I would be delighted to hear from them. I think that there is further to go on the issue.

17:28

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Presiding Officer, I wish you, and colleagues in the chamber, a happy new year.

I, too, am grateful to Collette Stevenson for securing the debate. It feels like a debate, and I am grateful to Graham Simpson for taking some interventions. I will not repeat some of the things that have been said. In his thoughtful remarks, Ben Macpherson, who paid tribute to the workforce that has been in place over many decades, made us realise that not only are there local impacts and factors but there is also a global dimension to the issue. We should remember the important internationalist values that are in play.

I remind colleagues that I am a member of the PCS parliamentary group and I refer members to the voluntary heading in my entry in the register of members' interests. Many of us recognise that there are important stakeholders involved, including the trade unions. I suggest to Mr Simpson that he does not have to wait to be approached; he can pick up the phone to workers as well.

I am here tonight because I am a Central Scotland MSP, so I represent East Kilbride, and I live next door in Blantyre. This is a big deal for us locally, and it is a real pity that we do not have unity among all the local elected members. I suspect that Graham Simpson probably feels the same way and would rather that we were in a different situation. However, we find ourselves in an election year and perhaps people feel that they cannot say what they really think.

People are concerned about the UK Tory Government's announcement that it is closing the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office offices at Abercrombie house and moving those

highly regarded civil service jobs out of East Kilbride. That is the key point that I will focus on tonight, because it is a hard pill to swallow.

The UK Tory Government promised more FCDO jobs in East Kilbride but, instead, it is moving them out of the town. It is doing that at a time when the council and others are working really hard to think about the future of East Kilbride, its regeneration and ways to give people hope and confidence.

As we have heard, Abercrombie house was first established in 1981, which happens to be the year in which I was born. The expansion of the Overseas Development Administration provided a massive boost to the area, giving East Kilbride residents access to stable and secure employment, at a time when communities across the central belt were suffering due to de-industrialisation and Thatcherism. Before his days playing for the Scotland football team, Ally McCoist worked at Abercrombie house part time while playing for St Johnstone Football Club, as one of the first 350 employees at the start of the 1980s. He said that when the building opened,

"It was a massive boost for East Kilbride".

Abercrombie house is a central feature of East Kilbride's economic and social life. Councillor Joe Fagan, who has been mentioned already, is the leader of South Lanarkshire Council. He said:

"I am frankly astounded by the announcement on the FCDO—both the decision itself and the way it has been made. These staff have been working, and in many cases living, in East Kilbride for decades and are important contributors to our local community and economy. The FCDO announcement has been made out of the blue, suggesting not just a failure of communication but also a lack of coherence in their decision-making process. The reasons given for the decision are also weak, to say the least."

I know that some people who work there and live in Glasgow perhaps feel that the move might not be too big a deal, but others who live beyond East Kilbride—for example, in Strathaven or Stonehouse—including people with caring responsibilities, are worried about the commute. There are so many unknowns. The fact that staff were given one hour's notice before the decision went public, just before Christmas, does not sit easily with me. A few of those points have already been made.

There is time to unite, to put East Kilbride first, to put those jobs first and to go back with questions for the Secretary of State for Scotland and other UK ministers, who have a plan that does not really add up. There is still time for Mr Simpson and Lisa Cameron to get behind the community and the workers. If we can speak with one voice, we will be much stronger.

I thank all colleagues for their support, and I thank Collette Stevenson for bringing the debate to the chamber.

17:33

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): I thank Collette Stevenson for securing this debate on the relocation of the FCDO office out of East Kilbride. The decision, which was made abruptly by the UK Government, will have far-reaching consequences for FCDO workers, their families and, as we have already heard, the wider community in East Kilbride.

Abercrombie house employs upwards of 1,000 staff members and is estimated to generate £30 million for the local economy. I do not think that we can overstate its contribution to the social and economic fabric of the town. The decision, which was made with no prior consultation, is deeply concerning, and the dedicated workers at Abercrombie house have been instrumental to the constituency. The relocation will not only impact the hard-working staff but create a massive shortfall for local services and stores in the business community, triggering a chain reaction that will adversely affect East Kilbride as a whole.

