



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 3 September 2024

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Tuesday 3 September 2024

CONTENTS

	Col.
TIME FOR REFLECTION	1
BUSINESS MOTION	3
<i>Motion moved—[Jamie Hepburn]—and agreed to.</i>	
TOPICAL QUESTION TIME	4
Creative Scotland Open Fund for Individuals (Closure)	4
Poverty-related Educational Attainment Gap	8
COMMUNITY COHESION	13
<i>Statement—[First Minister].</i>	
The First Minister (John Swinney)	13
PRE-BUDGET FISCAL UPDATE	27
<i>Statement—[Shona Robison].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison)	27
GENDER IDENTITY HEALTHCARE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE	45
<i>Statement—[Jenni Minto].</i>	
The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto)	45
CLYDE AND HEBRIDES FERRIES	56
<i>Statement—[Fiona Hyslop].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop)	56
MOBILE PHONES IN SCHOOLS	69
<i>Statement—[Jenny Gilruth].</i>	
The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth)	69
DECISION TIME	83
WINCHBURGH TRAIN STATION	84
<i>Motion debated—[Sue Webber].</i>	
Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)	84
Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)	87
Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)	89
Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab)	89
Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green)	91
The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie)	92
CORRECTION	96

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 3 September 2024

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Ruth Donaldson, who is CSW's church relationships team leader for the United Kingdom.

Ruth Donaldson (CSW): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to address you and reflect with you this afternoon.

What would it be like to live in a world where everyone is free to believe? How might Scotland reflect that?

CSW strives for a world in which everyone is free to adopt a religion or belief of their choice free from harassment, free from oppression and free from persecution. We stand for freedom of religion or belief for all, which is also known as FORB. Whether you have faith or none at all, FORB safeguards diversity, democracy, development, rule of law, stability and prosperity. Furthermore, FORB is good for social cohesion and business.

In the book of Jeremiah, chapter 29, in what Christians call the Old Testament, the advice through the prophet Jeremiah is surprising. It says:

"seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Even in a foreign land, the prophet Jeremiah exhorts the exiled Israelites to build homes, plant gardens and pray for the city's welfare. The passage offers a profound insight into the importance of seeking peace and prosperity for the broader society. It underscores a foundational Christian principle: the flourishing of a community is intertwined with the freedom and wellbeing of all its members. When people are free to practise their religion or belief, they contribute to the common good, fostering a society that thrives on mutual respect and co-operation.

In the New Testament, the parable of the good Samaritan, which is told by Jesus, demonstrates the moral imperatives that arise from true religious freedom. A man—robbed, beaten and left for dead on the road—was ignored by his own community, which we think should have helped him. Rather, it was a Samaritan, someone who would have been considered the "other", who stopped to offer compassion and care. The Samaritan exemplifies

the essence of loving one's neighbour and not just one's own community. The parable teaches that genuine compassion transcends cultural and religious boundaries.

FORB encourages an environment where such compassion can flourish. It allows individuals to act according to their deeply held moral convictions, fostering a society where acts of kindness and solidarity are common. We have seen recently the consequences when the "other" is feared or blamed, which can result in violence, oppression and fear.

Christian theology therefore highlights the intrinsic value of FORB as a means of promoting peace, resilience and compassion. By upholding this freedom, we not only honour the dignity of each person but create a society where diverse beliefs can coexist harmoniously, contributing to the collective welfare. Let us therefore commit to promoting and protecting this freedom, recognising it as a cornerstone of a just and thriving society.

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-14246, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business. Any member who wishes to speak to the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Tuesday 3 September 2024—

delete

followed by Scottish Government Business

and insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Community Cohesion

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish Government Pre-Budget Fiscal Update

followed by Ministerial Statement: Gender Identity Healthcare for Young People – Update and New National Standards

followed by Ministerial Statement: Clyde and Hebrides Ferries - Provision, Service and Harbours Update

followed by Ministerial Statement: Mobile Phones and Behaviour and Relationships in School

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.05 pm Decision Time

(b) Wednesday 4 September 2024—

delete

followed by Scottish Government Business

and insert

followed by First Minister's Statement: Programme for Government 2024-25

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Programme for Government 2024-25

(c) Thursday 5 September 2024—

delete

followed by Scottish Government Business

and insert

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Programme for Government - Eradicating Child Poverty—[*Jamie Hepburn.*]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:05

Creative Scotland Open Fund for Individuals (Closure)

1. **Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact on the culture sector and livelihoods of the reported closure of Creative Scotland's open fund for individuals due to budgetary constraints. (S6T-02065)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): With your permission, Presiding Officer, I will begin by mentioning today's memorial service for Euan MacDonald, who died recently from motor neurone disease. Euan lived with MND for 20 years. In partnership with the University of Edinburgh, he established the Euan MacDonald Centre for motor neurone disease research and the voicebank study, which enables people to preserve their voice if they are at risk of losing it due to illness. Working with his sister, Kiki, he set up Euan's Guide, which is used by disabled people to review, share and discover accessible places to visit. He was an inspiration, and I am sure that all members will extend their condolences to his family today.

In answer to Mr Stewart's topical question, I am well aware of the potential impact on individuals of decisions made by Creative Scotland about its open fund. I extend my thanks to the many people in the culture and arts sector in particular who have been in touch to underscore how important that fund is, and I assure them and members of the Scottish Parliament that I am working extremely hard with colleagues across the Government to ensure that the appropriate funding decisions are made to sustain and support the culture and arts sector.

Announcements will follow in the pre-budget fiscal update. The Government remains committed to increasing financial support for culture and the arts.

Alexander Stewart: I associate myself and my party with the cabinet secretary's comments regarding Euan MacDonald.

I thank the cabinet secretary for his response. Writing in an open letter, more than 170 artists have warned that a culture catastrophe is in progress and that job losses are already taking place in the sector. The situation is dire, and it is clear that urgent and substantial action is required.

How do you justify abandoning a sector that sustains more than 80,000 jobs and contributes more than £5 billion to the economy? Has the cabinet secretary met Creative Scotland or other organisations in order to listen to the concerns that they have expressed?

Angus Robertson: Concerns have been raised by the creative sector, rather than by Creative Scotland itself, but I am content to meet any members of the culture and arts sector, many of whom have written to me about this very issue.

It is disappointing that Creative Scotland took the decision about the open fund before the Scottish Government could complete due diligence to release funding, as is normal practice. The Scottish Government provides significant funding to Creative Scotland each year and will continue doing so. Members will recognise my oft-stated commitment to increase funding for the culture and arts sector and I look forward to updating colleagues about that shortly.

Alexander Stewart: It is hard to believe that, at the Scottish National Party conference only 11 months ago, the then First Minister announced a huge vote of confidence in the future of the cultural sector. Following the recent success of the Edinburgh fringe festival, the announcement of the closure of Creative Scotland's open fund for individuals is nothing short of a betrayal of the artists and cultural workers who made that success possible. Cabinet secretary, how will you rebuild trust from a sector that has consistently been let down?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Please speak through the chair at all times.

Angus Robertson: I again make the point that the Government and I are committed to increasing funding for culture. I think that the member is aware that that stands in contrast with the outgoing United Kingdom Conservative Government and the incoming Labour Government cutting cultural funding through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and cuts to culture in Wales by the Welsh Government.

I remain committed to securing additional funding for the culture and arts sector, because we acknowledge how important it is. I would welcome colleagues from other parties doing everything that they can to join the culture and arts community, me and my colleagues in the Government, who are doing everything that we can to get the appropriate funding in place as quickly as possible to ensure that the sector is not only safeguarded and sustained but can thrive in the future.

The Presiding Officer: There is much interest in asking a question, so concise questions and responses would be appreciated.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I have had recent discussions with Eden Court in Inverness, among others, regarding its concern about supporting local Highlands and Islands artists without the open fund. Will the cabinet secretary speak to what support is available to such people, particularly given that they have lost opportunities through Brexit?

Angus Robertson: One of the particular projects that I am very supportive of is Culture Collective, which does a lot of good work in the north of Scotland and is supported through funding from the Scottish Government. I am committed to that. I am also committed, more generally, to making sure that arts funds, including the open fund, are open for artists in order to ensure that the cultural sector can thrive. I assure my colleague that everything is being done in the Government at the present time to ensure that the funding is safeguarded and is provided as a priority. I was committed to that more than a year ago and I remain committed to doing it now and into the future.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I associate myself with the cabinet secretary's remarks about the late Euan MacDonald.

This is a total mess, and Scotland's artists are paying the price for the Government's incompetence and poor planning. Angus Robertson talks about the commitments that he has given. He gave the sector a gold-plated commitment to replenish £6.6 million to Creative Scotland, but that funding has yet to transpire. The open fund is closed and, as we have heard, the overall lack of certainty has led to some of Scotland's biggest names, including Paolo Nutini and Biffy Clyro, warning of an impending "cultural catastrophe". Given the constant cycle of promises followed by cuts, how can Scotland's arts and culture sector have confidence in its future and in anything that the cabinet secretary says now?

Angus Robertson: I will take absolutely no lessons on austerity from the Labour Party when it comes to funding anything. The member's party in government in the United Kingdom is cutting funding for culture and the arts. That is a fact. This Government is increasing funding. I remain committed to doing so, and I hope that he will welcome the good news to come.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): After previous uncertainty, the cabinet secretary confirmed in an answer to me in November 2023 that the Scottish Government was committed to providing the shortfall funding of £6.6 million to Creative Scotland for 2024-25. In my response, I described that as a U-turn on a U-turn on a U-turn, and it appears that we have another U-turn.

Cabinet secretary, I make a plea to you to be fair, transparent and open with Scotland's culture and creative sector. At the moment, it is a hokey cokey.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members again that they should always speak through the chair.

Angus Robertson: I hope that there is universal understanding across the chamber that Creative Scotland is an arm's-length organisation that makes decisions. It is not for Government ministers to dispense largesse to parts of the cultural sector that they particularly support.

I agree that it is important that the funding is in place to make sure that culture can be sustained and safeguarded and can thrive. I remain committed to that and continue to argue for that in the Government. My colleagues are very supportive of that, and I hope to update colleagues on that in the near future.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): In the short term, it is essential that the cabinet secretary finds a solution to the closure of the open fund, which is causing great concern to all our constituents. For the longer term, I want to come with positive solutions. We have already persuaded Parliament to pass legislation to give councils the power to introduce a visitor levy. We are now making the case for a stadium levy on large profitable events—again, that is a way of raising revenue to fund culture and the arts. Does the cabinet secretary agree that empowering local government to raise revenue from those who make significant profits is the most effective way that we can find to solve the problem and generate the funds that are needed?

Angus Robertson: I am sure that the Presiding Officer would wish me to focus my reply in relation to the open fund, which I know that the member is very committed to. However, he is right to point out that there are other potential income sources. The visitor levy will play an important part in that. If he has specific suggestions, I am open to hearing from him and from his colleagues.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Last month, I met the executive director of the Edinburgh International Festival. Although the festival is, in large part, the jewel in the crown of Scotland's cultural offering, its survival is not inevitable and its executive director, Francesca Hegyi, reminded me that a lot of that work is sustained by the smaller arts groups that are funded through the open fund.

Does the cabinet secretary recognise that the 3 million visitors who come to Edinburgh for our festivals do not just stay in Edinburgh but visit all parts of Scotland? They are vital for our economy,

so investing in the arts is actually an investment in our economy.

Angus Robertson: The point about festivals is well made. It is not just about the tremendous festivals that we have in Edinburgh. We have tremendous festivals such as Celtic Connections and others over the length and breadth of Scotland. That is why, at the time of the festivals, the Government has announced a strategic partnership with our festivals across the country, to make sure that they can thrive in the future. I remain absolutely focused on making sure that the appropriate funding is in place and that Creative Scotland has the funds that it requires to do the job that it needs to do. The support and assistance from members across the chamber and the great many people in the arts and culture community who have been in touch in recent weeks to underscore the importance of the open fund are extremely persuasive, and I am doing everything that I can in the Government to make sure that the appropriate funding is in place.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I note with great interest the cabinet secretary's comments, and I await with optimism updates in the coming days. However, does the cabinet secretary agree that, to a certain extent, this situation has arisen because of a wider financial picture, in that the Scottish Government awaits with great interest the United Kingdom Government's final budget at the end of October and will not have its own funding tied down until February 2025? To what extent has that played a part?

Angus Robertson: Michelle Thomson's points about the challenges are well made—in particular, about the challenges for colleagues who have to deal, in the first instance, with budgetary considerations across the Scottish Government. As the cabinet secretary who has responsibility for culture, I know that the Government has given a commitment not just to protect but to increase culture funding. I remain committed to that, as does the Government, and I look forward to updating colleagues on that in the near future.

Poverty-related Educational Attainment Gap

2. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of its work to tackle the poverty-related educational attainment gap, in light of the gap reportedly widening across all school qualifications in the recent exam results. (S6T-02081)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The most recent set of results from Scotland's schools shows that, for national 5 and higher, the attainment gap has returned to levels that are broadly comparable with

those in 2019—which, due to changes made during the pandemic to qualifications requirements, is the last comparable year on record. The results also show record levels of young people achieving technical and vocational qualifications, with an almost 25 per cent increase on the year prior. There has also been an increase in students from the most disadvantaged communities gaining a place in higher education—a 12 per cent increase this year alone.

Notwithstanding that, it is clear that the pandemic is continuing to have a lasting impact on our children and young people, here and elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Responding to this year's results, I convened a meeting with directors of education to focus on improvement and local variation, along with the chief examiner and the interim chief inspector of education. Post-pandemic, it is imperative that the Government works to drive improvement in our schools. To that end, in the coming weeks, I will set out further detail pertaining to the Government's response in relation to qualification reform and school improvement.

Willie Rennie: The education secretary chooses her milestones carefully. She knows that the Government will be measured on the promise that it made in 2016 to close the poverty-related attainment gap. Eight years into that promise, how confident is she that it will be delivered by 2026?

Jenny Gilruth: It is worth pointing out the progress that has been made thus far in relation to closing the gap. I do not take away from the challenge, some of which is not of this Government's making. However, we have seen a narrowing of the gap—for example, in the December statistics for primary 7 literacy and numeracy. We have also seen progress in our young people going on to positive destinations—since 2009, the attainment gap has narrowed by 60 per cent in that regard. As I intimated in my initial response, we have also seen really strong progress this year in the widening of access, with a 12 per cent increase in university acceptance for those from our poorest communities. I do not take away from the on-going challenge, but I hope that Mr Rennie can recognise that progress.

The financial context in which the Government is operating is also relevant. If an austerity agenda continues to be pursued by the Westminster Government—irrespective of party—that will hamper the progress that I as education secretary am able to make, because I will have less money at my disposal to make the necessary progress in closing the gap.

Willie Rennie: It seems that the Scottish National Party Government is focused more on finding excuses than on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The cabinet secretary is

also incredibly selective with her statistics. I know that we all like to choose our own statistics, but she will be measured on the promise on the poverty-related attainment gap, as set out by the former First Minister in 2016. What does she say to the thousands of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to whom a promise was made that has so far failed to be delivered?

Jenny Gilruth: The member talks about the selective use of statistics. When I was teaching modern studies, we used to talk about people being selective in their use of facts.

In my initial response to Mr Rennie, I talked about national 5 and higher. Mr Rennie might want to look at the results this year for advanced higher, where we have seen a slight widening of the gap. Why is that the case in relation to that qualification? It is because we have seen an increase in the number of students sitting that qualification. I think that that is a good thing, because in the past—certainly when I was at school in Mr Rennie's constituency, which is some time ago now—there was gatekeeping in relation to that qualification: children were essentially told that they were not bright enough to sit that qualification. I do not think that that was right and I think that we now have a far broader approach to qualification entry. Undoubtedly, that will have an impact on attainment, but we have seen progress in relation to closing the gap.

Earlier, I rehearsed some of the narrative in relation to our performance at primary 7 level and positive destinations, but the final point to make is that Scotland is not an outlier in relation to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. For both A level and GCSE this year, the gap between the highest and lowest-performing regions in England has grown and remains higher than it was before the pandemic. I am not using that as an excuse in response to Mr Rennie's point; I am saying that that is the context. What is being felt in Scotland is being felt all over the UK; the cohort of young people who are in front of teachers right now have lived through a pandemic—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: We should all be mindful of what that means in relation to their outcomes.

The Presiding Officer: I am keen for more members to have an opportunity to put questions, so concise questions and responses would be appreciated.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Eight years since the promise to close the poverty-related attainment gap was made, is the cabinet secretary in a position to provide us with a credible written strategic plan that she is working to in

order to close the gap, or is she making it up as she goes along?

Jenny Gilruth: I think that Mr Kerr is well aware that the Government's plan is the Scottish attainment challenge, which has over £1 billion of funding coming during this parliamentary session to close the poverty-related attainment gap. [*Interruption.*] Mr Kerr does not think that that is a good idea. I think that it is a pretty substantive plan and he should engage with the detail of it if he is interested. However, if he listened to my initial response—as I hope he did—he will know that I also stated very clearly that I would give a fulsome written update on qualification reform in the coming weeks, which will set out a clear trajectory in relation to improvement.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Central to the poverty-related attainment gap is the issue of poverty itself, with thousands of children being pushed into poverty by the austerity agenda, which the Liberal Democrats were central to ushering in. Does the cabinet secretary agree that one of the most important things that we can do in relation to improving educational attainment is to eradicate child poverty?

Jenny Gilruth: The member makes a hugely important point. What drives the attainment gap is poverty, caused by more than a decade of austerity and brutal cuts that have been supported by both Labour and the Tories. Children and families are bearing the brunt of Tory cuts to social security and brutal policies such as the two-child limit, which we now know is supported by Keir Starmer and the Labour Party.

We also know that modelling that has been published estimates that Scottish Government policies will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty in 2024-25, with relative poverty levels being 10 percentage points lower than they would otherwise have been. Meanwhile, the Tories and Labour are committed to doubling down on austerity, which impacts on attainment and poverty.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): At the weekend, the cabinet secretary said that she could not raise attainment with fewer teachers, yet teacher numbers will be cut this year. Later this afternoon, it is likely that we will hear of further pressures to local government and school budgets. Far from reforming anything in education, the cabinet secretary is putting forward an education bill that essentially achieves very little. Fewer teachers, fewer resources and what has been dubbed as pretty meaningless reform—is that really the plan to raise attainment and close the poverty-related attainment gap?

Jenny Gilruth: I am sure that Pam Duncan-Glancy will recognise that there was an increase in

the number of secondary teachers last year. I am sure that she would want to record that fact. Of course, in Scotland, we have the lowest pupil-teacher ratio—far lower than in Labour-run Wales, for example. I am sure that the member would also like to recognise that. I am sure that Ms Duncan-Glancy would also like to recognise that we spend more per pupil in Scotland than in any other part of the UK, and I am sure that she would love to recognise that Scottish teachers are the best paid in the UK because of investment from this Government.

The member talks about reform, and I look forward to engaging with her in that process to improve the outcomes for Scotland's children and young people, but I very much hope that she can recognise this Government's inputs into supporting our education system.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): What assessment has the cabinet secretary made of attainment with regard to the impact on the teaching and learning environment of the increasing levels of violence and threat that are being reported in classrooms, and what will she do about that?

Jenny Gilruth: I know that the member takes a keen interest in the matter, and I hope that he will be attending to hear my statement on the behaviour action plan that I will give to the Parliament later. He will be aware that we published the action plan two weeks ago. It responds to the assessment that the Government undertook on the impact of behaviour on attainment, which was published in the behaviour in Scottish schools research towards the end of last year. I encourage the member to engage with that data if he has not already done so, and I look forward to engaging with him further following the statement later today.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical questions.

Community Cohesion

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on community cohesion.

14:25

The First Minister (John Swinney): During the summer recess, everyone was affected by the dreadful, tragic deaths of three girls in Southport. On 29 July, Bebe King, aged six, Elsie Dot Stancombe, aged seven, and Alice da Silva Aguiar, aged nine, who were all attending a summer dance class, were attacked and killed. My heart goes out to the families of the girls who lost their lives. No parent should have to face the loss of a child, let alone in such appalling circumstances. Ten others were seriously injured in this horrific and shocking attack.

My thoughts have been with the community of Southport which, while facing that unthinkable tragedy, then faced further distress. Starting in Southport, sparked by false information and rumour on social media as to the identity and background of the perpetrator of the attack, communities in England and Northern Ireland were then made to endure disorder and rioting, on top of their grief and concern for those affected. That led to considerable distress to residents, significant damage to businesses and a number of casualties, including police officers who were injured in the line of duty.

Let me be clear: that activity was not and should not be classed as protest. It was violence and thuggery, pure and simple, perpetrated by those with a far-right ideology, by those who were taken in by that rhetoric and by criminals. Far from having legitimate concerns, those who were indulging in those mindless acts were doing so from a place of racism, Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment. That cannot and should not be tolerated anywhere. It is absolutely unacceptable for anyone to live in fear of leaving their home, to feel nervous about sending their children to school or to be afraid to use certain services or transport. Justice has been done in the English courts, with sentences reflecting the serious criminality that was perpetrated.

To date, Scotland has not had to deal with incidents of a similar nature, despite the attempts to organise them via social media, but we must continue to be vigilant against ideologies that can lead to such violence. We cannot take the view that we may be immune from related disorder occurring on our doorsteps.

Were we to see anything similar in Scotland, our courts have robust sentencing powers available to them, to use as they see fit. The Cabinet

Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and I have been in regular contact with Police Scotland, which remains alert to the prospect of disorder and is working with colleagues in other parts of the United Kingdom to ensure that they can respond accordingly and immediately if such response is required. I am grateful to the chief constable, and I thank her and all in Police Scotland for their continued work and commitment in keeping our communities safe.

We should rightly be proud of our history as a nation that values free speech and welcomes those who want to live and work here. We can be proud that, as a society, we celebrate, value and protect diversity in our communities. However, we must challenge those who would deny those values. We must guard against the prejudice, discrimination and misinformation that aim to incite hatred and violence. We must remember that those who seek to divide us are in a very small minority—and let me be clear that it is a small minority.

While we watched the violence unfold in communities and heard about how social media was being used to whip up the disorder and violence that several towns witnessed over some nights in August, we also saw many more people and communities come together to express how that was not reflective of their towns. We saw many more people work together to clean up the mess and damage in their neighbourhoods. We can also all take heart that, on 10 August, thousands of people took to the streets across the UK to protest against the racist thuggery and anti-immigrant rhetoric that they had witnessed—far more people than had taken part in the disorder itself.

Our relationships with our diverse communities are crucial to community cohesion, and I know that many people felt scared or uneasy in those early days of August. Violence, prejudice, racism, Islamophobia and antisemitism have no place in our society, and nobody should ever be subjected to them. I want to reassure everyone who was impacted that this Government will always work to ensure that every person living in Scotland is protected and that we are united in our opposition to anyone who would seek to use disorder as a means of division.

In the first week of August, I attended the Edinburgh central mosque, and, at my invitation, faith leaders came together as well. That provided an opportunity for us all to make clear that conflict and hatred have no place here. Faith leaders from across Scotland continue to promote mutual respect and share a common desire for everybody to be safe in our society. As First Minister, I assured them that that desire is shared by all of Scotland's political leaders.

I also convened a meeting and briefing between political leaders and Police Scotland. I thank colleagues in this chamber for taking the time to attend that event. It enabled senior officers to brief us on the work that they are undertaking to keep people safe as they engage with communities to provide reassurance and to ensure that none feels marginalised, isolated or vulnerable. In recent weeks, the service has had considerable engagement with Muslim and other minority communities. Greater officer visibility around mosques and hotels housing asylum seekers has also been well received.

Let me be absolutely clear to anyone in Scotland who is considering mimicking the kind of vile behaviour that we have witnessed in parts of England and Northern Ireland this summer that their actions will not be tolerated, they will be dealt with robustly and criminal actions online will be taken just as seriously.

I want to reassure people in Scotland that we have plans and preparations in place to ensure that everybody is kept safe in this period and that we continue to work co-operatively with a wide range of organisations throughout the country to tackle racism and hatred and to promote inclusion.

Let me turn now to the role of social media and how its use—or should I say misuse—has proven how easy it is for false information to spread. Following the tragic events in Southport, social media was a key factor in the first incident of disorder that then took place. In Scotland, we had an occasion when untrue speculation was spread about the perpetrator of an incident in Stirling. I wish to commend Police Scotland for its swift action in countering that misinformation and, I believe, in helping to reduce the risk of any possible conflict in Scotland.

Although we all have an individual duty to question whether everything that we read online is actually true, it is very clear to me that the major organisations behind the platforms also have a duty—both moral and legal—to take action to ensure that individuals in our society are not subjected to hate and threatening behaviour and that communities are protected from violence.

I wrote to the main social media companies, asking them to promptly outline the decisive steps that they plan to take on the matter, and we have engaged constructively with the United Kingdom Government on this question. Social media companies have assured me that safety teams have been working to detect any associated violation of their terms of service and that they have taken action, including account suspension and content removal. However, recent events suggest that there is much more work to do to ensure that hateful content and misinformation do not proliferate.

I want to conclude by emphasising to anyone who feels fearful of being targeted for who they are or what they believe that we stand in solidarity with them. Scotland is a diverse, multicultural society where everyone is welcome, and I want us to be united in our opposition to anyone who would seek to use disorder and violence to divide people.

However, we are not immune to the actions of a violent, misguided minority, and therefore we must remain vigilant. People in Scotland who are feeling afraid, marginalised or isolated as the result of this summer's events should rightly look to their parliamentarians to stand with them—and we do.

As First Minister of Scotland, I will always be emphatic in saying that violence and conflict have no place in our communities. The Scottish Government is committed to building cohesive communities within which divisive narratives will not resonate. It is in our power to address hatred and prejudice by tackling its root causes, and the most powerful and effective way in which to do that is by bringing communities together to learn from one another. It is for all of us in the chamber, and across society, to commit to standing for tolerance and equality and against hate and violence. The importance of one Scotland where people live in safety and peace, and have the opportunity to flourish, cannot be understated.

I close by reflecting on the words of Sabir Zazai, the chief executive of the Scottish Refugee Council, who was among the community leaders whom I met in August. Sabir emphasised the importance of nourishing community togetherness, of shared values and of the need to

“build bridges and bonds between communities.”

Let us all affirm our commitment to doing just that. Bridges must be built, but they must also be maintained, and that is the approach that we should all take.

[*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer: The First Minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to put a question were to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I begin by saying how good it is to see Richard Lochhead back in Parliament today, after his serious illness. [*Applause.*] People across Moray and in the chamber are pleased to see him looking so well, and our thoughts are with Richard—and with Fiona, Angus and Fraser—as he continues his recovery.

Turning to the statement that we have just heard, I echo the First Minister's comments about the tragedy in Southport. Every parent worries about their child getting hurt, and no one can imagine the pain that the families of three precious girls, who were brutally murdered in horrific circumstances at a summer dance class, are going through right now. It is unimaginable, and our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of the young victims and with the others who were injured during that senseless attack.

At this point, I say unequivocally that everyone, regardless of faith, race and background, in Scotland and across the UK, deserves to feel safe. Violence has no place in our society. The rioting and attacks that we saw in UK cities over the summer were both tragic and deeply alarming. Although it is welcome that such events have not occurred in Scotland, we cannot be complacent and deceive ourselves that they could never happen here. We have to be prepared.

However, in the past three years, police officer numbers in Scotland have fallen by 1,000. David Threadgold, the chair of the Scottish Police Federation, has said that

"the service simply cannot recruit the number of officers it needs to replace those who are leaving."

We all know the vital role that police officers play in managing disorder and keeping our communities safe. What action is the Government taking, therefore, to halt the reduction in the number of police officers across Scotland? At this point, I remind members that my wife is a serving police officer.

In June, before the riots occurred, the Government released almost 500 inmates from prisons early because of a lack of capacity in prisons. Can the First Minister provide an update on prison capacity and say whether his Government is considering more early releases?

Finally, the Home Secretary announced yesterday that the UK Government will review its counter-extremism strategy. What discussions has the First Minister had with the UK Government about that work?

The First Minister: I thank Mr Ross for his contribution, and I associate myself very much with his remarks in relation to my colleague Richard Lochhead, whom I am delighted to see back in Parliament after a very serious illness. I commend the staff at Aberdeen royal infirmary, whom I had the great privilege to meet, just days after Richard's operation, in order to thank them for the extraordinary work that they had undertaken. It puts me in awe of what clinicians have to face and to handle. I am profoundly grateful to them, and I am delighted that Richard is back in his place today.

Mr Ross makes a number of comments about the importance of community cohesion and safety, and the safety of children. I associate myself entirely with those comments; he is entirely correct about those things.

Police numbers are growing as a consequence of the very significant recruitment efforts by Police Scotland that are now under way, and we expect the numbers to rise in the period ahead. Police capacity has been adequate and appropriate to deal with the challenges that we face. Indeed, the chief constable has been able to take part in mutual aid to Northern Ireland, which she would only do if she was confident about police resourcing in Scotland, and she has given me the assurance that she is.

In relation to the early release of prisoners, Parliament has authorised the steps that we have taken so far. The prison population continues to rise, and to rise significantly. The Cabinet was updated on that issue by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs this morning. We are having to look at the issues around capacity in our prison system and at whether we have to take any other steps to ensure that the prison population remains safe and sustainable for prisoners and staff. The justice secretary will update Parliament on those questions.

In relation to the work of the United Kingdom Government on terrorism measures, obviously we remain in regular discussion with the UK Government on those questions, and we expect to take forward those discussions in the period ahead, as the UK Government forms its steps.

Mr Ross will be aware that we have taken a slightly different approach to the handling of the communication of these issues in Scotland in the past, which has been built on building community confidence in anti-terror measures. I have a great deal of confidence in that, and I think that, most importantly, the communities of Scotland have confidence in those measures, as we saw demonstrated during the period of instability that we wrestled with over the summer.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I echo the comments about Richard Lochhead; it is great to see him back, and I warmly welcome the content of the First Minister's statement.

Our hearts go out to all the families in Southport and in particular to those who were directly impacted by those horrendous acts of violence. Tragically, when those families, and that community, were hurting and needed love, time and support, a hateful band of far-right thugs attempted to hijack those tragic murders of three young girls with the aim of further dividing our communities and spreading fear across the country.

I praise the UK Government's response, which was strong, swift and appropriate. I also thank the Scottish Government and the police here in Scotland for the tone of their response in order to minimise the risk of disorder.

I welcome the opportunity for us in the Parliament today to come together and speak with one voice. We will not allow the acts of a mindless few to speak for the vast majority of people in this country who believe in the principles of peace, tolerance and love.

Sadly, there are people who seek to divide our communities. Much of that is amplified by reckless politicians who are only interested in their own divisive agendas, and we have to call them out for what they are. However, greater responsibility must be borne by the social media companies that allow their platforms to be used as vehicles to amplify, to recruit, to organise and to fundraise.

There is also, of course, people's individual responsibility to make sure that they are not deliberately or inadvertently sharing misinformation. We all have a responsibility to make sure that we are doing everything that we can to pull our country together. Ultimately, there will always be those who want to turn community against community because they thrive on the politics of us versus them.

Here in Scotland and across the UK, we cannot be complacent and must recognise our responsibility to build a society that is about all of us. Does the First Minister agree that we must never and will never allow the words or the actions of a mindless few far-right thugs to define who we are as a people or who we are as a nation?

The First Minister: I welcome Mr Sarwar's remarks, particularly the point that he makes in relation to interaction with social media. There is a responsibility on us all with regard to what we say and what we do on social media, as well as with regard to whether we believe what we see on social media, but there is also a huge obligation on those companies in that regard. The United Kingdom Government has been making those obligations pretty clear to social media companies. Ofcom has also been doing that—its statements at the height of the difficulties were very clear about the obligation of those companies to operate within the code of responsibility. As I indicated in my statement, there is much more to be done to ensure that that is the case.

We cannot pause for a moment to in any way, shape or form relax our rejection of far-right ideology. We have to stand together and be persistent and assertive about setting out that that represents the wrong agenda for our country, that we believe in the importance of diverse, multicultural communities and that we believe in

the importance of bringing people together. Therefore, I was delighted to welcome political leaders to Bute house to enable us to have a briefing and to make the point—as colleagues have done—that we are working to create a cohesive society. We want people to come together, and we reject the ideology of the far right in politics.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): On behalf of the Scottish Greens, I, too, offer a warm welcome back to Richard Lochhead. We are very pleased to see him recovering well.

I thank the First Minister for his statement, which properly reflected the depth of compassion for those affected by the violence in Southport and the horrific murders, and the depth of anger at those who have opportunistically capitalised on that horrific event to pursue their toxic ideology.

However, although I welcome a lot of what was in the First Minister's statement, I suggest that two things were missing from it. First, it is not only social media that is responsible for the promotion and proliferation of hatred and prejudice against immigrants, asylum seekers and Muslims. Those attitudes have also been deliberately cultivated by swathes of the UK mainstream media and by successive UK Governments. Politicians from a number of different parties are culpable for that.

Secondly, it is when social and community cohesion is already weakened that the far right finds its opportunity.

Does the First Minister agree that, if more austerity is coming our way, we have a responsibility to ensure that the burden falls on the wealthiest, not on our communities, on the investment that they need or on the public services that they need, if we want to have a chance of maintaining the cohesion of the communities that he describes?

The First Minister: I acknowledge the importance of Mr Harvie's points, and I thank him for his comments. Many comments have been made in the mainstream media and by politicians that I would never want to be associated with, because they represent an ideology that I find repugnant. However, I accept that that is a reality, which is why it is important that we exercise political leadership in Scotland, that we reject that ideology and that we reject it across the Parliament. It is to the credit of all parties in the Parliament that we are prepared to stand together to reject that. I will do everything that I can as First Minister to foster a climate that enables that to be the case, because I want this Parliament to speak as one in saying that the far-right ideology of racism or hate has absolutely no place in our society whatsoever.

On Mr Harvie's point about social and economic cohesion in our communities, as he will know, the Government invests heavily to make sure that we work to tackle poverty in our society. I would like to feel that I was operating in a situation in which I had a more sympathetic, prevailing climate to try to tackle poverty as a consequence of the change of UK Government. I am somewhat bewildered by the fact that we are not making more headway on that question, but it is early days.

It is important that we recognise the damage of austerity—I associate myself with Mr Harvie in that regard. Austerity is damaging our communities and the fabric of life. That is why it has to come to an end, and I want to ensure that that is the case in Scotland.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I, too, welcome Richard Lochhead back. It is great to see him so well.

I thank the First Minister for the tone of his statement, for being inclusive in his approach to the riots, during which he invited all political leaders to Bute house, and for the briefings that we got there.

When those murders happened, the four nations of these islands fell silent, but that silence was broken by the brutal thuggery that we saw on the streets of England. I was astonished—I am sure that members shared my astonishment—that some of the youngest perpetrators of the lawlessness were as young as 11 years old. Nobody is born racist but, as the First Minister said, many people in our society are becoming more susceptible to rhetoric and online misinformation. When it comes to young people of that age, it strikes me that, as a state, we have a role to play in countering that. What steps is the First Minister's Government taking to work with education authorities to ensure that we counter, right at the heart of our school system, that level of misinformation and rhetoric?

The First Minister: I welcome Mr Cole-Hamilton's comments. He will be familiar with the ethos of curriculum for excellence, which is the curriculum in our schools. One of its objectives—one of the four capacities—is to create responsible citizens. That aspiration runs right through our approach to our three-to-18 curriculum, so, from young people's earliest interaction with our education system, the importance of becoming a responsible citizen is imbued in our educational model.

On the specific incidents over the summer, the chief inspector of education wrote to all local authorities to convey guidance and educational materials that the school system could use when pupils returned in August. That was to ensure that materials were available to schools to support

them in—I agree with Mr Cole-Hamilton on this point—the important work that has to be done to ensure that young people are exposed to the most considered material that will support them to become responsible citizens and to turn their backs on any involvement in violence and prejudice such as that which we saw on the streets of England and Northern Ireland.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I welcome the First Minister's statement. As in many other places, misinformation on the nature of a recent serious incident in Stirling spread rapidly online. Will the First Minister further outline what action needs to be taken to ensure that websites such as X, Meta and TikTok combat the spread of misinformation and address racist and hateful material on their platforms? Have social media platforms provided reassurance?

The First Minister: I have been in touch with social media companies, and I have had responses from some of them about the steps that they take. They provided some degree of assurance about material that is taken down, but I do not think that that goes nearly far enough. It is quite easy to view material online that I consider to be completely and utterly repugnant and unacceptable.

Ofcom has strict and clear guidelines in place, but my sense is that those are not being respected by social media companies. We will engage in dialogue with the UK Government to ensure that whatever strengthening is required is undertaken. Social media companies have a responsibility to exercise their duties, and they could exercise them this minute to protect communities from being exposed to unacceptable material.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I echo the sentiments of colleagues across the chamber. We all have a duty to stand up to bigotry and racism in all its forms, and it is important to recognise that the response to the riots showed the overwhelming tolerance and decency of people across the UK.

We have already heard that police officer numbers in Scotland are at their lowest level in 17 years. Today, it has been reported that an additional 1,000 officers will be eligible to retire in the coming year. Will the First Minister tell us what he considers to be the minimum number of officers required to keep our communities safe?

The First Minister: Obviously, the number of police officers is an operational matter for the chief constable, but there are discussions between the Government, the chief constable and the Scottish Police Authority about such matters. As I said to Mr Ross in my earlier answer, there has been a fall in police numbers, which has been driven, in part, by the issue that Mr Findlay has raised—a

larger number of retrials than was expected—but recruitment is under way to replace those individuals, and we expect police numbers to rise.

I reiterate the point that we have had police numbers at the level that we have had in Scotland, which I accept are lower than they have been, but we have also been able to offer mutual aid to other forces when that has been requested, and communities in Scotland have remained safe.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): It is vital that we do all that we can to reach out to our faith and migrant communities and offer solidarity, support and reassurance that they enrich the social and cultural fabric of our nation. With that in mind, will the First Minister provide further detail on the work that is being supported to promote community cohesion across the country?

The First Minister: A great deal of work is under way in that respect through dialogue with stakeholder organisations who are well connected within communities. The justice secretary and I visited the Edinburgh central mosque during the incident and it was reassuring to hear the comments that were being made by members of the Muslim community about their relationship with the police and the dialogue that takes place.

I had my own experience of that when I visited a synagogue in East Renfrewshire and I met the Jewish community and heard similarly their appreciation of the assurance of their safety that was undertaken, although they highlighted to me the fact that, at times, they feel very unsafe and fearful.

We have to actively support activity in that respect and I assure Rona Mackay that that work is under way in Scotland today.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Does the First Minister agree that the rise of the far right is a problem across the UK, with many in society feeling alienated and disenfranchised? What more can be done to work with community organisations, trade unions and others to support groups that are affected and to combat that ideology?

The First Minister: There are two aspects to that. I very much agree with the aspirations that Katy Clark sets out in her question, and I have two points to make in response.

We have to give relentless political leadership on the value and inclusivity of our communities and not allow anything at all to get in the way of our unity on that point. It is precious to me and that is why I valued the engagement with political leaders during the summer.

The second point is about social and economic policy choices, and, frankly, austerity. Enormous

damage has been done to our society in the past 14-year period of austerity and I want it to come to an end. We need to reinvest in our communities and we need to tackle the challenge of poverty. I will say more about that in the programme for government tomorrow, because I believe that poverty is the feeding ground of some of that misplaced ideology.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): In continuously working to protect, promote and enhance community cohesion and inclusion, would the First Minister wish to further emphasise our shared admiration for the important contribution that local organisations and individuals across Scotland make to proactively, positively, tenaciously and regularly bring people together as fellow citizens and human beings, through various initiatives, communications and events, and work to support new Scots in our communities? I am talking about remarkable organisations here in the capital, such as the Multi-Cultural Family Base, the Edinburgh Interfaith Association, Building Bridges and The Welcoming.