East Kilbride was once touted as an example of where there had been UK Government investment outside large cities. The decision starkly contradicts the commitments that were made by the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities as recently as 2021.

The reasoning that has been provided for the move is weak and ill founded. Mr Simpson said that there would be no job losses in the FCDO. However, that misses the key point, which is that jobs are being lost in East Kilbride. The decision is not about a mere bureaucratic shift for those who work at Abercrombie house. People's livelihoods are neither expendable nor easily transferable. The relocation of the office will force workers to deal with the choice between working further from home, changing their job or, in the most extreme circumstances, potentially having to give up their job. Not all workers have access to a car, and workers moving to and from where they live by car or train represents another cost to them during a cost of living crisis. There can potentially be extra childcare costs and longer travel, and therefore longer working days.

Those who work flexibly due to caring responsibilities, disability or other personal circumstances now have a real dilemma. Shifting the jobs outside East Kilbride unfairly burdens workers, and it is disrespectful to assume that those dedicated workers can seamlessly transition

to an office in Glasgow. A worker who wishes to remain anonymous has been quoted as saying:

"It's going to take 40 minutes each way into town and back which adds to your working day—there will be childcare costs involved in that, there will be train and bus fares. Although FCDO say they will cover them for three years that's not good enough, nobody wants to move."

Levelling up has been touted as a pivotal element of the UK Government's pledge to reduce regional disparities and promote local economies. The closure of the FCDO office in East Kilbride directly contradicts those commitments. It sends an alarming message about the UK Government's dedication to regional development, and it calls into question the promises that it has made to Scotland until very recently. The same UK Government that claimed to be investing more than £2.4 billion in Scotland to empower local communities, drive innovation and enhance economic opportunities is now undermining its own commitment to addressing geographic inequalities. Moving valuable jobs away from communities, particularly at the expense of the people of East Kilbride, contradicts the very principles that the UK Government says that it supports. It raises questions about the sincerity of its efforts to promote opportunities in all regions.

As recently as 2021, the UK Government made a commitment to send an additional 500 workers to the facility. Now we have another decision instead. We should join together to strongly advocate the preservation of the jobs and expertise of, and the valuable contributions made by, the workers at Abercrombie house.

I reiterate my disappointment about and frustration with the UK Government's abrupt decision to relocate the FCDO office out of East Kilbride. The repercussions are keenly felt in the community, and they cast doubts on the UK Government's commitments to levelling up. I urge the UK Government to reconsider and reverse that ill-advised decision, and I emphasise the need for a renewed commitment to the workers of Abercrombie house and East Kilbride.

17:38

The Minister for Small Business, Innovation, Tourism and Trade (Richard Lochhead): I pay tribute to all members who have made powerful contributions in the debate and, in particular, to the member for East Kilbride, Collette Stevenson. No one can fail to be impressed by her passionate advocacy for her constituents in East Kilbride and the strength of feeling that she has expressed about the issue that she has brought to the chamber. The strength of feeling that exists is also clear from many other members who have spoken in the debate.

I was raised in Clarkston, which is a neighbouring community to East Kilbride. I remember as a youngster finding it quite unusual but also refreshing that, just up the road, there were hundreds of jobs for people working in international development on behalf of the UK Government. That was prior to devolution, of course. I am aware of the presence of those jobs and the impact that they have had on East Kilbride over many decades. I remember that well from when I was growing up. Others have looked at the history of the jobs in the UK Government's department. On Monday 23 November 1981, the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, officially opened Abercrombie house in East Kilbride. It began life with about 350 staff, and it was built as part of an expansion of the Overseas Development Administration, which was part of the Foreign Office, to create jobs in East Kilbride. It went on to be the joint headquarters of the Department for International Development before the merger of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DFID.

More recently, in November 2021, the FCDO warmly celebrated the 40th anniversary of Abercrombie house. The UK Government used that opportunity to reaffirm and cement the relationship with its staff and with East Kilbride. The Foreign Secretary at the time, Liz Truss, is quoted as saying:

"Our 1,000 staff in Scotland can proudly celebrate 40 years of Abercrombie House having been at the forefront of making the UK a world-leading diplomatic and development superpower."