The First Minister: I very much agree with Ben Macpherson. A whole host of community organisations do remarkable work in bringing people together. They exist across all communities. During the summer, I had a conversation with Mr Carlaw about organisations that come together in his constituency to support communities and provide welcome assistance and assurance for individuals. I encourage them to continue to do that and I express my appreciation for all that they do.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): On the streets of Southport, there were thugs, racists and all manner of extremists, but there were also people from what we might call “deprived areas” generally raging against the political establishment. Does the 60 per cent turnout at the recent election not tell us that politics is failing, when some choose bricks, not the ballot box, and that the cohesion that Patrick Harvie referred to will be severely tested under increasing austerity?

The First Minister: I have made clear my view that austerity is damaging our communities and I want to see that resolved. I cannot summon up any appreciation or understanding of why somebody wants to engage in violence—I just cannot understand it at all—so I think that it has no justification. Political participation is an essential way to resolve any differences and debates in our society, and we should all engage in that.

It is important to separate out those different things. We should make our political choices, exercise our political leadership and encourage people to participate in the political process, and

we should be absolutely and completely resolute in rejecting any sense that there is any excuse or legitimacy for violence in our society. I know that Christine Grahame will not be of the view that there is such legitimacy. We have to set that out very clearly to ensure that the public are protected and that we invest in and support our communities.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Scotland was not exempt from the turmoil that occurred last month. Although no riots broke out in Scotland, ethnic minority constituents in my region contacted me to say that they felt unsafe—so unsafe that they decided to stay at home or close their businesses until tensions calmed. What action is the First Minister taking to build community cohesion, not just between civil servants and community leaders but between members of the community? Will there be an increase in community outreach initiatives and community hubs?

The First Minister: It is important that we encourage and enable the cohesion of communities. Some of that comes about by political leadership, some comes about by community work and some by the active investment in social and economic priorities in the Government's programme and the programme of local authorities. Of course, our local authorities are heavily involved in all that work on community cohesion at local level.

It is important that we remain focused on that. It is unacceptable that anybody should feel unsafe in our society. It is unacceptable that somebody has to close their business because they are fearful of being attacked—that is completely repugnant to me. Police Scotland is prepared to be visible and active to protect people, and it has done so. A combination of those measures—investment in our communities, effective policing and strong, clear political leadership—will help us through these difficulties.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Stand Up to Racism Scotland has planned a family-friendly and safely stewarded mass event with support from trade unions and civil society organisations this coming Saturday. What advice would the First Minister provide to people who wish to attend the rally to express solidarity with communities that have been affected by the recent disorder, so that they can stay safe?

The First Minister: I encourage people who intend to attend any such event to follow the guidance that is available, to follow any advice from the police and, fundamentally, to stay safe and to engage in democratic peaceful protest. There is a place for democratic peaceful protest in our society—Parliament will be familiar with the fact that I have been on a few such protests over

my time. There is a place for democratic engagement, but it has to be done in a peaceful fashion, and I am sure that that will be followed this weekend.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on community cohesion. I will allow a moment or two for the front-bench members to organise before we move on to the next item of business.

Pre-budget Fiscal Update

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Shona Robison on the Scottish Government pre-budget fiscal update. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, therefore there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:04

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): This Government has consistently warned of the significance of the financial challenge ahead. Prolonged Westminster austerity, the economic damage of Brexit, a global pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the cost of living crisis have all placed enormous and growing pressure on the public finances.

In the past three years alone, cumulative consumer prices index inflation has seen prices increase by 18.9 per cent, diminishing how far money will go for households and Governments alike.

In the face of those challenges, the Scottish Government has stepped in to support people and services where that has been needed most—social security, health and public services.

As was set out in our 2024-25 budget, we have delivered a real-terms uplift for the national health service. We have continued to tackle inequality by committing £6.1 billion in social security benefits and payments, including increasing the Scottish child payment to £26.70 a week, thereby helping the families of the more than 325,000 under-16s who currently receive it.

However, we have done so without equivalent United Kingdom Government action and despite its repeated failure to properly review the adequacy of funding settlements. That issue has been acutely felt across the four nations. Just last year, the Welsh Government had to introduce emergency savings measures in order to balance its budget and, in 2022-23, the Northern Ireland Executive needed to draw down from the UK reserve.

The new Labour UK Government has since confirmed the failures of the past Administration, and the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, outlined that the previous UK Government

“never fully reflected the impact of inflation in departmental budgets”.

The Treasury’s audit has estimated that this year’s departmental spending budgets are at least £15 billion lower in real terms, when compared with 2021 spending review plans.

The chancellor has set out the £22 billion funding gap that was inherited from the previous Administration. The Prime Minister confirmed that the forthcoming UK budget will be “painful”, as his Government seeks to address the fiscal position. Although we welcome the new UK Government’s acceptance of the diagnosis that we have given for years on the UK’s public finances, its solution looks, sadly, like an extension of the folly of austerity.

In last year’s medium-term financial strategy, I made it clear that there was a difficult financial outlook. I set out the projected—and growing—gap between forecast funding and planned spending in Scotland. At the time, that was forecast to be £1 billion in 2024-25, rising to £1.9 billion by 2027-28. I made it clear that that was not sustainable, and I called on the UK Government to act.

At the same time, with the powers that we have at our own hand, I announced a range of measures in the 2024-25 budget to support the delivery of a balanced position while protecting public services.

However, given the circumstances, the uncertainty about additional funding and further in-year pressures, I must take further and more urgent action now to ensure that we can balance the Scottish budget in 2024-25.

Pay continues to be a significant driver of in-year pressures, with expected additional costs of up to £0.8 billion in this financial year alone.

Although I welcome the UK Government’s acceptance of the pay review body recommendations, it remains to be seen whether the UK Government will fully fund them. Put simply, if it does not fully fund the pay deals, that will leave a substantial gap between the expectations of the workforce and the available funding.

In addition, we must recognise that, relative to the rest of the UK, we have a larger public sector in Scotland. Our public sector workforce will need to evolve to ensure the delivery of high-quality public services within continued Westminster austerity and, in the budget, I will set out more detail on our approach.

Alongside pay, of course, other pressures arise in-year, which we must ensure are funded. Costs emerge due to natural demand-led changes, such as changes to legal aid and police and fire pensions, as well as the costs of accommodation for Ukrainian displaced people.

More widely, the budget must still be managed for wider operational pressures. Most notably, NHS boards are having to address the significant health and social care backlog that arose during

the Covid pandemic and a recent further surge in Covid and respiratory cases.

While the Scottish Government has to operate within a largely fixed budget, which is determined by Westminster, this Government will do everything that we can to protect people and the public.

Of course, were Scotland an independent country, we would not be paying the price for bad decisions that are taken at Westminster, whether those be years of austerity cuts, Brexit, or reckless mini-budgets, all of which have taken money out of the economy and funding from public services. However, within the current devolution settlement, the fact remains that our main lever to remove those pressures in-year is to reduce spending to achieve balance.

That is why I am today setting out a range of measures totalling almost £1 billion to support the 2024-25 budget, of which up to £500 million will be direct savings. Up to £60 million of those savings will be realised through the implementation of emergency spend controls, particularly targeting recruitment, overtime, travel and marketing. As was previously announced, we will not progress the removal of peak rail fares or the pilot of an extension of concessionary fares to asylum seekers. We have also agreed with local government that it can draw on specific existing programmes to fund its pay deal. Collectively, those decisions amount to a further £65 million of savings.

We will make a further £188 million of additional specific savings across all portfolios. That includes a reduction in resource spending on sustainable and active travel and increased interest income on Scottish Water loan balances. Full details are being shared with the Finance and Public Administration Committee and are being published alongside this statement.

Those savings should also be considered in the context of the recent and regrettable Scottish Government decision to mirror the UK Government decision not to retain universality in the winter fuel payment, which would have cost up to £160 million.

At present, I am also reluctantly planning on the basis of utilising up to £460 million of additional ScotWind revenue funding. In the past, that has allowed me to protect budgets from cuts that would otherwise have been made, and has enabled us to continue supporting net zero expenditure. As the financial year progresses, and through our emergency spend controls and continued robust forecasting, I am seeking to protect that ScotWind revenue as far as possible, just as I was able to do in 2023-24.

As we look ahead, it is clear that further significant action will be needed to reset the public finances on a sustainable path. The chancellor has made it clear that UK Government funding will continue to be tightly constrained. The Prime Minister has also made clear the difficult decisions to come. Ahead of its autumn budget, we call again on the UK Government to ensure that it prioritises investment in public services and infrastructure. We know from bitter experience that yet more Westminster austerity is not the answer and that public services must be protected.

However, if the Scottish Government does not act, spending will continue to outstrip the available funding. That is not sustainable. Tough decisions will be required and annual savings alone will not address that. All members of Parliament must face up to that challenge when they make demands during the coming budget process.

On public spending, our approach to the forthcoming budget will focus on action in areas that are key to addressing spending pressures, some of which I will highlight today.

I turn first to health. We will take forward our vision for health and social care reform. This Government will always prioritise funding for our NHS and the 2025-26 budget will build on the record funding that we have allocated in the current financial year. We will take the twin approach of investment in and reform of our health services, because that approach rightly tackles the population health challenges that we face. Where necessary, that must mean realigning spend to ensure that it reaches those who need it most.

Beyond health, we will also continue identifying and implementing opportunities to deprioritise lower-impact spending and programmes across the whole of Government. I will use the forthcoming budget to highlight how we will double down on reform opportunities and maximise efficiencies, with a particular focus on the operation of public bodies and on driving further savings through efficiency. That will include opportunities regarding estates, procurement, fund management, digital shared services and revenue raising.

On workforce, we have recruitment freezes in place across the Scottish Government for all but the most essential roles and, where appropriate, I am looking to extend that across public bodies while ensuring that front-line services in the likes of our NHS, police and fire service can recruit the staff that they need.

We also face significant pressures on our capital budget. The sustained high level of inflation that has been experienced in the construction sector has permanently increased the cost of delivering infrastructure. That coincides with an expected

real-terms reduction to our UK capital funding of 8.7 per cent over five years. That equates to a cumulative loss of over £1.3 billion between 2023-24 and 2027-28. As has been indicated previously, our financial transactions allocation from the UK Government has dropped by £290 million, or 62 per cent, since 2022-23, which is adding to the challenge that we already face.

Those factors combined have reduced our spending power and we cannot afford all our capital commitments. We will need to continue to make difficult decisions to ensure that our capital programme is affordable and deliverable. In line with our investment hierarchy, we are focusing spend on essential maintenance of our infrastructure so that we can continue to deliver high-quality public services.

Although these will be difficult choices, this Government remains committed to protecting the most vulnerable people in society. Our approach to equality budgeting will be strengthened further for the 2025-26 budget by publication of the results of our gender budgeting pilot with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

On tax, I confirm that we will publish our tax strategy alongside the 2025-26 Scottish budget, where we will set out our medium-term ambitions for the Scottish tax system. Our cumulative decisions on income tax since the devolution of powers are estimated to have raised around £1.5 billion more in 2024-25, compared with the position if we had UK rates and bands. That is additional revenue that has been used to support our vital public services. Of course, anyone who would advocate removing the progressive changes to income tax in Scotland will need to set out where the £1.5 billion of cuts would fall as a consequence.

On the application of taxation, we can only go so far, given the scope of our devolved tax powers. Raising significant further revenue would require substantial reform to the tax system or further devolution of powers. Those will take time and they rely on the UK Government. It is therefore essential that we aim to grow the economy and the tax base to support a sustained flow of revenues over time.

Since 2007, Scotland's economy has grown more quickly than that of the UK as a whole after accounting for population growth, and productivity has grown twice as quickly. That has supported growth in Scottish tax revenues. Boosting economic growth is a top priority for our Government because it is key both to raising Scotland's living standards and to funding the public services that we all rely on. That is even more important given that Brexit has been estimated to have left the UK economy at least

£69 billion worse off when compared with EU membership. That is why, tomorrow, our programme for government will set out in detail the steps that we will take this year to boost fair, green economic growth.

As members will be aware, I wrote to the Finance and Public Administration Committee recently to provide an update on the timing of the Scottish budget. I also stated that I intend to publish the medium-term financial strategy after the UK Government's multiyear spending review has concluded in the spring. I am giving careful consideration to the timing of a spending review in Scotland and to establishing a regular rhythm of reviews. I confirm to Parliament that I have proposed that the next Scottish budget will take place on 4 December. I am continuing to discuss the budget date with the Finance and Public Administration Committee and the Scottish Fiscal Commission and I will finalise it in due course.

We cannot ignore the severe financial challenges that we face. We will continue to be a fiscally responsible Government and to balance the budget each year. We have done that every year for 17 years and we will do so again this year. However, that will mean that, unfortunately, we must take difficult decisions along the way. I believe that we can all agree on the importance of putting the public first in all that we do. I call on members across the chamber to work together to navigate the challenges ahead in the best interests of all the people whom we have the privilege to serve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 30 minutes for that, after which we will move on to the next item of business. It would be helpful if those members who wish to ask questions pressed their request-to-speak button.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish Fiscal Commission has made it abundantly clear that much of the pressure that is faced by the country's finances is down to the Scottish Government's own decisions. For example, it cited the above-inflation pay settlements for public sector workers, the extent of the gap between the spending on devolved social security and the associated block grant adjustment funding, and the fact that—as Professor Graeme Roy said again this morning—the Scottish economy has not been growing at the same rate as the UK economy since income tax was devolved, which means that the Scottish Government is missing out on £624 million, which just happens to be very close to the total sum of the swingeing expenditure cuts that the finance secretary is announcing today.

I therefore ask the cabinet secretary three things. First, given the recent independent analysis, will she finally put it on the record that the large black hole in Scotland's public finances is a result of the actions of the Scottish Government, not those of Westminster?

Secondly, will the cabinet secretary clarify the Scottish Government's tax strategy in relation to economic growth? On the one hand, we have the Deputy First Minister repeatedly warning of the dangers of the Scottish National Party's counterproductive income tax rises, which could further hamper growth and investment; on the other, we have the First Minister saying that higher taxes are necessary to maintain the SNP's so-called social contract. Who is right?

Thirdly, in light of the very hard choices that the cabinet secretary is outlining today and the corresponding unaffordability of many aspects of the Scottish Government's spending commitments, does the Scottish Government agree that it is time to review universal payments, some of which are paid to better-off recipients?

Shona Robison: I say to Liz Smith that the Government's choices have been to invest in social security measures such as the Scottish child payment, which keeps 100,000 children out of poverty. [*Shona Robison has corrected this contribution. See end of report.*] If Liz Smith is arguing on behalf of the Conservatives that that is a wrong priority, that is for her and her party to defend in public.

Secondly, yes, we have funded fair pay deals. That has meant that we have avoided some of the costly industrial action that has blighted public services in other parts of the UK. It has been costly to the NHS in particular. I will make no apologies for the investment decisions that we have made.

Liz Smith made an important point about the Scottish Fiscal Commission, which also said that there is significant uncertainty about the funding that we can expect to receive from the UK Government. In the light of the UK Government's acceptance of UK pay review bodies' recommendations, this Government has to take action to ensure that we can create the headroom to fund such pay deals. I assume that Liz Smith is not arguing that we should not pay nurses in Scotland the same deal as they will get in England. I am sure that she does not intend to say that.

Finally, we absolutely want to grow the Scottish economy. Members will see tomorrow the programme for government's emphasis on the green and fair economy. We are also investing more than £5 billion this year in support for economic growth. Scotland is—absolutely—open

for business. We can see from the figures on productivity and growth that the Scottish economy is doing rather better than Liz Smith and her colleagues would have us believe, and we will continue to make the investments to ensure that that is the case.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

The cabinet secretary, instead of getting a grip on her Government's crisis in Scotland's public finances, has made in her statement a threadbare attempt to pass the buck once again. After 17 years in power, it is always someone else who is to blame, again and again.

What the public must know is that all the independent experts—the Fraser of Allander Institute, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Audit Scotland and the Scottish Fiscal Commission—are absolutely clear that these SNP cuts stem from the SNP Government's incompetence. It is SNP mismanagement of the public's money from a Government that has, I am afraid, long since lost its way.

The culture of always blaming someone else comes with a cost, and it is meted out in cuts to jobs and services. When we have the longest NHS waiting lists in history and attainment is dropping in our schools, Scots are left paying more and getting less. Almost half of the total adjustments that have been laid out today are pulled from a one-off raid on Scotland's money, which is now lost in a black hole rather than being invested in our future. That almost guarantees that the cycle of short-term sticking-plaster politics will run and run.

Will the finance secretary publish the real full details—or, to be frank, any details—of these incompetent cuts? After three years of annual chaotic emergency spending reviews, and after what looks like another exercise in kicking the can down the road, will she today confirm the date of next year's crisis cuts statement, so that we can all get it in the diary?

Shona Robison: First, Michael Marra should read my lips: Labour austerity is as damaging as Tory austerity when it comes to public service cuts.

When the Labour Prime Minister has announced, in the gardens of Downing Street, that there is a difficult and tough budget coming—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members!

Shona Robison: —immediately after the Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer announced £22 billion of public sector funding reductions, it is a bit rich for Michael Marra to come to the chamber on behalf of the Labour Party and lecture anyone about the public finances.

I assume from what Michael Marra said that, if he were standing in my position, he would make another £460 million of cuts rather than utilise the ScotWind resources that the Government has enabled to happen in Scotland, which have supported public finances.

Let us cut to the chase: we are going to see Labour presiding over austerity and cuts that will make the Tory cuts look like a pale imitation, yet Labour members will come to the chamber and try to make out that, somehow, Scotland is an exception—unlike Wales, where Michael Marra's colleagues have had to make extremely difficult decisions because of austerity, or Northern Ireland, where the Administration has faced the same issues and has not been able to balance the budget. All of us are facing the same problems, and we will point out exactly where the root cause lies.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I recognise the financial challenges that we face, although it is important to note that the budget will be fully spent as resources are reallocated to pay. In times of adversity, and with increasing demands on services, we must deliver more efficiently, not least through digitisation while growing the economy, improving productivity and widening the tax base. Can the cabinet secretary explain how she will prioritise investment, partnering with the private sector in areas where Scotland is globally competitive such as life sciences, financial services, information technology and food and drink, to create and sustain skilled, well-paid employment?

Shona Robison: The Scottish Government and its enterprise agencies, and the Scottish National Investment Bank, will work closely with the private sector to drive growth in all the sectors that Kenny Gibson mentioned.

In the past couple of weeks, we have seen the annual results of both the SNIB and Scottish Enterprise, which demonstrate their impact on investment. Since its launch, the SNIB has committed £645 million and has brought in a further £1 billion in additional third-party investment to 35 businesses and projects. Last year, Scottish Enterprise helped companies to raise more than £350 million of growth funding, unlocking nearly £1.9 billion in capital investment for companies and delivering more than £2 billion of planned international sales. That is a good record of success, and we want to see more of it.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Growth in the economy is essential to provide the additional revenues that we require to fund public services, but the reality is that since 2014—over the past decade—the Scottish economy has grown on average at half the rate of the UK as a whole. Previously, the Scottish Government cut

employability programmes, which are the very initiatives that help economic inclusion and drive growth. What assessment has been made of the impact on growth of all the extra cuts that have just been announced today?

Shona Robison: All the assessments that have been done on all the savings have sought to minimise the impact on all the Government's priorities, but there is no getting away from the fact that, in order to make sure that we balance our budget this year, difficult decisions have had to be made. We have tried to avoid the impact on public services and on front-line services where we can.

Despite some of the cuts that Murdo Fraser has referred to, we are seeing absolutely fantastic performance from Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish National Investment Bank. According to the figures that I laid out in my statement about the performance of the Scottish economy—although I know that this is not the narrative that the Scottish Conservatives like to hear—the Scottish economy is doing rather well. Is there room for it to do better? Yes, there is, and that is why, in the programme for government, Parliament will hear more about the focus on the green and fair economy and the measures that we are going to put in place to make sure that we maximise the potential there.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I note that the Scottish Government intends to use up to 100 per cent of ScotWind moneys available from year 2023-24—£460 million—to fund day-to-day resource spending. Given that that is a one-off bounty, the original intention was for it to help to develop vital supply chains and infrastructure in our renewables sector. It could also have been used as a tool to crowd in private capital.

However, the term “up to” is key. Will the cabinet secretary set out the circumstances in which those vital one-off funds can and will be protected and invested to create future wealth for Scotland, such as through a sovereign wealth fund? Will she also outline her intention for the remaining £200 million that is available in 2024-25? Is that also being earmarked for day-to-day spending?

Shona Robison: As I said in my statement, having to utilise ScotWind moneys for day-to-day spend is not what I would want to be doing. Given the choice in front of us with the in-year levers, with spending control essentially being the main lever at our disposal, I would have to go further and deeper on spending reductions in order to minimise the ScotWind utilisation.

Having said that, as I also laid out in my statement, because of the actions that we took last year, we were able to reduce the call on ScotWind resources through the year, and we drew down

less than we had anticipated having to do. It would absolutely be my intention to try to do that again this year. Michelle Thomson makes a very good point. Whether it is about using ScotWind money to invest in infrastructure or making sure that we have it as a backstop in future years, that will absolutely be my intention. I am happy to keep Parliament updated on the progress in doing that.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I want to push the cabinet secretary on this point. She identified a £1 billion shortfall in the Scottish Government's funding before we even had a budget from the UK Government, which she seeks to fill using £460 million of ScotWind money. Can she confirm that that is non-recurring? If so, does that not mean that she will simply have to find another £0.5 billion-worth of cuts in the budget when she publishes it on 4 December?

Shona Robison: The budget that I publish on 4 December will be guided very much by what the Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer publishes at the end of October. If what the member is saying to me is that it is going to be so grim that I will have to set out a further £0.5 billion of cuts, I am deeply disturbed by that prospect. Let us be really clear. The vast majority of funding for the Scottish Government is reliant on UK Government budget decisions—end of. That is a fact.

On the levers that we have, I have already said to Michelle Thomson that we want to utilise that ScotWind money over a number of years rather than having to use it in one year, because it is, as Daniel Johnson said, non-recurring. I will do my level best to avoid having to use it in one year.

The pressure this year emanates, in the main, from pay pressure, with £800 million of additional pay pressure driven by the acceptance of the UK pay review bodies. At the moment, it is not confirmed that that will be fully funded. In the absence of it being fully funded, we have to create headroom to pay for agenda for change and other pay deals. I assume that Daniel Johnson is not suggesting that we do not give our nurses, doctors or teachers the pay uplifts that are being given elsewhere. In the light of that, we must ensure that we have the headroom to pay for the pay deals. I am happy to explain that in further detail to Daniel Johnson if he requires.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I take the opportunity to say to our friends on the Labour benches that we must have much less chuntering while somebody else has the floor.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The finance secretary spoke about NHS reform in her statement. Can she provide an assurance that free eye tests will remain, as they have multiple benefits for people and their eye-health care?

Shona Robison: Those on the Labour front bench obviously do not really care about eye-health care.

In response to Stuart McMillan, I would say that Scotland is the only country in the UK to provide free universal NHS-funded eye examinations, and maintaining that is a Scottish Government commitment. It is critical that such flagship services are protected, so that patients have no financial barriers to accessing services and so that we have the capacity to support safe, high-quality management of patients in the community. I hope that that reassures Stuart McMillan.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Wes Streeting was right to say that

“All roads lead back to Westminster”,

and nowhere is that more true than in relation to the past 14 years of cuts to public services. However, the Scottish Government has choices. The SNP has chosen to slash spending on climate action, hitting budgets for nature restoration and for walking, wheeling and cycling, while bringing back peak rail fares and raiding ScotWind offshore wind income.

Contrast that to the untouched £700 million of business tax breaks, £250 million of which is the small business bonus scheme, or SBBS, for which the Government's own independent review could find no evidence of enhanced business outcomes—and which, despite having “small business” in the name, throws public money at large, extremely profitable companies, and even at the shooting estates of the landed elite. Why has the SNP chosen to continue handing public cash to big business and elite landowners while slashing critical spending to tackle the climate emergency?

Shona Robison: I start with a point of agreement with Ross Greer about all roads leading to Westminster, as Wes Streeting made clear during the election campaign. We agree with him on that point.

Regarding the choices that we can make in-year, as Ross Greer will know, there are very limited options when we are trying to balance the budget in-year. That is a different matter from budget choices that we may choose or not choose to make when we set out our tax and spending plans. In-year, we have to make difficult choices, many of which concern programmes that are not yet under way. Unfortunately, many of those are in the active travel area. That does not diminish the fact that we have put significantly more resources into active travel, and we will continue to do so, but the decisions on the programmes that have been impacted were required, unfortunately, to ensure that we can balance the budget.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The UK Government's spending plans will have substantial implications for Scotland's budget next year. Can the cabinet secretary provide any further information on when the Scottish Government expects to receive further detail regarding the consequential that it will receive for 2024-25?

Shona Robison: The Scottish Government continues to discuss the overall financial position with the Treasury. On another point of consensus and positivity—I am always full of positivity—there has been a marked improvement in the Treasury's day-to-day communications with the Scottish Government, which is helpful for the relationship and the flow of communication.

However, final Barnett consequential will not be confirmed until we have the UK supplementary estimates, which are completed in late January or early February, although I would expect some formal indication of additional funding at the UK budget on 30 October. We know from what the Prime Minister has said that that budget is likely to be extremely difficult. We do not know as yet what departments will be particularly hit by those budget decisions but, if they are in devolved areas of spend, that directly impacts the budget that is available in Scotland. We will set out all of that in due course.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Across Scotland, all of our constituents are working harder, but it feels like they are falling further behind, and they are just not buying these excuses any more. For decades, the SNP lectured us about Margaret Thatcher's failure to create a sovereign wealth fund for the oil that was found underneath Scotland's sea bed. That is exactly what the SNP has failed to do with the wind farms that are now being built upon that sea bed. When the Government draws down the £460 million—as we know it very well might—as Daniel Johnson says, that is a one-off spend, and a hole that will need to be filled next year. I want to understand from the Government and the finance secretary how she intends to fill that hole, or whether there are other one-off expenses that we will just have to make do with.

Shona Robison: Unlike other independent countries that have developed sovereign wealth funds and which have all the fiscal levers available to them, we do not have those fiscal levers. The only fiscal lever that we have in year to meet pressures such as pay review body recommendations being accepted but not fully funded is to make spending reductions. If I was to maintain the ScotWind revenues intact, I am afraid that I would be coming here and announcing a further £460 million of public spending reductions. I am sure that Alex Cole-Hamilton would not want

me to do that as my first priority, given what that would mean.

Having said that, I will, as I hope that I have made clear, do everything within my power to drive down the utilisation of the ScotWind revenues, for all the reasons that we understand and that have been articulated in the chamber. I did that last year and drew down much less than we had anticipated having to do, and I will do the same this year as well.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): The Labour Government's first move—of course, this was not in its manifesto—was to base winter fuel payment on pension credit, knowing that 40 per cent of those who are entitled to pension credit do not claim it. Of course, the Labour Government cut our funding to make the payment here universal.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that Labour should explain and, indeed, apologise to the estimated 929 households in my constituency of Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale that have not claimed pension credit and that will lose that vital support in winters that are incredibly cold and colder than those in London and the home counties, where these decisions are taken?

Shona Robison: That is one of the most regrettable decisions that the UK Labour Government has made. Of course, Labour did not tell anyone about that during the election campaign and nor would it accept the First Minister's point that public expenditure cuts were coming down the line. That was denied, and yet here we are, with all the Labour austerity being laid out, a difficult budget coming and, of course, the changes to winter fuel payment, removing that benefit from millions and millions of pensioners.

Unfortunately, the Scottish Government and I cannot find £160 million from other budgets, whether it is the health budget or anywhere else, to replace the money that we will not secure from the UK Government for winter fuel payments. I have no choice in that matter but, as Christine Grahame said, it is a deeply disturbing and upsetting decision, particularly given the climate here in Scotland.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Caroline Lamb, the director general for health and social care, has said that funding for Scotland's public services has reached "a tipping point" and implied that cuts to universal benefits may be on the cards. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether that is correct?

Shona Robison: First of all, I say to Pam Gosal that the 2024-25 budget provided funding of more than £19.5 billion for health and social care, giving our NHS a real-terms uplift. However, reform of how health and social care services operate has

never been more urgent, and I set out that priority in my statement.

On the difficult decisions on those issues going forward, we believe that many of those investments are vital, whether they are in our system of free university education and our efforts to not put financial barriers in the way of young people getting an education, or in our efforts to not put financial barriers in the way of people accessing their prescriptions. Those important things have been invested in and built on.

Does that mean that there are not difficult decisions to make as part of the budget process? No—of course there will be difficult decisions to make as part of the budget process, and we will set out the decisions that we are making when I come to the chamber on 4 December.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): In a letter to health boards, Caroline Lamb, the chief executive of the NHS, warned that there is a £1.1 billion black hole at the heart of the NHS budget for this year. The documents that the cabinet secretary provided today show that she has slashed a further £115 million from the health and social care budget—from mental health services, from primary care services and from the independent living fund, which is an attack on disabled people in our community. How is that protecting NHS and social care?

The cabinet secretary talked about prioritising essential NHS jobs, so why are there vacancy freezes for consultants and nurses? Are they not essential jobs?

Shona Robison: First, on the independent living fund, Jackie Baillie should be accurate in this chamber. That is based on the predicted number of applicants for the independent living fund, which we have re-established here in Scotland. I do not think that it will be re-established in England, where Labour is in power.

We have continued to invest in mental health services. We have invested in excess of £1.3 billion, which includes £120 million of direct funding to NHS boards and integration joint boards. Does that mean that health and social care is immune from some of those difficult decisions? No, it does not, but I know that my colleague Neil Gray and his team have worked extremely hard to ensure that the £115 million will have a minimal impact on front-line services.

Finally, on the payment of nurses and doctors, that is exactly why we want to meet the pay review body recommendations in order to ensure that nurses and doctors are paid. We have done that in Scotland. We have seen nurses and doctors on strike in other parts of the UK, but we have made sure that, through fair funding, we have avoided industrial action in the health service in Scotland.

On those urgent posts and emergency cuts, I made it very clear again, which Jackie Baillie would know if she had been listening, that essential posts on the front line, whether they are in health, police or fire, will be protected in terms of recruitment. I put that on the record again, for the avoidance of doubt.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call James Dornan, who joins us remotely.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): The new Labour Government at Westminster has the levers to end austerity but is choosing not to. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the case could not be clearer for full fiscal powers to be devolved to Scotland so that we can deliver the investment in public services in our communities that people deserve?

Shona Robison: I agree with James Dornan that we are doing all that we can with the limited powers that we have, but we could do so much more with the full set of fiscal powers that other European countries of our size have at their disposal. If we had those full fiscal powers, we would not be paying the price for bad decisions taken at Westminster, whether that is the years of austerity cuts that started under the Tories and now continue under Labour, Brexit or reckless mini-budgets, all of which have taken money out of the economy and led to reductions in funding for public services.

I will continue to make the case for this Parliament to have the fiscal powers of a normal independent country. In the meantime, we need the chancellor to use her forthcoming budget to provide the funding that our public services, infrastructure and communities so badly need.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Nowhere in the cabinet secretary's statement did she acknowledge the importance of the private sector to economic growth or the opportunities that unlocking greater private sector investment presents. Was that an oversight or yet more evidence that business and entrepreneurship are always an afterthought for this Scottish Government?

Shona Robison: Brian Whittle should have listened more closely to my statement. I literally talked about our absolute commitment to economic growth. I talked about the coming programme for government that will focus on fair, green growth and the levers that we will use to achieve that. I outlined some of the positive aspects of the Scottish economy earlier. We see record levels of foreign direct investment, which are above the levels anywhere else in these islands.

I know that Brian Whittle will not want to hear about the positive aspects of the Scottish

economy, but, for the avoidance of doubt, I say again that economic growth and green economic growth are absolutely key to the future success of this country. Members will hear more about that tomorrow in the programme for government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in Audrey Nicoll, to be followed by John Mason, if both members are brief.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The cabinet secretary understands the significant role of community justice approaches and their contribution to a range of national outcomes, including reducing reoffending, addressing homelessness and tackling child poverty. Given that the new Labour Government at Westminster is already turning its back on the most vulnerable, what assurance can the cabinet secretary provide that funding in that vital space will be sufficient to support continued delivery of community justice approaches, particularly given the pressures that other parts of the justice system are facing?

Shona Robison: Audrey Nicoll makes a good point. We are investing £148 million in community justice this year, which includes an additional £14 million that will build the capacity of justice social work services and strengthen alternatives to custody across Scotland. That increased investment underlines the Scottish Government's continued commitment to community justice and reflects evidence that such approaches can be more effective than short-term imprisonment at reducing reoffending, assisting with rehabilitation and, ultimately, ensuring that there are fewer victims of crime.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): It was encouraging that the cabinet secretary said that she has a slightly better relationship with the current Westminster Government than the previous one. Has she had any indication or is she hopeful that, in the areas of capital expenditure and financial transactions, Westminster might allow a bit more leeway?

Shona Robison: I have to say to John Mason that it is a very low bar, but the signals are that there has been a marked improvement in communications. When we met the Chancellor of the Exchequer last week, the First Minister and I directly raised the issue of capital investment, which will form part of the UK Government's spending review that will be produced in spring, and the issue of financial transactions. We impressed on her the importance of being able to invest in our infrastructure not only from a public service point of view but from an economic point of view. We were very clear about why that was important, and I will continue to press that point with her and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement. I allowed it to run on a wee bit, but we have to protect the rest of the afternoon's business. There will be a short pause before we move on to that, to allow front-bench teams to change positions, should they wish to.

Gender Identity Healthcare for Young People

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Jenni Minto on gender identity healthcare for young people—an update and new national standards. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement; therefore, there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:55

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I am pleased to have the opportunity to provide a further update in person to the Parliament on this work. I will start by speaking directly to trans and non-binary young people in Scotland.

I know that waiting times to access the specialist services that provide support for gender dysphoria, alongside the on-going changes to how those services are provided, are worrying for you and your families. I have heard that directly from you in the meetings that we have had, and I have read it in the correspondence that I have received from you and those who love you.

I also know that high levels of on-going speculation and interest in those services, along with accompanying—often toxic—commentary, whether online, in print or in person, can magnify your worry. I hope that that will be borne in mind by those who wish to comment on this sensitive subject.

To members in the chamber, I note that it is vital that we lead by example in the tone of our discussions, not just today but in all our words and work. It is clear from colleagues' correspondence with me that I am not the only one hearing directly from, and listening to, young people and their families. Therefore, I am sure that we all agree that they must be our priority and at the heart of all our discussions about how gender identity healthcare is provided and that everyone should be treated with respect.

In my parliamentary statement in April, I advised members that a senior multidisciplinary team in the office of the chief medical officer would consider the recommendations of the NHS England-commissioned Cass review and engage with relevant health boards and that I would provide an update to the Parliament.

As a result of that work, the "Cass Review—Implications for Scotland" findings report was laid before the Parliament on 5 July, which was the earliest opportunity following the pre-election period. The report is an important milestone in how we work together to deliver better gender

identity healthcare for young people in Scotland. The Scottish Government has accepted the findings of the report in full, and work has started to implement its recommendations.

One such recommendation is that gender identity healthcare services for young people are

"not provided in an adult sexual health setting (such as the Sandyford Clinic) but are provided within paediatric clinical settings as with other age-appropriate services for children and young people."

The report also found that, to ensure sustainable services, a distributed network or regional model—instead of one site—would be the appropriate delivery model. We are actioning that at pace to address the immediate fragility of gender identity healthcare for young people and to develop a sustainable longer-term model. We will use the Scottish Government's new planning and commissioning approach to fragile services and are convening a senior task and finish group to take it forward. The work will be overseen by the NHS Scotland chief operating officer's directorate in the Scottish Government.

Other recommendations from the report have already been implemented by NHS Scotland. For example, access to under-18s gender identity healthcare is now only through referral from a clinician. That is in line with other child and adolescent specialist services and will help to ensure that any other health needs can be identified and addressed.

In a progress report that I have published today, there is further detail on the actions that have been taken and progress that has been made so far. That includes work on the challenges in the recruitment and retention of staff in these services and the next steps for their commissioning and provision, which will, of course, include the voices of service users.

The CMO's report and the Cass review underlined the importance of research and data. As I outlined in April, the Scottish Government commissioned Public Health Scotland in 2022 to develop a national data set for national health service gender identity clinics. The first annual data set for both adult and young people's services will be published this autumn.

The Parliament is aware that we have already provided the University of Glasgow with grant funding to establish a programme of research into the long-term health outcomes of people accessing gender identity healthcare. The first outputs of those projects are expected towards the end of this year.

Furthermore, in August, the chief scientist for health for the Scottish Government confirmed to their counterpart in the United Kingdom Department of Health and Social Care the

willingness of an NHS Scotland team, which will include the Scottish Government, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and the University of Glasgow, to join the National Institute for Health and Care Research UK-wide study on puberty-suppressing hormones as a treatment option for gender dysphoria.

The CMO's report also highlighted the need for national standards, as well as guidance on training and development for staff. I am pleased that Healthcare Improvement Scotland has today published its national standards for gender identity healthcare for adults and young people. The standards have been developed following an extensive public consultation, as well as targeted consultation with people with lived experience, clinicians and a wide range of professional bodies. They will support clinical services and health boards to deliver positive changes in partnership with people who use the services.

NHS Education for Scotland's transgender care knowledge and skills framework has also been published today. It sets out what NHS staff need to know about caring for trans and non-binary people and improving training in that area. The framework was created following consultation and engagement. Further development of the framework, focusing on staff who work with children and young people, has started and is expected to be completed in 2025.

I have been clear that, to get this right, engagement with those who are involved in services, whether they are a user or a clinician, is vital. Throughout the process, the NHS has engaged constructively with people with lived experience to ensure that their voices are represented. I have regularly and proactively done the same. As well as regularly meeting young people since becoming a minister last year, later this month I will meet a wide range of stakeholders representing those who are impacted by on-going efforts within NHS Scotland to embed better service delivery and, ultimately, reduce waiting times. I know that colleagues across the chamber are doing the same. They are actively engaged with young people on the topic and committed to making sure that their voices are heard.

I reiterate the Scottish Government's wider commitment to improving gender identity healthcare in Scotland for young people and adults. Since December 2022, the Scottish Government has invested more than £4.4 million in gender identity healthcare improvement. More than £3.6 million of that is being allocated directly to NHS boards that provide gender identity clinics to support them to improve service delivery. Independent evaluation of the impact of that investment on waiting times and the quality of care is under way. A report will be published this winter,

and its findings will be used to support future improvements.

We all want to see improvement in waiting times for accessing those services. I hope that the breadth of work that is under way and that has been published today illustrates our commitment to improving clinical services and support for the young people who need to access them and shows that much has been advanced since my previous update to the chamber.

The findings of the Cass review and the CMO's report on the implications for Scotland recognise that the wider societal discussion about gender identity is complex. They also recognise that the significant public, media and political interest in gender identity healthcare provision for young people might detract from the primary issue of providing the best clinical care necessary for them. That underlines the need for the development of young people's services to take place

"with children, young people and their families in an active process of co-production."

We all have a responsibility to make sure that children and young people grow up safe, respected and supported. I hope that that sentiment is one that we can all keep in mind today and in the future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues arising from her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I encourage those members who wish to ask a question who have not already done so to press their request-to-speak button.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement. Tone and language are important when talking about gender identity healthcare and I echo calls for members to lead by example today.