Ms Truss went on to reinforce that, saying that she was

"looking forward to building on Abercrombie House's impressive history"

and giving a bold commitment

"to redeploy a further 500 jobs to our joint HQ by 2025, as part of the UK Government's levelling up agenda".

That is why I and fellow ministers fully understand and support the dedicated civil service staff at Abercrombie house today, and we accept and appreciate why they are so perplexed by the announcement. Only two years on from those quotes, the UK Government has reneged on that commitment to the staff and the town and has reversed the decision to build on their impressive history by moving all their jobs—the entire department—out of Abercrombie house, according to the plans, and out of East Kilbride.

As many members have echoed, towns are much more than simply buildings and spaces. They represent our communities. For many civil servants, Abercrombie house is the beating heart of the community of East Kilbride.

On learning about the 40th anniversary celebrations, I noted, as Monica Lennon did, that one of the very first employees at Abercrombie house was a famous son of East Kilbride: the former Scotland footballer and commentator Ally McCoist. On the 40th anniversary, he paid tribute by saying:

"It's amazing to think that 26 of the people I worked with when Abercrombie House first opened are still there".

He also said that

"It was a massive boost for East Kilbride"

at the time and that he still remembered his first day and how

"proud"

his parents were that he had

"got the ODA job".

He was not wrong. Abercrombie house is an embedded and important part of the fabric of the town of East Kilbride. As many members have said, it presents high-quality employment opportunities for local people and has had a significant positive impact on local businesses and the economy, with the FCDO having made the point that it generates an estimated £30 million per annum for the local economy in East Kilbride and the wider region.

Again, that is not just about numbers, roles or simply locations; it is about people. We are all thinking about those who have dedicated their working lives to the delivery mainly of overseas development assistance to those around the world in greatest need, directly from East Kilbride, for the past four decades. Ben Macpherson eloquently paid tribute, as Monica Lennon and Gillian Mackay did, to the work that is carried out there in helping people around the world through the contribution of the staff who work there and the wider work that they carry out. The town can rightly be proud of its role in having an impact on the lives of some of the world's poorest and most marginalised people.

As a Government, we place a great deal of importance on Scotland's being a good global citizen. Central to our commitment to raising Scotland's international profile and providing that assistance is our international development fund, which supports and empowers our partners in Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia and Pakistan to the tune of £15 million per annum.

The staff at Abercrombie house certainly carry out vital work, and I fully sympathise with those who are affected by the unexpected news. The UK Government's decision to relocate the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to a new location in Glasgow was not one that the Scottish Government was aware of. It is important that Governments work with our colleagues and with

trade unions to reach fair and reasonable decisions that respect the legitimate interests of workers. Of course, at times, that might mean that difficult decisions must be made, but the principle of no surprises is an important one. Given the level of surprise and the subsequent discontent at the news, I join members, as the Scottish Government joins others more widely, in urging the UK Government to follow the Scottish Government's more progressive approach and engage fully in meaningful conversation with the staff affected and the local community.

In the meantime, the Scottish Government continues to support East Kilbride. We have committed £500 million over 20 years to the Glasgow city region deal—the first such deal in Scotland and the largest Scottish Government investment commitment across the wider deals programme. Some £166 million of that investment has been allocated to economic infrastructure activity in South Lanarkshire.

I extend my thanks, as others have done, to the committed workforce at the FCDO in East Kilbride, and I encourage the UK Government to work closely with them and with the local community to ensure that any decisions take full account of the views of the workforce and the local community, and the impact on the local economy. Forty-two years of service by the people of East Kilbride must be respected.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister.

Meeting closed at 17:45.

Correction

Jamie Hepburn has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction:

The Minister for Independence (Jamie Hepburn):

At col 9, paragraph 5—

Original text—

“Parliament has been informed of costs for the first nine papers in the series. The cumulative cost has been £151,657.40, which means that the average cost of each of the first nine papers in the series was £16,850.21.”

Corrected text—

“Parliament has been informed of costs for the first nine papers in the series. The cumulative cost has been £151,548.31, which means that the average cost of each of the first nine papers in the series was £16,838.70.”

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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