The minister will be aware that I have held events at Parliament, alongside families impacted by gender care. Their stories are harrowing and each one outlines the importance of the evidence-based Cass review, but, due to the parliamentary recess, families and young people have had to wait weeks for a response from the Scottish Government, following the chief medical officer's recommendations. During that time, MSPs have been unable to ask direct questions on behalf of their constituents. I hope that that will be reflected on.

The Cass review concluded that there is a lack of evidence to support the use of puberty-suppressing hormones and also says that children and young people might not be offered the right psychological support and assessments when they experience gender distress. The use of

puberty-suppressing hormones has been paused in Scotland and, according to the minister's statement, a UK-wide study is now under way to assess that treatment option. I therefore ask the minister whether the use of puberty-suppressing hormones will remain paused here in Scotland until that study has concluded.

Jenni Minto: I thank Meghan Gallacher for the tone of her question and wholeheartedly agree that it is important for us, as elected politicians, to ensure that we get our tone correct. Thank you for meeting those families who have been impacted.

I have given this statement on our first day back in Parliament and we published the chief medical officer's report as soon as we could after the pre-election period.

Regarding your direct question about puberty blockers, you will know that that power is reserved to the UK Government and that we are currently in line with it. We await decisions that will be made by the UK Government's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. That power is reserved and we will follow those decisions.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank the minister for early sight of her statement and thank the chief medical officer and his team for their work on the "Cass Review: Implications for Scotland" report.

I will explore the issues of waiting times and support for staff. The decision to stop self referrals and to have GPs and other clinicians refer their patients to gender identity clinics has already been announced by the Scottish Government. Will the minister say what additional resources, such as support and training, will be provided for GPs working in that sensitive area of healthcare?

Secondly, there are long waiting times at the Sandyford clinic—four years for teenagers and five for adults. We supported the Scottish Government's strategic action framework three years ago, when Humza Yousaf was the health secretary, but waiting times continue to rise. I am told that there is a recruitment problem at the Sandyford, because the environment is toxic, but the position appears to be better at the Chalmers clinic in Edinburgh. Does the cabinet secretary therefore believe that a national service might be the answer and that it would resolve the lack of staff and the increase in waiting times?

Jenni Minto: As I highlighted in my statement, I find the waiting times concerning, which is why we have invested additional funding. I spoke about the £4.4 million, £3.6 million of which will go directly to NHS boards.

You are right to highlight the differences between the two centres. My statement also

highlighted that there will be a review of that funding to see where there has been success and what the two health boards can learn from each other.

You are also correct to highlight the recruitment issue, which is an issue not only in Scotland but across the UK. To go back to Meghan Gallacher's comment, the onus is on us to ensure that we reduce the temperature of discussions to ensure that the right people, with the right training and the right desire for the service to work, can be recruited and, importantly, retained.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: To no one's surprise, there is a lot of interest in this subject. I would be grateful for brief questions and responses, all of which should be directed through the chair.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I hold a bank nurse contract with Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS.

The Cass report says:

"A compassionate and kind society remembers that there are real children, young people, families, carers and clinicians behind the headlines."

With that in mind, and remembering the long waits faced by both adults and young people accessing gender identity services, will the minister say what steps the Scottish Government is taking to recruit the staff required to reduce waiting times?

Jenni Minto: As I said in my response to Jackie Baillie, we have provided more than £4.4 million for gender identity healthcare improvement since December 2022, including more than £3.6 million to health boards that provide gender identity clinics. However, both the Cass review and the CMO's report highlight that recruitment in this field is challenging and, as I said in my statement, consideration of staff skills will form part of the already outlined commissioning approach to fragile services. Gender identity healthcare for children and young people is now a part of that.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): The Royal College of General Practitioners is clear that the prescribing of gender-affirming hormones should generally be done only by specialists. However, it is often done by GPs, who have shared with me their concerns about safe prescribing to patients who have gender dysphoria. Can the Scottish Government confirm whether, under the new standards, GPs will be routinely expected to prescribe gender-affirming hormones, and whether shared-care protocols will be put in place?

Jenni Minto: We have been clear in our responses that the specialist centres will be in

charge of determining the support that children and young people need in that area. We have to ensure safe prescribing—which is created by the outlined approach and the regulations.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am sure that, like me, the minister receives a lot of correspondence from concerned young people and their parents each time that there is news about trans healthcare—including puberty blockers and hormones in particular—due to the significant misinformation about and misinterpretation of announcements. What the implementation of those recommendations means for people getting treatment will need to be extremely clear and accessible. Will the minister therefore please provide reassurance to those who currently receive treatment, or are on a waiting list for treatment, about the continuation of their care while the research and data collection goes on, and speak about access to such care for those in rural and island communities?

Jenni Minto: When the announcement was made about the pausing of the prescribing of puberty blockers, we were clear that those who were on a treatment would remain on that treatment. I represent a rural constituency, as Emma Roddick does, so I absolutely understand the reasons behind her questions.

We are absolutely clear that services should take into account the barriers that may be faced by people, including those who live in island or rural communities. I agree with the multidisciplinary team's report, which states that those services should be delivered according to the principle of being

“as local as possible and as national as necessary”.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for her statement. There is a clear disparity in the availability of services, based on where people live. To ensure sustainable services, there is an expectation that gender identity healthcare will be provided in a number of different settings. The report refers to a “distributed” network or “regional” model. In her statement, the minister said that that is being actioned at pace. Can the minister be clearer on those models and on the timescale for them?

Jenni Minto: As I said in response to Emma Roddick, it is absolutely clear that arrangements should be suitable for people wherever they live in Scotland. As I said, I represent a rural constituency. We need to ensure that people can access the right care for them at the right time. That may include the use of digital tools to support people's access to services. If Carol Mochan will allow, I will come back with a timeframe after this question session.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): In her report, Dr Hilary Cass showed that social transitioning in schools sets some children on a pathway to irreversible medical interventions. Surely, children who are taught in schools that they are born in the wrong body are being failed in the duty of safeguarding that is owed to each of them. Therefore, as numerous of my constituents have called to be done, will the minister withdraw the current guidance, remove all gender ideology references from the relationship, sexual health and parenthood resource, and remove third sector activist groups from schools?

Jenni Minto: I underline that my statement is focused on NHS gender identity healthcare for young people. Those are specialist services that are provided to a small number of young people who need that care.

Children and young people are not taught about their own gender identity in schools. That is a personal matter for any individual and, in the case of young people, their family.

However, it is the role of a school to provide pastoral support to a young person who is seeking it. Our education system must support everyone to reach their full potential, and it is vital that the curriculum is as diverse as the young people who learn in our schools. It is also vital that we help instil the values of respect and tolerance in our children and young people.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): The current media and political environments mean that many young trans people are terrified, like never before, to come out. That is compounded with long waiting times for care and the fact that they are now unable to access treatment that they could access this time last year, so it is no wonder that many of those young people need mental health support. I am glad that that is reflected in the documents that were sent alongside the statement.

However, with the approach that is currently being proposed, there is a danger that trans healthcare is seen purely through that lens, and that stigma is compounded for one of the most stigmatised groups in society. How will the Scottish Government ensure that that does not happen, that stigma and transphobia are challenged at every turn, and that this Government is committed to ensuring that young trans people's healthcare is accessible and that their rights are upheld?

Jenni Minto: As I said, leading up to this statement, all the conversations that I have had have very much included and put at the centre the young people and their families. I have a meeting in the next couple of weeks to ensure that the way that we are moving forward is correct.

I have said this before, but I will repeat it—there is a responsibility on those of us who are elected, as well as on our news broadcasters, to ensure that that toxic environment is not maintained.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To follow on from my colleague's question, the narrative surrounding the conversation of gender identity healthcare must move away from the harmful and toxic state in which it currently sits.

Will the minister outline work that the Scottish Government will undertake to ensure that the young people at the heart of the discussion are supported positively both in and out of healthcare environments?

Jenni Minto: As is set out in the progress report that was published today, a range of support has been put in place for young people who are accessing and waiting to access gender identity healthcare. That includes waiting list validation, onward referral to additional services where appropriate, community-based third sector support to address social isolation and inactivity, and mental and emotional wellbeing support.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am grateful for the tone that the minister has adopted today. She and I share the ambition to get this right in a timely manner and remove some of the attendant heat.

Emma Roddick rightly referenced the children at the heart of this matter, many of whose care pathways will have paused and who will have spent several months in profound anxiety about their future.

I was gratified to hear that the Government is still seeking an evidential base and that part of that will be the lived experience of those who have received gender-affirming care. What efforts will her Government deploy in order to put the voices of the children who are on waiting lists at the heart of those considerations?

Jenni Minto: I have already indicated that I have such meetings regularly, as do my officials. It is incredibly important to hear the voices of those people.

It is also important to recognise the research side of that. The Scottish Government has commissioned research through Glasgow university, and part of that research is looking at issues such as hypertension in young people.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Can the cabinet secretary outline what the Scottish Government's statement means for the future of the Sandyford clinic? Will it be closed? Will it be relocated? Can she share a timeline for those changes?

Will she also confirm whether GPs were consulted on the NHS Education for Scotland transgender care knowledge skills framework?

Jenni Minto: The Sandyford gender identity clinic is not going to be closed, as it offers a wide range of sexual health services. However, the report of the multidisciplinary team has recommended that, in the future, specialist gender identity health services for young people be provided not in an adult sexual health setting but in paediatric clinical settings.

As I referenced in my statement, under the Scottish Government's new planning and commissioning approach to fragile services, work will take place to address the immediate fragility of gender identity healthcare for young people and develop a sustainable longer-term model in line with the recommendation that these services be delivered in a paediatric setting. As I indicated, all the reports and frameworks that we have published today have been subject to consultation with appropriate people.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Children and young people with gender dysphoria can present with a range of complex psychosocial challenges and mental health problems, which can impact on their gender-related distress. Can parents and children in Scotland now be reassured, with services being provided in paediatric settings, that all issues will be explored fully in order to provide diagnosis, clinical support and interventions—medical or otherwise—that are appropriate for the age, stage and needs of the child or young person?

Jenni Minto: I thank Ruth Maguire for that important question. It is of the utmost importance that these services are delivered to the highest standard for the young people who use them. The new national standards that I referenced include a standard—standard 10—to specifically address the delivery of gender identity services for young people and outline the need for young people to have timely access to safe, high-quality and person-centred gender identity services that understand, respect and uphold their rights.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): Adult and child patients must have healthcare that is appropriate to their clinically assessed medical presentation. Can the Government confirm what the milestones will be for Scotland's Cass compliance for the 32 recommendations? What clinical evidence informed the national standards? Can the minister confirm that GPs, primary care clinicians and health boards fully support the national standards and their funding, training and implementation? Reports that are reaching me suggest that that is not the case.

Jenni Minto: A clear ask of the chief medical officer and his multidisciplinary team was to review the recommendations in the Cass review to ensure that they were being properly implemented as appropriate in Scotland, and that is what I have been reporting on today. There is also the progress statement. Clinical organisations were consulted. I am not across the information about health boards complaining or raising issues. Perhaps Ms Regan would be happy to write to me on that, and I will be very happy to explore it.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Following on from the questions that have been asked by Tess White, Fergus Ewing, Rachael Hamilton and Ash Regan, will the minister take the opportunity to spell out the governance structure for the oversight of Scottish gender identity services? In other words, who is responsible?

Jenni Minto: Responsibility for all healthcare lies with the health boards, and the Scottish Government works with them to ensure that that is met. We have had very clear consultation across the board, including with GPs, to ensure that the four reports that have been published today provide the right standard for Scotland to move forward with regard to gender identity healthcare.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank members for their co-operation. We managed to get everybody in who wanted to get in. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow front-bench members to change positions.

Clyde and Hebrides Ferries

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Fiona Hyslop on Clyde and Hebrides ferries: provision, service and harbours update. The cabinet secretary will take questions on the issues following her statement, so there should be no interruptions or interventions.

16:25

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to make this statement. Unfortunately, the pre-election restrictions for the United Kingdom Government election meant that this was the earliest opportunity for me to address members in the chamber on these important issues, and there have been significant developments over the summer period.

The update covers a wide range of issues relating to the support for, and provision of, ferry services across the Clyde and Hebrides ferry network. I thank the crews, port staff and wider teams at CalMac Ferries and NorthLink Ferries for their work in providing ferry services across the busy summer period. That required dedication and flexibility in order to deliver services to communities that are served by our lifeline networks.

That was not without its challenges on the Clyde and Hebrides ferry network, with two extended periods with key vessels out of service on the Cumbrae and Arran services. I further extend my thanks to the communities on those islands for their patience, understanding and flexibility throughout the period of disruption. I can advise that the MV Caledonian Isles, serving Arran, is expected to return this month, which will provide significant additional capacity in terms of passenger and car carryings. That will release the MV Alfred to provide resilience and overhaul cover; we have extended her charter until at least February next year, when new tonnage should be delivered. We are also expecting an update from CalMac later today on the repairs to the MV Isle of Arran. I was also pleased to see the MV Loch Shira, serving Cumbrae, returning to service at the start of August, following repairs to her damaged ramp.

The Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee received updates on the delivery schedule for the MV Glen Sannox on 2 August and for the MV Isle of Islay on 8 August. With regard to the Glen Sannox, while it is regrettable that there has been further delay to the delivery of the vessel, I am pleased to confirm that the arrangements to ensure a smooth handover and entry into service

are well under way. Reports from the sea trials and work to date have indicated that the vessel is performing well, and we look forward to her entering service and serving the Arran community. Discussions are already under way with communities around the timetables for when she initially enters service from Troon.

The update on the MV Isle of Islay highlighted the impact of global supply chain issues, with the vessel now anticipated to be delivered towards the end of this year and to enter service early in 2025. Although that is disappointing, there are issues beyond our control that are impacting on the wider shipping industry. Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd indicates that the build quality is very high, and its team, along with the CalMac staff on site, are working with the shipyard to ensure that there is a smooth handover of the vessel.

We announced the launch of the procurement process for the seven fully electric small vessels. That will enable older vessels to be replaced and the cascading of some vessels to improve resilience and capacity on other routes. The initial phase of the procurement concludes in early October, and shortlisted shipyards will submit bids towards the end of the year. Work is also under way around port improvements and the power upgrades to support those vessels when they come into service from 2027.

It is equally important to ensure that our port and harbour network is fit for purpose while providing a high standard of passenger experience. Work to allow the new Islay class vessels to berth at Kennacraig and Port Askaig is now substantially complete. The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity recently visited those works en route to engagements on Islay.

Work at Colonsay should finish in the autumn. Work on the Little Minch ports is now substantially complete. Lochmaddy and Tarbert are finished, and work is well under way on the terminal building at Uig. That major programme of works has delivered a combination of replacing life-expired infrastructure and increasing flexibility and resilience by allowing a larger range of major vessels to use those ports. That represents investment of more than £100 million, supported by the Scottish Government.

Work to develop the final design and business case for Port Ellen is also under way. The preferred option that is being developed should tackle existing restrictions with the marshalling at the port and enable those to be addressed, allowing full benefit from the 40 per cent uplift in capacity of the new vessels, but it also represents an opportunity to incorporate drop-trailer facilities for freight.

On Ardrossan, I understand that all outstanding elements are being completed and that I will receive the new business plan shortly. That will include consideration of the funding requirements and recurring lease costs, including progressing the respective legal agreements to protect the interests of Government in terms of cost and ensuring that a robust and resilient port can be maintained well into the future. Once I have had an opportunity to consider the new business plan, I will undertake to communicate the next steps directly with interested members and the wider task force, which would be reconvened as soon as possible. I assure the chamber that this issue remains a key priority for ministers.

As I confirmed in May, although good progress is being made in relation to the direct award of the next Clyde and Hebrides ferry services—CHFS—contract, it was necessary to extend the current contract by up to 12 months.

We have now published the public consultation response report on the CHFS 3 contract, building on the earlier work by Angus Campbell. Transport Scotland officials visited 11 islands and held 22 public events, in addition to focused discussion with key ferry stakeholders. The formal consultation saw 434 responses received. I thank all those who contributed, as well as the groups and organisations across the islands that helped to set up the engagements and helped officials to reach communities. I assure those who contributed that the responses will help to inform and shape the next CHFS contract in a way that focuses on community needs and putting the customer's voice and experience at the heart of decision making.

The direct award due diligence work continues at pace. A submission to the Competition and Markets Authority is due imminently as the next key milestone towards a go/no-go decision on direct award early next year. I will further update the Parliament on progress at the appropriate time.

I said that there would need to be improvement and change. One of the key mechanisms that will help to drive that change is the CalMac "Enhancement and Change Plan", which was published in July. It reflects feedback from communities about how they can better influence service delivery.

A key element of the plan is to enhance the number of local area managers across the network to enable decisions on services to be driven by the often distinct circumstances across different routes. There will now be six regions rather than three: Clyde, Islay, Arran, Argyll Islands, Hebrides North and Hebrides South. That change will enable greater engagement with customers and business users. Those core roles

should be empowered to influence decisions that impact their communities.

Transport Scotland officials have also been engaging with the ferries community board, along with CalMac, to design and define the key performance indicators that will be used to monitor the success of service delivery. Lived experience of users will be at the heart of those. I expect to see the new measures and elements of the enhancement and change plan brought in and refined across the extension period.

I have also outlined that we will have the requirement for a ferries community board set out as part of the new CHFS contract. Workshops have been held with the board to consider how its role can be further defined and strengthened to help it to drive forward service improvements and to further consider strategic issues across the CalMac network. I thank the board members for their dedicated work in supporting the development of key issues to date.

I am also aware that there have been calls for greater island representation on the boards of ferries bodies. I agree with those calls, and that is also my aim. I am pleased that both CalMac and CMAL now have islanders on their boards and are working hard to make sure that island residents have opportunities to be involved. I will continue to stress to both bodies the necessity of ensuring that the communities that they serve are represented at the highest levels of the organisation.

Today, we have published the consultation report on the islands connectivity plan, following a similarly expansive engagement with communities across both the CHFS and northern isles ferry services networks. That important work will help to form policy for ferries and the investment in ports and vessels into the future. We are considering the feedback that has been received and will look to make any changes to the two documents before formal publication as soon as possible.

Our focus on those issues demonstrates the Government's commitment to ferry services that are fit for the future. As well as our on-going and planned investments, in recent years we have been able to freeze fares or minimise increases.

However, it would be remiss of me not to highlight the stark financial backdrop against which the plans that I have outlined are set. We will continue to take forward our ambitious programme, but difficult decisions will be needed around all aspects of ferry services as the business cases come to fruition.

Thank you, Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to update Parliament on those important matters. I know that they have been extensive and varied, but a lot has happened over recent months.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I invite members who wish to ask a question to press their request-to-speak buttons, if they have not already done so.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of the statement. I have to say that I was full of excitement and expectation but, once again, the cabinet secretary has dashed my hopes that we would get some good news. We warned that there could be a summer of ferries chaos, and there has been a summer of ferries chaos. Not a day goes by when we do not hear about more delays, cancellations and repairs. Islanders are long past being at their wits' end.

There is little in the statement that we did not know already, but the cabinet secretary managed to save the worst until last in a doom-laden ending that would give Keir Starmer a run for his money. She warns of

"difficult decisions ... as ... business cases come to fruition".

She mentioned Ardrossan, so is one of those difficult decisions about Ardrossan? Is the work on that port likely to be put on hold? If not, when are we likely to see progress?

Finally, will the cabinet secretary agree to a full debate on ferries in Government time, so that we can properly address all the issues?

Fiona Hyslop: I understand that there has been disruption on certain services, but I reiterate that the vast majority of ferry services have been completed, and it is a disservice to the staff of CalMac to say otherwise. I know that there have been particular problems. I have addressed them first hand in relation to Cumbrae and the Isle of Arran, and I have given updates on that. We know that there can be technical problems and that there can be weather issues in respect of berthing. Those things happen, but it is wrong to say that the situation has been as Graham Simpson has relayed.

I remind him that it was not me or Keir Starmer who introduced the 9 per cent capital budget cuts that the Scottish Government faces: it was actually the Conservative Party. I would like to see a change in the fiscal regime to replace that capital reduction, but I am afraid that that is where it came from. Not just in my budget, but in others, there will be challenges.

Having said that, I reiterate that, in my statement, there was good news. Obviously, the member does not have an interest in ports and harbours, given that I have just announced that we have invested £100 million successfully in that work. I also talked about the announcement of

£175 million for procurement of the small vessels replacement, which is also very welcome.

On Ardrossan, I also gave the welcome news that I am expecting the new business plan any time now. I will convene the task force on that, which is rightly in a position to take forward that piece of work, as the individual stakeholders on it have already been involved. *[Interruption.]* I know that Graham Simpson is all doom and gloom, but even he should see that there were elements of success, progress and commitment in the statement that I have just given.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As with the previous statement, there is a lot of interest in asking questions. That will require responses to be a little bit briefer and it will require those who have asked a question to stop talking while the answers are being given.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I note the cabinet secretary's remarks at the end of her statement that it would be remiss of her

"not to highlight the stark financial backdrop against which these plans are set"

and that

"difficult decisions will be needed around all aspects of ferry services".

Is that not just a get-out clause for everything that came before? It would be remiss of me not to remind the cabinet secretary of the Government's monumental overspend and failure in procuring MV Glen Sannox and MV Glen Rosa. Why should the passengers and staff across the public ferry network be made to pay for the Scottish Government's financial incompetence?

I also note the comments regarding a direct award of the CHFS contract. It was my understanding that that decision would be announced in the summer. Can the cabinet secretary explain what has caused the major delay in announcing the Scottish Government's approach, which is leading to yet more uncertainty for islanders about vital ferry services?

Fiona Hyslop: On the first point, there is a situation that we have known about: the capital pressures that are facing the Scottish Government are just a reality, and it would be wrong not to address that point. As for how we will take things forward, the point about value for money being demonstrated is re-emphasised, particularly in relation to the work on the Ardrossan business case, which I have been keen to see being progressed.

On the point about the direct award on CHFS, I gently remind Alex Rowley that I gave an indication to Parliament—clearly, openly and transparently—that we would extend the current CHFS 2 award for up to another year. I hope that it

does not take that long, but we need to do that, given the elements of what we were doing—particularly in relation to going to the Competition and Markets Authority. I also refer to the harbours agreement, which I mentioned in my statement, and was known publicly even before the recess.

The issue now is to ensure that we get everything in order so that—as would be my preference and, I think, Alex Rowley's preference, too—we can move to the direct award decision. The CHFS 2 extension was announced prior to the recess. I hope that we can get into a position from which to go ahead with CHFS 3 to give everybody the certainty that they need—not least the staff. I gently remind the member that I set that out before recess.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome the confirmation that the MV Caledonian Isles will soon return to service. My Arran constituents will benefit from the much-needed additional capacity and resilience, given that the Ardrossan to Brodick service has now been disrupted for the fifth day in a row.

Meanwhile, the redevelopment of Ardrossan harbour drags on without a decision. Today the cabinet secretary has said that it is a "key priority", and the Government is committed to retaining Ardrossan as the mainland port for Arran. It did so in 2017. Seven years later, however, not a single shovel has hit the ground. I appreciate that a business plan is on its way, but when will all the seemingly endless uncertainty finally be lifted and a decision to proceed taken?

Fiona Hyslop: I share Kenneth Gibson's frustrations and those of the communities of Arran and Ardrossan. A decision can be made only when the vital business-case work is completed. As has been stated, the work continues, with significant changes to the estimated project cost and outstanding legal and lease matters—issues that have been addressed more recently. Those will impact, in turn, on the partners' financial packages, so we must give partners time to develop them.

I expect the business plan to be presented to me very shortly, and that is why work is being put in to demonstrate the business case from the social, economic and value-for-money perspectives. That work is being completed. I expect to see the new business plan soon and I will convene the task force as soon as possible after that so that we can move forward.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Before the recess, my questions about delivery of the Glen Sannox were met with nothing less than evasion. Hours after the recess started, bad news was snuck out to the media. The disruption to the Isle of Arran this summer has been endless, and it

is very costly to island businesses. The main Arran ferry has been out of action for most of this year, the temporary replacement vessel has now been out of action for five days, as other members have mentioned, and still in today's statement we have no delivery date yet for the new Arran ferry. What faith can islanders have that the coming winter will be any better than the disastrous summer that they have already had?

Fiona Hyslop: The delivery date for the Glen Sannox was communicated, as appropriate, to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. The date was set as 30 September in that communication in the summer. What I have been talking about is delivery of that and the plans for delivery. The on-going sea trials are therefore very important, so it is pleasing to hear that they are going well.

The issues that are facing the MV Caledonian Isles are obviously frustrating. There are other ways and means by which access can be provided, including the MV Alfred and the other route. Latterly, the Isle of Arran problems have caused issues: they have been technical issues. People want to ensure that their vessels are safe, so it is therefore appropriate that technical problems be addressed. I understand that a communication is expected at 8 o'clock this evening about the potential for tomorrow's sailings from the Isle of Arran. I know that that is not satisfactory for those who have been disrupted over the past week, but I am relaying the most recent information that I have been given.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The MV Glen Sannox and MV Glen Rosa are clearly the immediate priorities for Ferguson Marine, but it is vital that the company is supported fully to bid for future work. What funding and support is the Scottish Government providing to help to get the current ferries delivered and to set up the yard for future success?

Fiona Hyslop: I am not providing funding for the Ferguson yard—that is the responsibility of the Deputy First Minister. She has set out the provision of £14 million to ensure that the yard can become as competitive and productive as possible in order to win future bids, which is what we want to happen.

I understand that Ferguson has indicated that it wants to bid for phase 1 of the small vessels replacement programme. Procuring that is my responsibility. Information about that was also set out during the summer.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The statement did not mention freight capacity at all. The building of the Western Isles interconnector will require almost all the current freight capacity on the MV Loch Seaforth, while

the building of new distilleries on Islay will increase freight traffic there. How does the cabinet secretary intend to increase freight capacity? Will ferries that are due to be replaced be kept in the fleet to provide additional capacity where and when it is required in the future?

Fiona Hyslop: I referred to freight, particularly in reference to Port Ellen. Rhoda Grant will know that Port Ellen on Islay is one of the key ports that the whisky industry uses and would want to continue to use. I specifically talked about drop-trailer freight capacity being considered as part of the plans for Port Ellen, so it is incorrect to say that I "did not mention freight".

The new capacity that will be available for increased heavy goods vehicles on the MV Glen Sannox and on the MV Isle of Islay—I think that the Islay class of vessels will increase capacity by 55 per cent—will help to support services to Islay.

Rhoda Grant raised a very good and important point about the Western Isles and renewable energy companies. Transport Scotland and my officials took part in a meeting with the wider economic interests in the council and others on economic development and the requirement for freight there.

Rhoda Grant will be perfectly aware that the Scottish Government heavily subsidises CalMac. A number of private energy companies will be making significant profits from renewable energy. I think that we can work together to identify how we can maximise the use of everybody's resources to increase freight capacity.

The member has raised a serious point, so I can reassure her that I am taking that forward as one of the areas on which I need to work with my colleagues in both the energy and the economy portfolios to ensure that we have plans that will meet the future capacity needs of the renewable energy interests.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary ensure that the Scottish Government continues to reiterate to Caledonian MacBrayne that it is crucial for island communities to feel that they are kept up to date with and involved in relevant discussions regarding the lifeline services on which the islands rely?

Fiona Hyslop: I do that. I stress the importance of establishing the ferries community board as part of the CHFS 3 contract and its role in identifying the key performance indicators for that contract.

On the enhancement and change plan that CalMac has announced, I said that it is not business as usual and that there has to be change. Having six regions with six area managers would enable greater ability to respond to needs and services and, importantly, to

communicate. In my discussion with islanders, the communication of what can be recognised as genuinely needed changes in services is also an important aspect of what that improvement can look like.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): It is good to hear that progress is being made across the CalMac network. As a Highlands and Islands MSP, I know that the performance and future of our ferries and ports are a source of deep concern and frustration. Beyond the unavoidable tidal and weather-related issues, 10 ferry routes in my region are today on restricted timetables or cancelled altogether.

Although I welcome the proposals for six local area manager posts in the CalMac enhancement and change plan, as well as the news that some local people are already in place, will the minister outline what has been put in place to ensure that island communities will always be embedded in the decision making on their ferry services?

Fiona Hyslop: There will be different routes for that. The KPIs will embed islanders' lived experience in relation to satisfaction. The whole point of having a direct award is that CalMac will be focused on delivering a public service rather than on simply working to contract in delivering a pre-existing contract. As I have mentioned before, the role of the ferries community board is critical. The representation of islanders—not necessarily to represent any particular island but to bring an islander perspective to wider governance issues—will be a requirement for the CalMac and CMAL boards.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): There was a lot of detail in the statement, cabinet secretary, and there is clearly a pipeline of new vessels that will be added to the network in the near future. Does the Scottish Government have any figures on the net benefit of all the new vessels in terms of increased vessel capacity and—just as important to island communities—in terms of network resilience?

Fiona Hyslop: On capacity issues, I have already said in answer to another member that the two new vessels for the Islay routes—the MV Isle of Islay and MV Loch Indaal—will have an increased capacity. They will each have capacity for 14 HGVs and deck capacity for 100 passengers. Overall, if we combine their capacity, the vessels have space for 28 HGVs. That compares with a maximum capacity of 18 HGVs on the existing vessels and equates to 55 per cent more deck space for HGVs. That applies to the sister vessels, which will have a similar capacity configuration.

On phase 1 of the small vessel replacement programme, members will see that the increase in capacity there equates to 40 per cent.

Another aspect is reliability and resilience. With new vessels coming into the fleet to provide reliable and resilient ferry services, that will automatically increase available capacity on some key routes.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): There is little that generates more public anger than the scandal of the ferries. We have had yet more of that today with, again, broken ageing ferries, delayed new ferries and stranded islanders.

The cabinet secretary has been particularly evasive today. She has been asked a number of times about what she is referring to when she says that cuts are coming because of the financial position. I think that she has a duty to spell out to members exactly what she means.

Fiona Hyslop: Going forward, we have to ensure that the public purse can deliver on key public services. This Government is focused on delivering on four key missions, and improving public services is one of them. Ferries are clearly part of the transport aspect of public services.

It would be wrong for me to identify that. We have frozen fares in the past and we have minimised cost increases in looking at the future development of ports and harbours and in a number of other areas. We have to drive down costs and be harder and smarter at making sure that the business cases that are presented to us for delivery achieve value for money, because we are doing this in the context of years of austerity. As Shona Robison quite rightly pointed out, it was the Liberal Democrats, as part of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government, that heralded the start of austerity in this country.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The MV Alfred was first chartered in April 2023 for an initial period of nine months at a cost of £9 million—or £1 million per month. There have been two further extensions, with the latest extension scheduled to end in March 2025. That will mean that the MV Alfred will have been chartered for just short of 24 months. Can the cabinet secretary advise me what the total cost to the taxpayer of that charter will be? If she does not have that figure to hand, can she at least confirm whether the total cost of the nearly two-year charter is more or less than the reported £14.5 million cost to Pentland Ferries Ltd to buy the ferry outright in the first place?

Fiona Hyslop: I expect that it will be more, but it is right that I, as the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, and my predecessors, ensured that there was cover and resilience for our island communities in the CHFS network. I do not think

that the member is suggesting that we should not have done that.

We have continually looked at the purchasing of vessels to help with resilience, and, as the member knows very well, for freight for the Northern Isles ferry service network in particular. Is it satisfactory? No, it is not. As the minister who represents the customer base for receipt of the incoming ferries, I am as frustrated as others are about the increased cost of providing that additional cover. That is frustrating, but in a purchase, there has to be a willing seller to purchase from at a satisfactory price. I am not necessarily referring to the MV Alfred, but to all the other vessels that we are looking at.

However, we have particular needs. In particular, the Arran route has proved to be very important and helpful in providing that cover. I look forward to the six new vessels by 2026 and the seven new small vessel replacements that I announced in the summer that are being procured starting to provide that necessary resilience in the Scottish fleet.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): During the summer, I have received a lot of communication from islanders who have not been able to make the necessary ferry journeys. Has the Scottish Government given any thought to making contractual provision for a Samsø-style ticketing system, whereby separate allocations are maintained to ensure that islanders are given an equitable level of priority on sailings in the next CHFS contract?

Fiona Hyslop: The CHFS 2 contract includes a commitment for a smart ticketing platform. On the issue of islanders and places for islanders on routes, the member might not be aware, but we are already piloting that in the current deck space reservation pilot for Mull, Coll and Tiree. In CalMac's enhancement and change plan, which was published in July, if the pilot delivers the intended benefit, the intention is to engage with communities on rolling out that plan to ensure that islanders have reserved places. We know that that is essential for short-notice and pressurised immediate sailings that islanders need. I reassure the member that we are not only thinking about it, we are piloting it, and there is a commitment to roll it out should the pilot prove successful.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you. That concludes the ministerial statement on Clyde and Hebrides ferries. We move on to the next item of business. I will allow a moment for the front benches to organise themselves.

Before we move on to the next item of business, I will take the opportunity to alert members to the

fact that business is running approximately 20 minutes late.

Mobile Phones in Schools

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Jenny Gilruth on mobile phones and behaviour and relationships in school. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

16:48

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am pleased to update Parliament on the Scottish Government's new guidance on mobile phones in schools and on our joint action plan on relationships and behaviour in schools with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. I know that the topic is of great interest to colleagues from across the chamber and to their constituents.

When we debated the topic back in March, I said that we are all striving for our schools and classrooms to be free from violence and disruption so that our young people can learn and our teaching staff can work safely. In recognition of that shared aspiration, in April, I had a constructive meeting with education spokespeople from Opposition parties to discuss our work on relationships and behaviour and to provide them with the opportunity to feed in their priorities to the action plan.

I begin by reminding colleagues of the key findings of the behaviour in Scottish schools research that we published in November last year. That externally commissioned research involved almost 4,000 school staff across Scotland and provides a nationally representative picture of what is happening in our schools. Although there will be local variations, it provides robust evidence on which to base the action plan and guidance on mobile phones.

What BISSR shows—a key point that we should not lose sight of—is that most children and young people are generally well behaved in class and around school. However, I accept that that research also tells us, as does the evidence that has been gathered by our teaching unions and has come through the series of relationships and behaviour summits that I chaired last year, that behaviour is absolutely not where it should be and that, post-pandemic, things have become much more challenging in our classrooms, for a range of reasons. With that in mind, I wish to begin with the development of the refreshed guidance on mobile phone use.

Recently, I have been reading “The Anxious Generation”, by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, which highlights the broad impact on young people of increased access to smartphones,

screens and social media. The impacts that he highlights—such as poor mental health, addiction, and sleep deprivation—are all factors that impact on young people's readiness to learn. It is clear from BISSR but also from the programme for international student assessment that mobile phones are having a substantial impact in our classrooms, disrupting learning and often causing conflict.

When I launched the mobile phone guidance at Stonelaw high school in Rutherglen last month, I heard directly from pupils and staff about the impact of mobile phones on their day-to-day classroom experience. Before the summer, nearly 700 pupils monitored and mined their own screen time during one period of personal and social education. Some of their teachers also took part in the exercise. Pupils and teachers alike were shocked by the results. On average, each pupil received 18 notifications during that one-hour lesson. Multiply that by the number of pupils in a class, and we can see how much disruption is caused to pupils' concentration.

Members will know that, as cabinet secretary, I do not currently have the power to ban mobile phones. However, the updated national guidance goes as far towards a national ban as I am currently able to go, by setting out the Government's clear support for whole-school bans. Our headteachers are empowered to take the steps that they consider appropriate to create an environment that is free from the disruption that is caused by mobile phones—an environment in which pupils are better able to focus on their learning and actively listen to one another, and which supports positive relationships between peers and with staff. If such an environment is best created by banning phones in the entirety of the school estate and for the entirety of the school day, the guidance supports such a decision.

Headteachers know their schools best, and the guidance provides them with the flexibility that works for them and their local context. At Stonelaw, for example, following engagement with pupils, parents and staff, the school has prohibited mobile phones in learning and teaching areas during learning and teaching time. That protects the learning environment while respecting the personal time of children and young people during breaks. When I spoke to the staff and pupils, I heard that they appreciated the school taking that balanced approach. They spoke about the trust placed in pupils through allowing the continued use of mobile phones in certain areas and at certain times. The privilege that was given to them by their teachers was not something that pupils wanted to abuse. Fundamentally, they recognised that, for them, a successful approach required a bit of give and take, and the adoption of a

collaborative approach helped everyone to approach the changes positively.

I turn now to the joint action plan on relationships and behaviour, which I also launched during my visit to Stonelaw. As I have done every time that I have spoken on this topic in the chamber, I reiterate that our schools should be safe and consistent learning environments for all pupils and staff. However, from the engagement that I have undertaken over the past year, it has been clear that relationships and behaviour in our schools have changed since the pandemic. Although discussions in the chamber have often focused on increases in violence and aggression, we have also heard that the challenges are far more wide ranging and complex.

Schools are dealing with a wide variety of challenges that they would not have faced five or 10 years ago. Those include children and young people who are much less mature than expected, with difficulties communicating their emotions and navigating social dynamics; many who struggle with their mental health, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic and the stress that has been caused by the cost-of-living crisis; the rise of right-wing influencers, which has an impact on the prevalence of misogyny towards pupils and staff; and, as I have said, the prevalence of mobile phones, which disrupt learning and teaching.

The behaviour action plan is therefore ambitious in responding to that wide variety of concerns. It contains 20 overarching actions under eight themes that we will take forward over the next three years. These actions address not only violence but the breadth of areas identified as being priorities, including consequences; recording and monitoring; children and young people's wellbeing; attendance; and empowering staff to reinforce positive relationships and behaviour. The plan balances setting clear national direction through the provision of guidance and developing capacity through enhanced practical guidance and support for local authorities and schools delivered by organisations such as Education Scotland.

Importantly, the plan is jointly owned by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, given that the statutory responsibility for the delivery of education rests with our councils. The plan has been developed in collaboration with the Scottish advisory group for relationships and behaviour in schools—SAGRABIS—which includes COSLA, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland, the NASUWT, the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association, the Association of Heads and Deputies in Scotland, School Leaders Scotland, Unison, the Scottish Council of Deans of Education, educational psychologists, respectme and parents representatives.

The value of the plan having been developed by SAGRABIS and all the partners I just mentioned is that all the partners who have a role in implementing the plan have also helped to shape the priorities and actions within it. SAGRABIS will monitor the implementation of the plan over the next three years and will adjust it as necessary in light of any emerging issues, including those that are brought to us by the teaching profession.

I want to acknowledge the frustration that some colleagues have felt about how long it has taken to publish the action plan. I had intended to publish it before the summer but, having considered the advice on activity during the United Kingdom Parliament pre-election period, I took the decision to launch as soon as possible in the new school term.

I want to provide reassurance to colleagues that, while we have been developing the plan, we have continued to implement action to support schools and their staff. The new mobile phone guidance is an example of that, but it does not stand on its own. Rather, it supplements the suite of support that has been announced since last November, including new funding for training of support staff in direct response to findings of the behaviour in Scottish schools research that staff would welcome such training; new guidance on preventing and responding to gender-based violence in schools to address emerging trends surrounding misogyny; additional data and support to improve attendance, including guidance on professional learning, networking and exemplification launched by Education Scotland last week; and support spearheaded by our new interim chief inspector to ensure that His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education inspections support improvement.

The progress that I have set out today is not the end of our journey. We will continue to focus on and bring forward actions over the coming weeks and months. That includes the publication later this year of refreshed guidance on anti-bullying, work on consequences and additional information to enhance understanding of secondary 4 leavers was published this morning.

The development of the mobile phone guidance and the action plan was a collaborative effort involving many stakeholders, not just those in SAGRABIS but all those who participated in the behaviour in Scottish schools research and the relationships and behaviour summits, or who have spoken to me about their experiences in the classroom or supporting their child. I thank everyone who has shared their experiences with us to inform this important work.

I recognise that there are unlikely to be quick, easy fixes in addressing these challenges—neither can nor should they be addressed by

schools alone. It will take sustained effort by everyone who has a role to play to improve the situation. The willingness of all to have constructive conversations about the scale of the challenge and the actions that are needed means that I am confident that that shared commitment exists.

Presiding Officer, in that spirit, I very much hope that everyone across the chamber can support the plan and the trajectory that it puts in place to improve relationships and behaviour in Scotland's schools for the benefit of our children and young people, our teaching staff and our whole school community.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move to the next item of business. I would be grateful if those who wish to put a question to the cabinet secretary would press their request-to-speak button.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I am grateful for advance sight of the statement, but, like the guidance on mobile phones and the behaviour action plan, the statement is long on words and very short on detail.

To be fair, the cabinet secretary acknowledges that it has taken far too long to produce the behaviour action plan, from when the Scottish Conservatives first demanded it, in spring 2023, through to the various groups from which Opposition spokespersons were excluded and the delay this summer.

She fails to mention that the EIS said that the plan will be little more than a wish list without the necessary allocation of funding and resources, and that a real opportunity will be wasted. Perhaps most worryingly, the statement about the plan provides little clarity about how and when it will be implemented.

I have three questions for the cabinet secretary. What does her planning tell her would constitute the necessary allocation of funding and resources, and will councils and schools be given those? When precisely will the outcomes set out under theme 7, on tracking impact and progress, be achieved? Finally, when will the cabinet secretary provide clarity about the range of approaches and consequences that are available, including the use of exclusion where there is no appropriate alternative?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Kerr covers a few different areas, and I will try to respond to each in turn.

First, I will pick up on a favourite topic for Mr Kerr and others in this chamber, which is the issue of Opposition spokespeople not being invited to a

series of meetings that I held with teachers and others who work in education. I make no apology for that. It was really important to create a safe space in which teaching staff could share their experiences of what had happened in schools, and I do not think that having other politicians in the room would have been helpful to that.

However, Mr Kerr also knows that I am a collegiate cabinet secretary and that I engage with him regularly on a range of educational matters, which is exactly why I met with Opposition members prior to the election to talk about our plans. Broadly, and particularly in relation to behaviour in schools, we have seen quite good party consensus. We may hear more about that in the questions that will follow.

Mr Kerr asked specifically about consequences and about exclusion. For his understanding, I will say that new anti-bullying guidance will be published by the end of this year and, on Friday, Education Scotland published updated attendance guidance. I also draw his attention to an infographic that the Scottish Government published today, which looks specifically at data regarding pupils leaving school after secondary 4. He knows that I am currently concerned about our S4 leavers' trajectories and positive destinations and that I am also concerned about their behaviour and attendance.

His third point related to consequences, which will be covered in the action plan that is to be published by March next year. We are working with the headteachers task force that I established last year to further develop that. Mr Kerr mentioned exclusion, which will also feature in the updated action plan in March. I can give him further practical examples from the guidance that is being published today, not least the guidance on mobile phones.

He made points about the EIS and about resources. The EIS was part of SAGRABIS and took part in formulating the guidance, which it broadly welcomed. I recognise Mr Kerr's point about resources, but he also recognises that, this year, the Scottish Government is investing record levels in our education system. If he wants me to invest more, I must ask him from where that would come, because, at the current time—

The Presiding Officer: Please be brief, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: —we have an incoming Labour Government that seems to be mirroring the spending decisions of the outgoing Conservative Government, which will impact on the resources I have at my disposal as cabinet secretary. I am sure that Mr Kerr would be keen to work with me to ensure that we have additionality from the new

UK Government so that this can be adequately resourced.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The publication of the guidance, although long overdue, is welcome, but I worry that the devil will be in the detail of how it is implemented, because, as we have heard, the general secretary of the EIS has said that implementation of the national guidance will need resources.

I therefore come today with a possible solution for the cabinet secretary. Instead of the planned redirection of funding from regional improvement collaboratives to the Government's centre for teaching excellence—which most of those in the sector do not think is needed, and which the EIS has said will not address the challenges that the cabinet secretary has set out today, which her statement recognised—does she agree that the money would be better spent if it was given to schools to support the implementation of the approach that is set out in the behaviour in schools plan?

Jenny Gilruth: I am glad that the member welcomes the publication of the plan. She is correct in saying that the devil will be in the detail.

In developing the guidance, I was very mindful of the fact that it is not for the Government to instruct schools in how to implement behaviour plans. We need to trust Scotland's teaching profession. I see the member nodding in agreement. When I visited Stonelaw high school two weeks ago to launch the guidance, I spoke to the headteacher in that school about how she was implementing a mobile phone ban. She has taken a much more nuanced approach than the school that I previously taught at in Edinburgh, where the approach is, I understand, more of a whole-school ban. She has taken that approach by getting buy-in from her staff and pupils. I was really struck by the way in which she has allowed that devil in the detail, I suppose, to come to fruition in her school community. However, she has also used, I think, some of the founding principles that the national action plan sets out.

One of the points that headteachers raised with me at the behaviour summits was about the need for Government at the national level to set out a clear expectation on the issue, and that is what I have been keen to do throughout the process.

The member asked a question about the RICs and the centre for teaching excellence. It is important that we do not pit funding to support the profession against funding that is needed to respond to changes in behaviour. I make the point to her that I do not want to take funding away from supporting the teaching profession. Excellent learning and teaching are really important, but I want additionality—

Pam Duncan-Glancy: When?

Jenny Gilruth: I hear the member shouting, "When?" from a sedentary position. I do not yet have clarity on the VAT that the Labour Government has told us is going to flow to Government from private schools, and I also do not have clarity on the 6,500 extra teachers that the Labour Party promised the rest of the UK. I presume that I am going to get consequentials. However, if I had some certainty about both of those funding streams, perhaps I could give additionality for the behaviour in Scottish schools work.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware that some pupils have unique personal circumstances that mean that they require their phones. Can she say more about how the published guidance considers pupils—such as our young carers and those with neurodiversities, mental health struggles or mental conditions—who may need exemptions from school-wide mobile phone policies?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises a really important point that relates to the response that I gave to Pam Duncan-Glancy. It is important that we do not have a monolithic national approach to the matter. The guidance makes it clear that, when school guidance is developed or refreshed, there is a need for schools to look at a range of individual circumstances that might apply. The member has given examples of those.

I know from my previous experience in the classroom that some young people may need that contact. They may need to monitor medication, for example, and young carers may need to remain in touch with family members about their care. In some cases, mobile phones may be a source of support for pupils with additional support needs. Those matters will be known to school communities and they need a tailored response. That is why it is hugely important that we trust our headteachers to get implementation of the policy right. That might look different in different schools, which is why the member's points about pupils and their needs are so important.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I note that the Scottish Government has given support for whole-school bans by empowering headteachers to take the steps that they consider to be appropriate, and I entirely agree with the statement that

"Headteachers know their schools best".

However, can the cabinet secretary explain why the Scottish Government is so reluctant to give headteachers even greater autonomy so that they can take whatever steps they believe are required

not only to improve behaviour but to raise attainment?

Jenny Gilruth: Roz McCall has raised an important point. I pay tribute to her interest in the issue. We have met to discuss it and she has written to me on a number of occasions, particularly in relation to challenges in her region.

On headteachers' autonomy, we as a Government have always pursued a policy approach that seeks to empower the teaching profession—in particular, headteachers—in Scotland's schools. One of the ways in which we have been able to exemplify that is through the funding for the Scottish attainment challenge, which flows directly to headteachers and empowers them to take decisions about additional funding in their schools and where that is best placed. That is evidence of us trusting Scotland's headteachers in practice.

More broadly, I am amenable to the member's suggestion about empowering headteachers further. Of course, I need to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, recognising its responsibilities, but I am amenable to that because I trust our headteachers. Post-pandemic, we perhaps need to revisit that empowerment agenda, which is one on which we probably agree.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): Last month, as she referenced in her statement, the cabinet secretary visited Stonelaw high school in my Rutherglen constituency, which developed its new mobile phone policy following a process of engagement and discussion with young people. Does the cabinet secretary agree that similar approaches will be key to ensuring that young people feel that they have shared ownership of their schools' policies?

Jenny Gilruth: I put on record, given that Stonelaw high school is in Clare Haughey's constituency, that it is an outstanding school, with an outstanding headteacher and some outstanding young people. I was delighted to meet them two weeks ago, not only to launch the mobile phone guidance, but to talk to them about their experiences of how they have been engaged in policy development. They feel, which I think is hugely important, that they have ownership over the policy, rather than feeling that it is something that is being done to them.

Stonelaw high school gives us an example of how engagement through the curriculum has generated an understanding of the impact of phones on learning. That has really helped to build co-operation with the policy, not just among young people but with their parents and the wider community. I know, from initial feedback from pupils and staff, that the guidance is working and

that young people and staff alike feel that they have ownership of the policy. It is certainly an example that I would support other schools in following.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The Government published the "Education Outcomes for Looked after Children 2022/23" report, which shows that care-experienced pupils face significant challenges in achieving academic success, in comparison with their peers. Those are some of the young people who are most at risk in the environment that today's statement addresses. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the Government has details of the risk profile of that group? How will those young people feed into the guidance, and how will they be included as looked-after children, as is their right, when the guidance is created?

Jenny Gilruth: Martin Whitfield raises a hugely important point. I note that the risk profile would be owned by the local authority, not by the central Government. The authority would have the data on the individual pupils in its cohort, and it would know and understand which of its pupils were care experienced. I would expect headteachers in schools to consider that in their application of the policy. To go back to a previous question from a member, I expect headteachers to work with their cohort on the basis of that risk profile, and to address the needs of, and to support accordingly, pupils who might need access to a mobile phone throughout the school day.

Nevertheless, Martin Whitfield raises an important point. It is also worth my while to remind members that, through the Scottish attainment challenge, there is a specific funding stream that supports looked-after children and care-experienced young people. In addition, through mechanisms such as the virtual school headteachers network, for example, we have been able to support care-experienced young people and get them back into school when, perhaps, in the past they might, for a variety of reasons, not have been able to engage.

We will always work with local authorities to that end. I have set out some of the examples at national level, but with regard to the risk profile, the data set belongs to local authorities, and the legislation sets out that statutory responsibility rests with them.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Digital technology can provide another platform for bullying, harassment and abuse, and it is vital that we keep working to ensure that staff and pupils are safe. Can the cabinet secretary speak to how the guidance, alongside the equally safe in schools programme, feeds into the promotion of positive relationships and anti-bullying policies?

Jenny Gilruth: With regard to developing positive relationships, it is fundamental that we recall that the types of behaviour and relationships approaches that are now used in Scotland's schools are not those that most members in the chamber would have experienced 20-plus years ago. We have moved away from what was previously, I would argue, a relatively punitive approach to behaviour to one that is much more supportive. Throughout the past year, we have heard examples of where that has undoubtedly created tension.

However, I think that the national action plan is important in setting out expectations not only around behaviour, but around where we will go next. To go back to Liam Kerr's point about consequences, and recording and monitoring, I say that all that needs to be developed with the teaching profession, with our teachers and young people and with their interests at heart.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The cabinet secretary knows that I try not to be cynical, but I am struggling to understand the purpose of the mobile phone guidance. It consists of 10 pages that could be summarised in a single line: "You, as schools, have the same power to restrict mobile phones as you've always had."

The cabinet secretary will be well aware of the cynicism that so many teachers feel—quite rightly—about the huge amounts of guidance that are being produced by the Government and by Education Scotland, but with little, if anything, ever actually changing. What is the additional value of the guidance, when nothing has actually changed in terms of what schools can or cannot do?

Jenny Gilruth: I note Mr Greer's cynicism. He will know that, as a former secondary school teacher, I share it, generally. I note that he received a small clap from Liam Kerr when he made that point; I am not sure if he was—

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): It was me.

Jenny Gilruth: Oh. I apologise.

To go back to the substance, this is not another example of guidance that is not going to have an impact. It is a three-year plan, and it will be monitored, which is quite different from the situation with other guidance that has been published previously. It will be monitored and the outcome will be published, and that will be shared with the Education, Children and Young People Committee, which I know is taking a very keen interest in the matter.

My final point is that the advice and guidance have not come from thin air. They have come at the behest of the profession, which asked me, as cabinet secretary, for a clearer direction on behaviour. The profession was very clear that

things have changed post-pandemic, and it asked for clear guidance from central Government on expectations about behaviour and relationships. We have responded to that call through the national action plan.

As I intimated in my statement, this is not the end of the road: it is part of a process. I have set out a range of measures that we have already taken in the past year, but the action plan will be reported on every year for the next three years, and that will be the marker of progress.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I am supportive of these moves. Please correct me if I am oversimplifying, but is it not the case that the most important aspect is that headteachers know their schools best and that empowering teachers to take the steps that best fit their learning environments is surely the correct approach? Can the cabinet secretary provide examples of how the latest guidance will support schools to make the best choices for their pupils?

Jenny Gilruth: I agree with Mr Adam. I mentioned previously that, fundamentally, the guidance sets out our expectation that, as a Government, we trust Scotland's headteachers to deliver improved behaviour and relationships in our classrooms. The guidance goes some way to supporting that. The guidance also recognises and respects the role of headteachers. That perhaps contrasts with the approach that has been taken in other parts of the UK, where the Government has decided on a national ban. I think that, in education, it is far better to work with the professionals in whom we trust and who work in our classrooms on a daily basis. I have been clear that the decision on whether to introduce bans on mobile phones is entirely one for headteachers. However, if they choose to do so, they will have my full support.

The member asked for an example. I have spoken at length about Stonelaw high school's approach, which has been possible only because of the leadership of the headteacher in that school in supporting her staff and her young people and engaging with the wider community. That is an example of good practice. I am sure that other headteachers will take their own approaches, but the fundamental point is that the Scottish Government trusts Scotland's headteachers to enact a ban, should they see fit.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I give credit to the cabinet secretary for the focus that she has put on behaviour issues. I think that she gets the problem, and it is good to have a new action plan but, fundamentally, I cannot see what is new. We have lots of guidance, lots of documents and lots of action plans that will be monitored, but I am not sure exactly what will be monitored. What has fundamentally changed?

Lots of the teachers I have spoken to are completely oblivious to the guidance. They have not read the action plan and have not seen it. Will the cabinet secretary take the opportunity now to set out concisely what is different?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Rennie asked what will be monitored. Of course, the action plan will be monitored over the course of the next year, but let me give an example of some of the things that are in the action plan. For example, one point that we have discussed at length relates to consequences. A range of measures can be taken in relation to consequences in school. In fact, Mr Rennie and I and others discussed that very recently. It is important that the action plan identifies what acceptable consequences look like. That is a clear-cut example of something that is different, as it is not something that the Government has specified before.

The other ask that came to the Government from the profession, from parents and from young people was for a definition of violence. We perhaps discussed that previously, too. That will be set out under the action plan. That has never been set out by Government before, and I think that it is important.

The further work that I talked about relates to the work that Education Scotland is undertaking. The work in relation to S4 leaver data was published on Friday, which is really important, and there is work in relation to attendance more generally, where we know that there are real challenges post-pandemic, particularly with certain year groups.

The action plan will be monitored by SAGRABIS, not just by central Government. We will be held to account in relation to the actions in the plan.

Of course, the action plan has been published. I am sorry to hear that Mr Rennie's constituents have not engaged with it, but I am sure that, as a constituency MSP, he could help to furnish them with a copy of the action plan and to share it widely, because it is hugely important that the profession is engaged with it.

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: Of course, the action plan itself came from the profession, which was part of creating it in co-production with the Scottish Government and Scotland's teaching unions.

Sue Webber: Leadership is about taking bold and courageous decisions. Alongside teaching groups and experts such as Lindsay Paterson, I have been calling for a ban on mobile phones in classrooms for quite some time now. Can the cabinet secretary confirm today that the approach

in her action plan will empower our schools and headteachers to take the necessary action to do that, or are we, in the words of Lindsay Paterson,

"leaving it up to schools to argue it out with resentful adolescents and stropky parents"?

Jenny Gilruth: Yes, it will empower headteachers to undertake a mobile phone ban. Many schools already have one. I read a piece in one of the newspapers in relation to Mr Paterson's views on the issue. I am slightly concerned that he does not understand the limitations on my powers as cabinet secretary. I cannot enforce a national ban—I do not have that power. However, local authorities, who run our schools, have that power. That is why I trust Scotland's headteachers to get it right in their schools. I support Scotland's headteachers in taking the right decisions for the young people in their care. I am not sure whether Mr Paterson disagrees with that statement, but I do not.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): The cabinet secretary mentioned in her statement the broad impact that increased access to smartphones, screens and social media is having on young people in terms of mental health addiction and sleep deprivation. Digital technology and social media have provided an anonymous platform for unacceptable conduct that might not normally happen face to face. Obviously, that is a problem for wider society and is not just about young people. That said, however, can the cabinet secretary say more about how the guidance will help schools to support good, healthy behaviour online?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises an important point. I am sure that colleagues in the chamber will engage with teachers and parents and carers in their constituencies, and that they will recognise some of the challenges that Ms Maguire has outlined in relation to behaviour online.

The guidance makes it clear that unacceptable behaviour, whether online or not, is unacceptable. That applies in the playground, the classroom or anywhere else. However, there is a limitation to where schools can act in that regard, which is why having really strong home-link relationships is hugely important. It is also why the development of a behaviour action plan includes having strong parental links. Having high expectations for respectful and responsible conduct should also be rooted in a school's existing positive relationships and behaviour policies.

More broadly, there is an issue and a challenge around the use of social media and behaviour online, and schools are no different in that regard. However, there is an opportunity, through the refreshed guidance on acceptable behaviours and

linking that to the curriculum, to consider further learning on the use of digital technologies and in relation to the internet. I know that schools are taking that forward at the current time, and we will continue to support them in that development through the behaviour action plan.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on mobile phones and behaviour and relationships in school.

Decision Time

17:32

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We move to decision time. There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business, so that concludes decision time.

Winchburgh Train Station

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-14125, in the name of Sue Webber, on a new Winchburgh train station. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the view that there is a need for a new train station at Winchburgh; further notes the belief that a new station is essential because Winchburgh people need a sustainable, low-carbon alternative to the car to access jobs and services in Edinburgh, especially in light of 4,000 extra homes reportedly being built as part of the Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal; understands that a study from transport consultants, Systra, estimates that a station would remove just short of 420,000 car journeys a year, which will help the Scottish Government and local authorities to achieve their net zero goals; further understands that passengers would save £2.4 million per year, and that there will be £3.5 million of decongestion benefits per year; notes that Winchburgh Developments has already spent over £50 million on transport improvements for the town, including a new junction on the M9, and welcomes its ambition and work towards bringing what is considered to be this vital transport link to Winchburgh.

17:34

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I thank everyone who has stayed behind this evening and is contributing to the debate. Most people will know that its subject has been close to my heart since I was elected as an MSP.

Last year, I launched an online campaign to call for the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland to come together to fund and build a new train station at Winchburgh. In April, campaigners and residents from Winchburgh came to the Scottish Parliament to deliver to the Scottish National Party Government a petition with more than 2,000 signatures that asked for a train station to be built at Winchburgh. Along with many other members, I was pleased to meet those people that day and show my support for that vital campaign. I am therefore glad to have the chance to raise the issue in Parliament on our first day back.

On one of the rare dry days in the summer, I managed to get out and have another insightful tour around what is a rapidly growing village. Some SNP ministers may criticise me for being late to the campaign for the station. However, in August 2020, prior to my election in 2021, my sister bought her home in Winchburgh. I knew then how desperately the community needed—as it still needs—such a station. On my election day, I vowed to do all that I could to deliver a station for the people of Winchburgh.

Winchburgh is a vibrant and growing community in West Lothian that finds itself isolated from the national rail network. The lack of direct access severely restricts the ability of residents to reach essential medical services, pursue educational opportunities and connect with employment across the region. The establishment of a new railway station would dramatically enhance connectivity and ease congestion in West Lothian and the west end of Edinburgh. Given the absolute chaos that is on the A8 right now, it would have been quite mindful to have had a station there—if a little time travel could have been involved.

All those elements would support our ambitions to provide sustainable transport solutions. After all, the region anticipates 4,000 new families as a direct result of the investment that will be leveraged from the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal. Demand for more robust public transport options has never been more urgent and will continue to grow.

Winchburgh Developments Ltd is the principal landowner and has worked in partnership with Winchburgh community council and Winchburgh Community Development Trust. The local authority and the Scottish Government specified that integrated travel must be a key part of the overall development. Already, we have lots of shops, a pharmacy—soon to be two pharmacies—and new schools and motorway junctions. Winchburgh Developments paid £20 million towards making all of that possible.

Winchburgh Developments has clearly shown considerable commitment to the expanding community. The motorway junction has certainly helped the already busy bus service and made it much easier for the average two-car household to literally get out of the fast lane and into the capital. However, improving the roads so that cars can move around more easily does not do much for integrating travel or our net zero ambitions. The main railway line west from Edinburgh runs through the middle of the development site. A space around the track is set aside for a new station, and plenty of car parking space is already there. A station would keep thousands of people currently in cars off the roads virtually every day of the year—they would go by the train tracks.

That is what integrated travel means. We hear again and again about the importance of getting people out of their cars and on to mass public transport solutions. There is no point in getting on a bus to sit in a traffic jam on the A8, St John's Road and Corstorphine Road all the way into town; that defeats the purpose. We are talking about an 11-minute train journey versus a 47 or 48-minute commute by road on a good day.

A study from transport consultant Systra estimates that a station would remove 420,000 car

journeys a year, help passengers to save £2.4 million a year and offer £3.5 million in decongestion benefits. However, despite a commitment from the developers of several million pounds, which has been ring fenced from the outset, and despite the offer of as much professional help as is required to physically plan and build a station, the Scottish Government continues to refuse to meet a penny of the shortfall, although that would guarantee integrated travel for potentially tens of thousands of people.

I do not at all understand the logic in that. I appreciate that finding £10 million, especially in the current climate, will not be easy, but that is a fraction of the cost of the Scottish Government-approved tram project in Edinburgh, which was so badly mishandled. Let us not even start to do the maths on what proportion of a properly organised ferry contract—we heard about that earlier—that sum might be.

The developers have faced so many barriers, not least of which are the sluggish Labour-controlled councils in West Lothian and Edinburgh, and the reluctance of Transport Scotland. When I visited, I saw extraordinary progress, and the quality of the homes that are being built there is notably high. It is no wonder that people want to move there. It is not a dreary estate but an exciting new place to live, with affordable homes built to mirror the old miners' cottages, so that there is a real sense of place and continuity. Everywhere we look, there are new homes. It is quite a transformation, and the pace of change continues at an accelerated speed.

Until recently, there was nothing but excuse after excuse from Transport Scotland. In fairness, the new SNP connectivity minister, Mr Jim Fairlie, responded positively to WDL's determination and community pressure. I thank him for that. Blockages might be dissolving and money might be found. I see no viable reason why the new main line halt cannot be built by the end of 2026 to give new residents vital links to their workplaces and the extended services that are available from all the various neighbouring areas.

There is, of course, another very good reason for building a new station at Winchburgh. The physical station, tracks, rolling stock and everything else would be built by members of the Railway Industry Association. The RIA has been the trade body for the supply chain part of the industry for more than 150 years and it already brings 56,000 jobs of all levels to Scotland. Just think how many more would be created in a part of West Lothian that badly needs the good-quality jobs that the rail industry would bring for men and women.

I have quite a bit left to say, Presiding Officer. Is it okay for me to carry on?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: For a short time, yes.

Sue Webber: I promise that I will not go on all night.

RIA Scotland supports the campaign for a new station at Winchburgh. I was not there—funnily enough—but I have heard that, at an SNP conference fringe meeting, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, in whose constituency the development lies, said that the station is a rather good idea. With her support and that of every other party in Parliament, who else do we need to persuade to make it happen?

We do not have the luxury of time in West Lothian. If we do not start to make a new station in the next 24 months, we will lose the space that has been ring fenced for the station and car park, as the demand to build more houses will mean that the land is needed for homes. We will find a few more property owners who have zero transport integration beyond an increasingly busy new road junction.

I commend Winchburgh Developments for its commitment and substantial contribution to making the vision a reality. Its involvement is testament to the power of community and corporate collaboration in driving forward public projects. It is now time for the Scottish Government to match that. A new station at Winchburgh is essential. It is not only a necessity to alleviate mounting congestion in our capital but a critical factor in meeting the Scottish Government's failing net zero ambitions.

17:42

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I thank Sue Webber for lodging the motion for debate. Before I speak about the proposal for a railway station at Winchburgh, I bring it to members' attention that my wife, Janet Campbell, has been the local councillor for Winchburgh since 2007. Both my wife and my friend and colleague Fiona Hyslop have been at the forefront of the community campaign to bring a station to the area. There have been plans for a railway station going all the way back to the original Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement plan, but unfortunately they had to be dropped because of the financial crash in 2008, which saw a reduction in the capital funding that was available at the time. However, we should always remember that this is and has always been a developer-led initiative, and it was used to support the case for building the new town at Winchburgh.

The development of the village into a new town has been taking shape over many years since planning permission was granted in April 2012. Since then, there have been new high schools,

feeder primary schools, a new retail centre, a new public park at Auldathie and nearly 3,800 new homes, which brings the old village of Winchburgh up to the size of Linlithgow, but there is still no station.

Given the growth of the surrounding area, it came as no surprise that, in the autumn of 2019, Transport Scotland and Network Rail announced that they were going to examine again the proposal for a chord to the Dalmeny to Winchburgh junction line. That would be considered as part of the Edinburgh Waverley western approaches project. The constituency MSP, Fiona Hyslop, hosted a visit by the then Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, Mike Matheson, and representatives of numerous transport groups including ScotRail and Network Rail.

The obstacle is funding, as it always was. The development company, West Coast Capital, had budgeted £10 million for the Winchburgh railway station, but that was pre-Brexit and pre-Covid. The impact has been that construction inflation has increased by nearly a quarter in recent years, and it is expected to increase by a further 15 per cent over the coming five years. The result is that the developer is seeking funding from the public sector, but at a time when the Scottish Government has had its capital budget cut in real terms by Westminster.

There is no doubt that there is a need for a station at Winchburgh, given that a new station could serve more than 13,000 people within walking distance of it—and double that number could travel to the station to use the facility. Given the reduced 15-minute journey time by train, which is substantially quicker than the current 50 minutes by car or 60 minutes to Waverley by bus, I believe that a substantial number of people would become regular rail commuters. We have the passengers and the trains; we just need a station.

We need to find a way forward, and Winchburgh rail steering group is considering one possible solution—to progress the preparation of the business case for the railway station as an essential element of the application for city region deal strategic site funding. That fund is worth at least £50 million, and it is to be shared across seven key areas, including Winchburgh. A substantial contribution would still be needed from the developer, but a partnership with the Scottish Government would help to remove tens of thousands of car journeys per year from our roads, resulting in improved air quality and a reduction in greenhouse gases.

The steering group is supported by the local MSP, Fiona Hyslop, and local councillors. They have agreed a set of actions and they are moving

the project forward together. I wish them every success in their endeavours.

17:47

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Sue Webber on securing this debate. For as long as I have known Sue, she has been championing this issue. It is not really about who has been campaigning the hardest, however—it is about bad planning. If a development of such a size has been planned and there is a railway going through it, there should be a station. That should have been planned and agreed at the start because, as Winchburgh has grown, the need for the station has become ever greater.

I was outside the Parliament for the handing in of the petition in April, together with Sue Webber and others—I see Foysol Choudhury across the chamber; he was there, too. I have been lucky enough to visit Winchburgh and I was shown round by representatives of Winchburgh Developments in May. I cycled along the canal that goes through Winchburgh over the summer. It is quite well connected by road and canal, but not rail—yet there is a railway line going through it. This is not difficult—it can be done.

The cabinet secretary, who is sat there on the front bench, knows that I live in East Kilbride. Money is now being spent on the East Kilbride line, and the town is getting a new station at Hairmyres, which will be fantastic, with a big new park and ride. That station will become the main station in East Kilbride, I suspect. That has been done with Scottish Government money.

Gordon MacDonald mentioned city deal money. I agree with him that that could be used—but that decision should have been taken years and years ago.

If we have an ambition to get cars off the road—the Scottish Government certainly has that ambition, and we would agree with it—train travel is the way forward. A 15-minute journey from Winchburgh into Edinburgh would take hundreds of thousands of cars off the road every year. Surely we can all agree that that should happen.

There is hope. Jim Fairlie has possibly provided some hope with the steering group, which met at the end of July. I hope that we can get beyond just having a business case and get an agreement to do something. Building a station is not all that complex—there just needs to be agreement to do it. Let us stop fighting about who will take the plaudits and who needs to spend the money.

17:50

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I congratulate Sue Webber on bringing this

important issue to the chamber. I am grateful to see members from across the parties who feel strongly about the issue. I hope that we can continue to campaign and deliver for the people of Winchburgh.

Since I first raised the issue of Winchburgh in the chamber in 2022, some progress has been made. I have engaged with the council and developers and I have questioned three successive transport ministers, highlighting the need for improved transport links for Winchburgh. However, my requests to meet the ministers have been denied, and the Scottish Government, until recently, has failed to meaningfully engage. The reformation of the Winchburgh railway station steering group is welcome, but it must be met with clear action. Above all, stakeholders, including MSPs, must work together to achieve that.

Winchburgh is a fast-growing town and it needs improved public transport options. Since 2012, 1,000 houses have been built, with 4,000 more planned. By 2031, its population is predicted to rise to more than 13,000—similar to Linlithgow, which has its own train station. It is estimated that the catchment area of a train station in Winchburgh would benefit 26,000 people, and the proposal is popular.

Earlier this year, I joined Winchburgh residents in delivering a petition, signed by more than 2,000 people, to the Scottish Government, calling for a date to be set for the opening of the station. It is not only those in Winchburgh who would benefit—more than 400,000 cars would be taken off the road every year, there would be millions of pounds of savings for passengers and in transport costs, and millions would be saved in decongestion benefits. It makes economic and environmental sense.

Sue Webber is right to mention the £50 million that has already been invested by Winchburgh Development in infrastructure, including a new primary school. We should be encouraging and rewarding developers that proactively create well-connected communities.

A key issue that must be addressed is the lack of a promoter for the project. The Scottish Government insists that it is a developer-led project. Winchburgh Developments has committed to partially funding the station, and then there is the possibility of funding from the city region deal. We need clarity on the funding and business case for the station. I will be meeting Winchburgh Developments later this month and hope to hear that further progress is being made.

If we are to see a station in the coming years, we must see collaboration between stakeholders, including MSPs. The Scottish Government should look at the enthusiasm that is evident today, and in

Winchburgh, and step up to deliver on this incredible opportunity.

17:54

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): I thank Sue Webber for securing the debate. Winchburgh was promised a train station, it needs a train station and it deserves a train station. That needs to be delivered.

It is disappointing and frustrating to hear that there is still confusion and misunderstanding over who is to lead and fund the project. Constituents tell me that the developer has not been forthcoming and helpful with others, which has led to delays, and that it has implied or made promises that it has not delivered. Development of infrastructure to support communities must go hand in hand with building those communities. I understand that West Lothian Council, Transport Scotland, Network Rail and Winchburgh Developments are all to get together again soon. They all need to get around the table to deliver the station. Jobs and mobility depend on it.

The Scottish Greens believe that a high-quality and well-connected public transport system plays a crucial role in delivering on our climate ambitions, reducing congestion and helping to deliver a just transition to net zero. It boosts our economy by allowing people to get to work, study and keep connected with family and friends. After decades of underinvestment and austerity imposed by Labour and Tory Governments in Westminster, the need for investments in building a green economy and in our public services is urgent.

I gently challenge Sue Webber on buses, as buses reduce both congestion and emissions by moving more people in a single vehicle, and on the success of the Edinburgh trams, which not only are popular and convenient for people such as me who live in Leith but, in my experience, have reduced congestion and improved air quality along Leith Walk.

Transport emissions continue to increase, though, driven by a long-term and systematic failure to invest in public transport and infrastructure for walking, cycling and wheeling. Building stations so that more communities can be served by our rail network will encourage more people on to public transport. Improving rail connections across Scotland should be a national priority.

Therefore, I strongly support the calls for the construction of a new station at Winchburgh. Further information and clarification on responsibilities from the key agencies would provide assurance to the many constituents who have inquired, and continue to inquire, about the

possibility of a new rail station. The new station at Winchburgh would be a crucial component of the region's infrastructure. It would help to reduce traffic congestion, play a significant role in reaching net zero and provide accessible and affordable transport. I look forward to seeing the business case as it is developed, and I would welcome the announcement of a date for the construction of Winchburgh train station as soon as possible.

17:57

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I thank all the members who have taken part in today's debate. I will make one point before I move on. My friend Graham Simpson said that building a station is not that difficult. I assure him that a load of my officials would tell me quite the opposite.

The proposal for a new station at Winchburgh can be traced back two decades to the West Lothian local plan in 2004 and the Edinburgh and Lothian structural plan in 2005. As soon as I got involved after my appointment as a minister, I made it a priority to get a good understanding of the issues and, more important, of how to progress the building of the station, which had been promised by the developers in their vision for a new community around the old village of Winchburgh.

I want to use the opportunity of this debate to set out what progress is being made. Creating a new station as part of a large-scale housing development was an ambitious and far-sighted plan, for which I commend the developers and West Lothian Council. I have visited the area with the developers and the council, so I have seen at first hand the excellent work that they have done, and I can clearly see the vision taking shape.

However, what was never clear to me was how the narrative has developed that, somehow, the failure of a station being built over the past two decades is either Transport Scotland's or the Scottish ministers' fault or responsibility. It was absolutely clear—I want to ensure that this fact is understood—that the commitment was, and is, developer led. Any political posturing to say otherwise serves absolutely no one, least of all the people of Winchburgh, whom members in the chamber are here to represent.

Perhaps a wee bit of history behind the saga might help to provide some context to the situation. The ambitious plan and application for Winchburgh was submitted by Winchburgh Developments back in 2005. The application included provision for a new trunk road junction on the M9, a railway station and two park-and-ride facilities on the site. Currently, neither the railway

station nor the park-and-ride facilities have reached the point of delivery.

A planning condition that was added to the consent by the planning authority allowed for a further assessment to demonstrate the need for a station at a later date. That allowed the application for the site to be granted and discussions to take place about accommodating the station later in the process, but it was still clearly a developer-led ambition.

Following discussions with Winchburgh Developments Ltd, West Lothian Council, Transport Scotland and Network Rail, and further assessments in line with those discussions, it was agreed in February 2015 that the case for the rail station had been demonstrated. Planning permission in principle was granted for the station in 2015, and it was expected that an application for detailed planning consent would follow from the developer in around December 2017. However, that did not happen.

Throughout the period in which a railway station at Winchburgh has been under consideration, the Scottish Government's policy has been clear that developers are required to provide any mitigation on infrastructure to support their development. At various points in that period, the developer confirmed its intent to fund the station—I have documentation to confirm that fact. However, it has now become apparent that the developer no longer has the available funds to independently provide the required railway station at Winchburgh. Consequently, my officials are supporting the developer and the council in seeking alternative sources of funding to support the delivery of the proposed station.

The historical consideration and approvals in place for the station place no legal obligation on the developer or West Lothian Council to construct Winchburgh station, which is unfortunate, because the local authority had it within its power to put such an obligation in place when granting the final permissions, but it failed to do so. That, added to the progressively worsening financial restrictions across all sectors, has contributed to stagnation in respect of progress on the station over the past several years.

In the meantime, the developer has continued to develop the community at Winchburgh and has successfully funded and delivered, with financial support from the Scottish Government, the new four-way junction on the M9, which opened in February 2023. However, it should be pointed out that that was a requirement of the developer's planning consent, which was supported—I emphasise this—by my colleague and local constituency MSP Fiona Hyslop only as an addition to the requirement to build a railway station, not as a get-out or an alternative. That

was a legal requirement on the developer and should be seen as such and as a direct result of the hard work that was put in by Fiona Hyslop, as the local constituency MSP, along with regional MSPs, in bringing people together in their campaign to raise awareness of the matter.

It is a matter of fact that the station proposal originated as a developer-led proposal that added to the value of the overall saleability of the master plan. I have to say that I agree with that, but it has never been the duty of, or a requirement on, Transport Scotland or the Scottish Government to be the lead promoter on the project. Transport Scotland's only role in the process was to act on behalf of the Scottish Government as a statutory consultee in the planning process that was led by the planning authority.

Overall, I can confidently say that we have made significant progress in bringing together a collegiate and productive group whose members have all shared the goal of helping the local authority and Winchburgh Developments Ltd make progress on a station that is clearly demanded by local residents and businesses and, of course, to meet the needs of the environment. All the interested parties whom I have met are clear that they share the objective of continuing that progress.

To aid that process, I believe that it was vital to push support for the reformation of the Winchburgh railway station steering group, which Fiona Hyslop had previously successfully done. The group now comprises the developer, West Coast Capital, West Lothian Council, Transport Scotland, Network Rail, the city region deal and the South East of Scotland Transport Partnership—SEStran. They are currently meeting on a four-weekly basis to progress the immediate next steps that are required for delivery of the station. One of the immediate requirements of the steering group is to investigate potential sources of funding to plug the gap that requires to be filled in lieu of the infrastructure elements that the developer has already delivered to support the station or has agreed by way of existing financial contributions.

Work has also been undertaken to review and, where required, to update the business case to support the station proposal. I understand that the developer and the council plan to meet soon to finalise who will perform the lead promoter role and to identify an appropriate project sponsor to lead with the delivery of the station. In my view, it would seem appropriate for the council and the developer to share that vital lead promoter role but, clearly, that will be something that they will decide for themselves.

My officials have reported to me on the productive nature of the first two meetings. I

commend all parties for the positive and constructive nature in which they have engaged, and I urge them to continue in the spirit of co-operation and solution finding. I emphasise the need to allow that group the time and space to do the work that is needed and I encourage others, particularly across the chamber, to remove the political opportunism that has become all too apparent in order to let the constructive nature of the developments—

Graham Simpson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jim Fairlie: Not at the moment.

To be clear, the Scottish Government supports the provision of a station at Winchburgh, and officials at Transport Scotland will remain proactively involved with the proposal.

I will give way to Graham Simpson.

Graham Simpson: I thank the minister for taking the intervention. I actually want to congratulate him for facilitating the steering group meetings. The message sounds quite positive. Is there now more confidence than there has been for some time? Is he confident that the station will happen? I am not pinning him down to any dates, but does he think that, as a result of the work that he appears to have led, we might actually see some progress?

Jim Fairlie: All I can say to the member is, “Thank you very much.” We absolutely support the provision of a station in Winchburgh. As I have said, my Transport Scotland officials will be proactively involved in that proposal. The cross-stakeholder structure will progress only if all the parties involved continue to work in the constructive and collaborative way that has been witnessed in recent months. The message is to please continue, be positive, engage and make sure that we get the station built for the people of Winchburgh.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate, and I close this meeting.

Meeting closed at 18:06.

Correction

Shona Robison has identified an error in her contribution and provided the following correction.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison):

At col 33, paragraph 4

Original text—

I say to Liz Smith that the Government’s choices have been to invest in social security measures such as the Scottish child payment, which keeps 100,000 children out of poverty.

Corrected text—

I say to Liz Smith that the Government’s choices have been to invest in measures, such as the Scottish child payment, which are estimated to keep 100,000 children out of poverty this year.

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.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba