



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 25 February 2025

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 25 February 2025

[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, and our time for reflection leader is Wayne Sutton, senior pastor, Carrubbers Christian Centre.

Wayne Sutton (Carrubbers Christian Centre):
Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for allowing me to join you this afternoon for your time for reflection.

It certainly is good to stop in the midst of the busyness of our lives and reflect. Socrates once said that an unexamined life is a wasted one, and so we need to reflect, because we have only one life and how tragic it would be if that life were to be wasted.

Mine almost was. I never thought that I would be living in Scotland or, for that matter, standing before the Scottish Parliament. I grew up in New York and, although I had a very loving and supportive family, I fell into bad company in my early years and it was not long before my life was consumed by drink and drugs. I am sure that it is fair to say that, if I had kept going on that road, I might not have had a life at all or be standing here today.

My life was interrupted and transformed by the person of Jesus Christ, who has given me not only my life but also my reason for living. The Bible tells us that every one of us has been created in God's image and according to his likeness, and, because we are, every one of us has dignity, meaning, value and purpose.

The Bible calls it glory or, if you like, being made to express the greatness of who God is in our lives, which is our very reason for living. However, the Bible also tragically describes our fall from that glory, reminding us that

"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"—

hence the awful mess that we find throughout all the pages of history.

If that were the end of the story, it would truly be tragic; but, amazingly, it is not the end of the story, because our creator was not willing to leave his world without the hope of restoration and redemption. So, he entered this world himself in the person of Jesus Christ in order to deal with the predicament and the power and the presence of

our sin, and to offer us hope and life through his death and resurrection.

Today, many people across Scotland are struggling with life and trying to fight the pain with the temporary pleasures and numbing of drink and drugs and more, desperate to find hope, meaning and purpose. Jesus put it this way:

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

I tell you my story knowing that Jesus's story is not too good to be true. It is true, and it is a perfect cure to a wasted life.

Business Motions

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-16585, on suspension of standing orders. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of consideration of the third supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Great British Energy Bill, Rule 9B.3.5 of Standing Orders is suspended.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

14:05

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Members of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee support the motion, but with reluctance and with more than some frustration. When we debated the second legislative consent motion on the Great British Energy Bill, five short days ago, I talked about the committee literally rushing through the motions for the sake of standing orders in order to produce a report that could say almost nothing. The present motion would prevent us from having to go through that again, in even more extreme circumstances, and in that sense it is welcome.

However, any objective observer can see that this is not the way in which our legislative consent process is meant to work. This is the third time that I have stood here to talk about the bill. The first time round, I had some strong words for the Scottish Government, after the committee had been made to wait for months for a substantive legislative consent memorandum, and I hope that it listened.

The present case concerns an amendment with devolved elements, which was tabled and agreed late in the day at Westminster. That was not the Scottish Government's doing, and I accept that, like death and taxes, late amendments will always be with us. However, it seems that there cannot be a mechanism to hit the pause button at Westminster whenever that happens. Why not? It would buy us a little more time to consider such amendments. That is not an unreasonable ask, and the committee thinks that the Scottish Parliament should explore it further. The late amendment in question looks unobjectionable, but that is a matter of chance and might not always be the case.

Although the committee supports the motion, it feels that we should actively explore, with our counterparts, ways to ensure that we do not have to go through this rather futile process again.

14:07

The Minister for Parliamentary Business (Jamie Hepburn): I thank Mr Mountain for raising his concerns. He is clearly right to do so, if those concerns have been expressed by the committee that he convenes.

I make it clear that the Government absolutely recognises the importance of the Parliament's role in considering legislative consent motions effectively. We share many of the concerns that the committee has raised. However, as Mr Mountain recognised, there is a limit to our ability to determine timings.

The legislative consent motion relates to an amendment to the Great British Energy Bill that is going through the United Kingdom Parliament. The amendment was tabled at Westminster on 17 February and the bill was amended on 20 February. Under our current processes, we have to lodge any legislative consent memorandum within two weeks, so we lodged such a memorandum on 24 February. In the meantime, the bill will have its third reading in the House of Lords today, so it is very near the end of its parliamentary passage.

We are asking the Scottish Parliament to suspend standing orders so that the motion can be considered later this afternoon. I will not go into the detail of what the amendment sets out, because that is publicly available for members to consider, but it enables any review of the effectiveness of GB Energy to be laid before the Scottish Parliament, in parallel with its being laid before Westminster. Clearly, that enhances this Parliament's role to some extent, which should be welcomed, notwithstanding the challenges involved in the process that we are having to go through now.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the minister give way?

Jamie Hepburn: Presiding Officer, do I have time to give way briefly?

The Presiding Officer: I call Douglas Lumsden.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the minister go back to his counterpart in the UK Government to say that the Scottish Government is not happy with the process that is being followed and to try to improve things going forward?

Jamie Hepburn: We have already communicated that. I assure Mr Lumsden that we recognise that we have arrived at a regrettable set of circumstances. I recall that, last week, Alasdair Allan spoke to the previous legislative consent motion that concerns the bill. I recognise Mr Lumsden's point that we have debated the issue quite a lot in the past few weeks. We have emphasised to the UK Government the

importance of ensuring that the Scottish Parliament has enough time to consider such matters.

Mr Mountain's suggestion about the ability to pause processes at Westminster is an innovative one. I am happy to reflect on that and to see whether we can explore it. It is not for me to suggest what any committee might want to do, but of course any committee of this Parliament is well equipped to write to the UK Government to make suggestions to it, just as committees make suggestions to the Scottish Government. My expectation would be that the UK Government would respond timeously.

I assure members that we understand the concerns and we continue to press them but, unfortunately, we are where we are, so I urge Parliament to support the motion in my name.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-16585, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on suspension of standing orders, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

14:10

Meeting suspended.

14:19

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S6M-16585, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on suspension of standing orders. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. There was an issue with my app; I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Gallacher. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Several members have indicated that they wish to make a point of order. I will reach each one of them, and I must ensure that our clerks have an opportunity to record the information.

Sarah Boyack has a point of order.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I apologise, Presiding Officer; I inadvertently pressed my request-to-speak button.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app is playing up; I would have voted yes.

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

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app failed to connect; I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Thomson. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect; I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Tweed. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Michael Matheson (Falkirk West) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect; I would have voted yes.

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

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow Southside) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Likewise—I could not get the app to connect; I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Sturgeon. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and
 Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire)
 (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote
 cast by Rona Mackay]
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by
 Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse)
 (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)
 (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)
 (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-16585, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on suspension of standing orders, is: For 110, Against 0, Abstentions 7.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of consideration of the third supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Great British Energy Bill, Rule 9B.3.5 of Standing Orders is suspended.

The Presiding Officer: We come to consideration of business motion S6M-16586, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business.

Motion moved,

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

for Tuesday 25 February 2025—

after

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Response to Concerns Raised Regarding Care of Children at

Skye House

after

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Budget (Scotland) (No. 4) Bill

insert

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Great British Energy Bill - UK Legislation

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.30 pm Decision Time—[*Jamie Hepburn.*]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:23

Grangemouth (National Wealth Fund)

1. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it will work with the United Kingdom Government on the recently announced £200 million investment in Grangemouth, as part of the national wealth fund. (S6T-02380)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): Last week, the First Minister announced the new £25 million Grangemouth just transition fund, as part of this Government's nearly £90 million of planned support to Grangemouth.

We welcome the recent UK Government announcement that £200 million will also be allocated for Grangemouth from the national wealth fund. We are already engaging with the UK Government on that and we are seeking clarity on the details of the fund to ensure alignment with our interventions, in order to maximise the impact for the workforce, the community, and business development.

I am committed to continuing my collaborative relationship with the UK Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero in order to secure a long-term and sustainable future for Grangemouth. I hope that Daniel Johnson can show a similar collaborative approach for Grangemouth by backing the budget—and the money that we have announced—at stage 3 this afternoon.

Daniel Johnson: Our position on the budget is clear. This is such a big issue that I do not think that the workers at Grangemouth would thank us for playing politics with it. [*Interruption.*] It is an important point.

Of all the numbers of great importance, the most important is that 400 people have been given redundancy notices. Given that this is the start of the hard work to attract investment in, which is what the funds are expected to do, what steps will the Scottish Government take alongside the United Kingdom Government to attract that investment? Critically, will those sums be available to fund project willow?

Gillian Martin: First, I am not playing politics. I am making the point that it is important that we all get behind any money that is pledged by any Government to support the workers at Grangemouth. I do not mean that to be a party political point.

This is not the start of the hard work by either Government. Since the new UK Government

came in, we have had a much more collaborative relationship than we had with the previous UK Government and we have been working very hard, initially to prevent the closure and ask Petroineos to make a different decision. We have been unstinting in that, and that is still the course of action that I would like to see.

As regards the moneys and what will be done with the £200 million and indeed the £90 million, including the £25 million just transition fund, I want to work with the Grangemouth future industry board and the UK Government on that, because they are critical. We have been working together for a good two years now on what needs to happen in the Grangemouth area. Our £25 million just transition fund will be deployed this year. We have a precedent in how the north-east and Moray just transition fund has worked and some of the projects that it has supported for oil and gas workers and, indeed, the supply chain.

The first thing that I will do after the budget is—touch wood—passed this afternoon, once I know that the moneys are coming to the just transition fund, is to meet my officials to make sure that we get early engagement with the Grangemouth future industry board to talk about how that money can be deployed and the mechanisms that will be put in place for that. I will have a similar conversation with Ed Miliband, I hope very soon—I will be writing to him this afternoon—to discuss how the £200 million can work with that money.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There is a great deal of interest in asking supplementary questions, so I would be grateful for concise questions and responses.

Daniel Johnson: With the £25 million from the Scottish Government and £200 million from the UK Government on top of the £100 million city deal, this is one of the largest industrial interventions that this country has seen in decades, but it is not just about the money. A number of policy and regulatory changes will be required, particularly if we are looking at project willow and biorefining. Will the cabinet secretary set out how those things will be examined and how she will take the actions that we expect to see in the project willow public document in the coming days, so that we can implement those changes?

Gillian Martin: I have been talking about some of the regulatory changes that the UK Government will have to make since well before the Labour Government came into place. I had those discussions with the Conservative Governments. I am pleased to say that I have now had a lot more feedback in our discussions about what might need to be done. Project willow has been essential in that regard because, as well as looking at some areas in which the refinery can adapt and become a different type of plant for sustainable aviation

fuel or biorefining, it requires regulatory change. That will be outlined in project willow.

The UK Government has the most locus in that, but we are already aware of what some of those policy changes should be, and I stand ready to support the UK Government in making the right decisions that will allow some of the future industries—in the short term, I hope—to be viable and ensure that they are competitive, given that other countries might already have the regulatory changes in place and we must not be left behind.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I, too, welcome the additional moneys, although I note that the UK Government application process will be time consuming, with money being made available as debt or equity on the probability of a sufficient return on investment to the UK Government. For businesses to make applications at pace, there must be, as the minister stated, considerably more policy certainty. I know that she has been pursuing the matter, but has she had any advice on it thus far from the UK Government? Will there be a shift in its current attitude to carbon capture and storage and the Acorn project, which is a critical enabler of green hydrogen, or the possibility of Grangemouth and the associated work becoming a test site for sustainable aviation fuel? I repeat that policy certainty will be needed as much as finance to encourage confidence in business investment.

Gillian Martin: What Michelle Thomson has just outlined is absolutely critical. I welcome the response from the Prime Minister to the First Minister's call for the UK Government to provide its fair share of support for Grangemouth, but I agree that we need policy certainty, particularly on carbon capture, utilisation and storage.

I have had repeated discussions with the former and current UK Governments and remain deeply frustrated that there is still no clarity on timelines, funding and criteria for the Acorn project, which, I think, will provide that policy certainty and, as I have been told by people who have an interest, ramp up the investability that is in the plant. I agree whole-heartedly that giving the Acorn project the go-ahead is the next intervention that the UK Government should make, and I think that it should be made immediately. I hope that all members will support me on that, because it would be a game changer.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Daniel Johnson is right that this is about jobs. However, it is not just about 400 jobs; it is about nearly 3,000 jobs. That is the economic impact assessment of what is happening at Grangemouth.

It is a great pity that we do not have more detail on the £200 million and exactly how that will be

distributed and used. It is also a great pity that we still do not have much detail about the £25 million. I would really like to hear a lot more detail about how that money is going to be used.

I would also like the minister to tell us about the report on project willow. I remember her saying that that would come out by the end of this month. This is the end of the month. When exactly will we see it? Colin Mackay of STV saw it. He even wrote a detailed report on it. I do not understand why we have not seen it. Has Petroineos got a copy of the EY report on project willow? How much did it cost? How specific are the project willow proposals? Are they costed? Where will the investment come from? Those are all burning questions on the minds of the people of Grangemouth.

Gillian Martin: There are a lot of questions in that. I will not have time to answer all of them. I will be able to write to the member about some of the detail—in particular, the cost of project willow. That involved money that was put in by the Scottish Government and the UK Government. None was put in by Petroineos.

The report is due by the end of the month, and nothing has been said to me to indicate that that will slip in any way. As I mentioned, the budget needs to be passed today for the £25 million to be released but, once the £25 million has been secured, through the Parliament's voting for it, it is my number 1 priority to look—particularly with the Grangemouth future industry board, because this is about not just the refinery but the industrial complex of Grangemouth as a whole—at how that can be deployed and used. It will be able to be deployed in a way that makes a difference only if we work together with the people of Grangemouth and the stakeholders in it, much as we did with the north-east and Moray just transition fund, which has been very successful.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): All the money that has been announced for Grangemouth is absolutely welcome, but trying to get money out quickly does not always mean that that money gets spent in the correct projects for the area. At the Grangemouth community council meeting last Thursday, 120 people were in the room, asking about the industrial future of Grangemouth and wanting to resolve some of the disconnect between them and industry. How can the cabinet secretary implore people to resolve that disconnect as well as ensure that projects are value for money and will support both skills and the local community?

Gillian Martin: Both the local council and the community council are members of the Grangemouth future industry board. That is the vehicle by which any disconnect will be resolved. As I have said, the £25 million can be deployed over the next year, but it has to be deployed in the

right way, to create more opportunities for the workers, supply chain and communities. The supply chain, the communities and the workers will dictate how that money is spent. I need to work with them via the vehicle of the Grangemouth future industry board, of which some of the people whom Gillian Mackay has mentioned are members.

Public Bodies (Equality Act 2010)

2. Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its role in ensuring that public bodies are meeting their legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010, following recent correspondence from the Equality and Human Rights Commission. (S6T-02370)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish Government is considering the letter from the Equality and Human Rights Commission and will, of course, engage with the commission. Under the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012, public authorities are under a duty to assess and review proposed new or revised policies and practices.

This Government stands firmly behind the separate and single-sex exemptions that are provided in the 2010 act. Members will be aware that that allows for trans people to be excluded when that is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim. Public bodies are responsible for complying with the 2010 act and its regulations.

Tess White: The equalities regulator wrote to NHS Fife last week, pointing out that, under statutory public sector equality duties, the health board must

“assess and review proposed new or revised policies or practices”.

The Herald reports today that NHS Fife skipped that vital step when it allowed a trans-identified male doctor to use a female changing room. This is serious. It means that the health board might have failed to comply with its legal obligations to assess the impact of its policies on women. So, let me ask the cabinet secretary a very simple question: does she know how many other national health service institutions are operating this potentially unlawful policy?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As ministers have made clear on a number of occasions, we cannot comment on on-going cases such as the one in NHS Fife. However, in general, as I also made clear in my original answer, ministers are very clear that they stand firmly behind the provisions in the Equality Act 2010 and the exemptions that are contained in it. We absolutely expect public bodies

to conduct their policies and procedures in line with the legislation that is in place.

As the EHRC said in its letter, it is the statutory regulator for equality in Scotland and it promotes and enforces compliance with the Equality Act 2010. Ministers are, as we always have been, happy to discuss with the commission how the Scottish Government and the commission can help public bodies to comply with their obligations under the Equality Act 2010.

Tess White: The EHRC was clear in its correspondence that the Scottish Government—we are talking about the Scottish Government—has a role in ensuring that NHS Scotland and other public bodies are meeting their legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010. I am glad that the cabinet secretary says today that it will fulfil its duties.

Caroline Lamb is the chief executive of NHS Scotland and sits at the Scottish Government’s top table as director general for health and social care. Failings such as these lead straight to the heart of the Scottish Government. Scottish National Party ministers keep trying to ride two horses with regard to single-sex spaces, but they cannot keep reading out the same script that says that sex is protected under the Equality Act 2010 while arguing in the United Kingdom’s highest court that sex does not mean biological sex. My question is: will this SNP Government protect single-sex spaces for biological women in Scotland’s public services—yes or no?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The member refers to another live court case, and, therefore, of course, I will not comment on that. With the greatest respect to Tess White, the reason why the answers from Scottish ministers are the same is that they are based on the legislation that is in place—the Equality Act 2010 and the regulations that I mentioned in my previous answer. The Government absolutely expects all public bodies to fulfil their obligations under the regulations under the Equality Act 2010. For the benefit of the member, I say once again, the answers are similar because that is our clear expectation. There has been no change in the Government’s policy. As I said in my original answer, we stand firmly behind the 2010 act and the exemptions that are within it. That has been the policy of this Government all along.

The Presiding Officer: We are now past the scheduled time for this item of business. I will allow it to continue for a few minutes, but I absolutely must insist on concise questions and responses.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Is the cabinet secretary confident that all health and safety workplace regulations are being complied

with and that all public bodies have single-sex toilets clearly marked as male and female? In her answer, I ask her to give us evidence of how that data was collected and, if it is not available, to commit to obtaining such information.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Carol Mochan quite rightly points to the fact that there are other regulations on top of the ones that I mentioned in my original answer—for example, those that refer specifically to the workplace. However, I say once again that those regulations are also included in the Government's belief that all public bodies should fulfil their obligations under all pieces of legislation with reference to this issue.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Does the cabinet secretary have full confidence that all public sector bodies in Scotland, including NHS Scotland, are complying with the requirements that are set out in the Equality Act 2010 to produce an equality impact assessment in relation to the provision of single-sex spaces—yes or no?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Once again, for the benefit of Rachael Hamilton, I note that we are very, very committed to working with the EHRC. There is a role for the Government and a role for the commission in that, as I said in my earlier answer. The EHRC is the statutory regulator for equality in Scotland. It promotes and enforces compliance with the Equality Act 2010 and provides guidance on these very matters. We look forward to working with the commission and to meeting it in due course to discuss these matters in detail.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): Given the tenor and tone of questioning in this area, how can we ensure that trans people across Scotland feel included and protected in their workplace?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important that all of us in the chamber conduct ourselves in a manner whereby we respect everyone's rights. We are quite rightly questioned on the promotion and protection of women's rights, which is absolutely integral to the work that the Scottish Government does.

We will continue to support the trans community; it is one of the most marginalised communities in Scotland, and it is important that we do that. However, we will not do that in a way that provides any doubt about our commitment to the Equality Act 2010 and to ensuring that single-sex space exemptions exist and should have practical effect.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): A lack of clarity and, I have to say, a lack of understanding by the Government of the law has left working women in Scotland in the absolutely

ridiculous position of having legally provided single-sex spaces open to anyone who identifies into them.

The minister has repeatedly said that she expects public bodies to uphold the law, but I am not hearing what the Government is doing about it. Perhaps I can make a suggestion: the Government could get the situation under control by making the upholding of public sector duties a condition of Government funding. Will she commit to that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I go back to the point that the Government expects all public bodies to respect, obey and comply with the law and to have that set out in their procedures.

Ash Regan: That is a no, then.

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us ensure that we do not shout over one another.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have to say to the cabinet secretary that all we are getting is the same answer every time, which is not good enough. I know that it is uncomfortable for the Government, but it must respond to members' questions.

The cabinet secretary said in her statement that she and the Government are considering the letter from the EHRC. It was sent last week, is one page long and contains only six paragraphs. How much longer will the Government need to consider the letter? Will it publish its response to the EHRC? When it has responded, will the cabinet secretary give a statement in the chamber to finally answer questions about the issue?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Again, for the avoidance of any doubt, the answers are similar because they are based on the law of the land and the Equality Act 2010, which is exactly what the Government will continue to refer back to.

Douglas Ross raises points about the letter. It is a reasonably short letter, but it contains important challenges and questions for the Government, and it is important that we take time to reflect on it. If we did not, I think that members would criticise us for that.

We will, of course, move forward with meeting the commission, which we look forward to working with. There are important roles for the Government and for the commission in this. I am sure that members will have ample opportunity to continue to question the Government on the issue over the weeks and months ahead.

Skye House (Care of Children)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Maree Todd on the Scottish Government's response to concerns raised regarding care of children at Skye house. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:44

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): My statement today follows a previous parliamentary question regarding the harrowing BBC "Disclosure" documentary "Kids on the Psychiatric Ward". I am grateful to have the opportunity to expand on the answer that I gave last week. As the Parliament would expect, I must outline up front that I am unable to comment on the detail of individual cases of care and treatment.

However, I want to say two things very clearly at the outset. First, I was shocked at what I saw on the programme. The accounts given by the young people about practices that they experienced were appalling and upsetting to hear. My heart goes out to them and their families. Secondly, I want to put on record my sincere thanks to those young people for having the courage to come forward and tell their stories. They did so articulately and movingly, but they should not have had to do so.

As I said in the chamber last week, when our most vulnerable and unwell young people ask for help for their mental health, we owe them the highest standard of care and compassion. It is all too clear that what was described is completely and wholly unacceptable. It should not have happened, and we will do all in our power to prevent it happening again.

Today, I will outline what must and will improve in our child and adolescent mental health units, both in regard to standards of care and system oversight. All young people who need in-patient admission for their mental health must be able to access safe, high-quality care, which must always respect their human rights and support their recovery.

I want to speak directly to the young people featured in the documentary. My message to them is that their testimonies will result in change for the better.

Staff in our in-patient facilities take critical decisions every day. Their obligation is to take such decisions consistently, informed by clinical evidence and with the patient's rights and best interests central every time. Healthcare staff across Scotland demonstrate extraordinary skill

and compassion, and every day, they can and do save lives. Their role supports a fundamental principle: recovery is possible.

It is possible across the full range of need, from those with milder mental health conditions to those with severe and enduring mental illnesses, which includes those who are in in-patient facilities. There were moving and inspiring accounts in the "Disclosure" film of how some of the young people are now studying to become nurses, doctors and psychologists. That is what recovery means, and we maximise the chance of recovery if care and treatment is timely, compassionate, evidence-based and respectful of the patient's rights.

What I found so disturbing about the documentary was the culture that was depicted. By any standards, the behaviour of some staff during the time covered fell far below basic standards of decency and compassion or what we all expect of healthcare professionals. As we saw, patients in CAMHS facilities are often acutely unwell and frequently require to be admitted for their own safety. Many are detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 and not there voluntarily.

A well-functioning mental health in-patient facility will ensure that our most vulnerable people always receive the treatment and care that is necessary to keep them safe. Even in that context, some treatment options are a last resort. Issues that relate to nasogastric feeding, sedation and restraint require staff to make delicate judgments. Sometimes, such treatments can be the difference between life and death. By definition, they are difficult decisions for staff to make, which was acknowledged in the programme.

However, what also came across very clearly was a disregard for patients' rights by some staff who were working in the in-patient unit at the time. Inappropriate, cruel and stigmatising language was used. The young people described how they had often shown nothing other than their illnesses' symptoms. Treatment decisions are difficult, but that can never be an excuse for the kind of operational culture that was described.

I turn to my expectations for change. National health service boards are responsible for the quality of care that they provide. However, since I was made aware of the allegations in the programme, my officials have been in on-going contact with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. The board has given clear assurance that the issues that were raised in the programme have been dealt with in accordance with its complaints procedures and legitimate expectations of care.

As soon as the board was made aware of the allegations in the programme, it undertook a rapid information-gathering exercise. Its view is that standards have significantly improved since the

events that were described. An internal quality of care review is now in progress and will be completed by 14 March. The board is considering a range of indicators to assess current practice and drive improvement. Furthermore, an external review is being commissioned to review the care, treatment and patient experience at Skye house. The board is in the process of sourcing appropriate external expertise to undertake the review, which I expect to happen as a matter of urgency. I will carefully scrutinise the outcomes of both reviews as soon as they have taken place, and I expect NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to act immediately on any recommendations for improvement. As it would expect, I will hold the board closely to account for that.

Tomorrow, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I will meet the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, along with the chief executives of NHS Lothian and NHS Tayside, which also host adolescent in-patient units. I will seek further direct assurance that the issues that were raised in the programme have been addressed and that care and treatment have improved. I will also ask about the governance arrangements in place to ensure that what happened can never happen again.

As the minister for mental wellbeing, I want to go even further to ensure that the units operate in the way that I expect. To that end, I have asked NHS Healthcare Improvement Scotland, as the inspection body, and the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland, as the independent organisation that is responsible for providing assurance on compliance with the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, to carry out a series of visits to all three adolescent in-patient units in Scotland, plus the national child in-patient unit, as soon as possible. My view is that an independent perspective is required to provide wider assurance on care quality, patient safety and patient experience. The voices of children and young people, and their families, will be central to those visits.

I will take very seriously all resultant recommendations about how we can improve the scrutiny of our child and adolescent mental health service facilities, whether they come from the board's on-going reviews or from the enhanced programme of visits.

What we saw in the "Disclosure" film would have been deeply worrying for members across the chamber. My door is open to members who want to discuss the issue further, and I will continue to engage collaboratively with members from all parties on the matter.

Before I close, I will address an issue that has been raised in relation to the role of the Mental Welfare Commission. Some reports have

questioned the effectiveness of the commission's scrutiny and have suggested that it did not pick up on issues that were raised in the programme. The commission is an independent body and can rightly speak for itself, but, since 2016, commission representatives have visited Skye house seven times, using a mix of pre-announced and unannounced inspections. The commission's reports highlighted concerns and elements of positive practice. However, it is important to point out that the commission bases its findings and recommendations on observations during the limited timeframe of each visit.

What is crucial is that boards act on the recommendations that are made. There must always be appropriate governance and assurance processes to ensure effective care, as well as a working culture that responds to feedback, so that care is delivered with kindness and compassion on an on-going basis.

As I have outlined, I am determined to use the expertise of relevant bodies to ensure that care and treatment in our CAMHS in-patient facilities are of the highest quality and that patients' rights are always respected. I repeat my offer to members—if there are suggestions for how we can go further, I will seriously consider them.

I have no doubt that all members will stand together in condemning instances of appalling treatment of some of our most vulnerable young people. I again commend the young people and their families for coming forward and speaking out; I do not underestimate how difficult that must have been. I am only sorry that it was necessary to do so.

I treat the issues that were raised in the documentary with the utmost seriousness. It must and will result in improvements.

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

I would be grateful if members who wish to put a question would press their request-to-speak buttons.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement.

The minister states that she is unable to comment on the details of individual cases of care and treatment. However, in this instance, individual cases are critical to shining a light on the lack of action taken by those at Skye house and those in the NHS and the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government did not find out about the problem through the BBC documentary—it has

known for years. I have emails from my constituent that outline when she contacted ministers for help. On 23 June 2023, my constituent contacted Scottish Government officials on behalf of her daughter, Harmony. On 12 August 2024, she contacted the First Minister; the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Neil Gray; and the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, Natalie Don-Innes. The email subject line read:

“Urgent concerns regarding the care and treatment of our child”.

On 25 November 2024, she again contacted the minister, Natalie Don-Innes, after being ignored by the minister who has delivered the statement today.

I have no idea how the minister can stand here today and pretend to be shocked, because she has known about this for years. The minister says that she finally feels the need to make a statement on the abuse that young women endured while they were detained at Skye house—two years late. Is she now acting only because the issue has been made public?

Why did none of the Scottish Government ministers treat my constituent's letter with the utmost seriousness? Why did multiple ministers ignore a parent who was trying to raise institutional failures at Skye house?

If the minister is going to take suggestions from members today, will she conduct an urgent investigation into the matter to find out why nobody contacted my constituent to give them the help and support that they deserved?

Maree Todd: I thank the member for that question. As she will understand, Scottish ministers receive a huge amount of correspondence daily. When issues are raised about a medical setting such as Skye house, the Scottish Government would normally direct correspondence to the health board, because patient care and delivery are the statutory responsibility of local healthcare providers.

Although, as I have made clear, I cannot intervene or comment on individual cases, I acknowledge the concerns that have been raised by the family that Ms Gallacher has spoken about. I am extremely sorry for the distress that the situation is causing, and I look forward to meeting them to hear their concerns.

Because patient care and delivery are the statutory responsibility of local healthcare providers, it is for relevant NHS health boards to respond to complaints about services. I am happy to look into why the family had no response whatsoever and I will certainly investigate that and get back to Ms Gallacher. Generally, people do

receive a response, although it might have been that the response directed the family to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the minister for her statement. I am sure that all members will share the minister's shock and disgust at the allegations about the behaviour of staff at the Skye house child and adolescent psychiatric ward at Stobhill hospital in my region of Glasgow.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has previously claimed that the staff lacked experience in in-patient units and the complexities of the young people being cared for in Skye house. The health board has also previously indicated that there are staffing issues at Skye house. That is clearly an unacceptable consequence of chronic understaffing and an overreliance on a casualised agency nursing workforce. It will be difficult to improve the culture of mental health nursing at Skye house and similar facilities until that fundamental cause is addressed.

Does the minister agree that there must be an urgent review of permanent staffing levels and training at Skye house and other child and adolescent mental health facilities, so that patients and their families can be reassured that such abuses will never happen again?

Maree Todd: First, I agree with the member that the care and treatment of young people that was described in the programme is completely and wholly unacceptable. As I said in my statement, when our most vulnerable and unwell young people come forward and ask for help with their mental health, we owe them the highest standard of care and compassion.

I can assure the member that, since we heard about the programme, officials have been in regular engagement with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde on the issues. They have received assurance that the situation has already improved and that staff numbers are higher and staff experience and training are of a higher quality than they were in the period that the programme covers.

I will, of course, seek further assurance that that is the case. The purpose of the internal review, the external review and the commissioning of the visits by the two organisations concerned, Healthcare Improvement Scotland and the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland, is to give me, everyone in the chamber and the public confidence that changes have occurred.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): It is crucial that we all remember that many young people are still under the care of Skye house. Can the minister expand on the assurances about the standards of care that are

currently being provided at Skye house, and can she advise how the Scottish Government is supporting the young people who are currently using those services and their families?

Maree Todd: Since I was made aware of the allegations in the programme, my officials have been in regular contact with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, asking a series of questions about how complaints and incidents during the period were handled, how Mental Welfare Commission recommendations were addressed and how staff were trained and supervised. There were also important questions about leadership and governance.

From NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's response, I am satisfied that the appropriate review and assurance processes are in place and that improvements have been made since the events described. I will be carefully monitoring the outcome of the internal and external reviews that have been commissioned and, as the board would expect, I will hold it to account.

On support, I would always encourage young people and their families to raise concerns with staff or via the advocacy services that are available in in-patient units, if they feel able to do so, so that any issues can be resolved as quickly as possible. Young patients and families can also contact the Mental Welfare Commission advice line.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I make a declaration of interests as a practising NHS general practitioner.

The minister spoke of accountability, but not a single manager has been sacked for scandal after scandal in our NHS. Today, we heard clear evidence that the Scottish Government knew of the abuse suffered by those children years before the release of the documentary, yet nothing was done.

Minister, who in the Government is responsible for failing our most vulnerable children, and which manager was responsible and held to account?

Maree Todd: The member is well aware that the responsibility for delivery of care is down to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. I absolutely am concerned about what I heard in the programme. What I heard in the programme shocked me, and that has put in place a sequence of events that will give me and others in the chamber assurance that the situation has changed since the period of the programme.

I assure the member that I take the issues very seriously, and I will be working very closely with the board. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I will meet the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde tomorrow, along

with the chief executives of NHS Lothian and NHS Tayside, because there are in-patient adolescent units in all those areas. We take our role in scrutiny and in assuring the quality of services to our most vulnerable young people very seriously.

The Presiding Officer: I remind all members of the requirement to speak through the chair.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind members that I hold a bank nurse contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

The culture in respect of and the attitude to the rights of service users that are reported to have been shown by some staff in Skye house are hugely concerning. Can the minister advise how the Scottish Government will champion the rights of vulnerable children and young people who use services such as Skye house and ensure that all staff are fully trained on the welfare of patients and are cognisant of the rights of all children and young people?

Maree Todd: As I have set out, I am dedicated to strengthening the current system of scrutiny and assurance to drive improvement and protect Scotland's vulnerable children and young people in in-patient settings. The vast majority of our dedicated healthcare professionals are fully committed to the welfare of the patients who are in their care, and they go above and beyond to support them in a way that is in their best interests. Where that does not happen, boards have a duty to address that and ensure that appropriate support and training are provided.

The Mental Welfare Commission has a duty to visit people who are receiving care under mental health and incapacity legislation. Its visits allow us to hear directly from the person who is receiving care and treatment whether they feel that their rights are being respected. Where the Mental Welfare Commission identifies issues, NHS boards should prioritise them and report feedback and recommendations through their existing escalation and clinical governance structures.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Given that the Mental Welfare Commission has visited Skye house on six occasions since 2017, and given that the main issues that were raised in the BBC's investigation include allegations of physical abuse—including nurses quickly resorting to force such as physical restraint and dragging patients down corridors, leaving them bruised and traumatised—can we have any faith that the enhanced programme of visits will provide the necessary oversight?

Given the magnitude of the allegations, surely it is time to consider regular unannounced visits to such facilities, because Skye house is not the only institution that has had allegations made against it involving abuse of children. Otherwise, we cannot

be sure that children are getting the standard of care that they need.

Maree Todd: I assure Pauline McNeill that unannounced visits by the Mental Welfare Commission already occur. The commissioning of visits by the Mental Welfare Commission in combination with HIS is a new development as a result of the programme and of the concerns that have been raised. I am clear that I expect that approach to give greater assurance, both to members and the general public, that standards are as high as we expect and want them to be, right across Scotland.

On restraint, the Scottish Government is absolutely clear that alternatives to physical restraint should always be considered first, and that use of physical restraint should only ever be a last resort for the shortest period of time in order to ensure safety. Health boards must ensure that they have policies in place covering all forms of restrictive practice and that staff receive appropriate training. We expect other interventions to be considered before any restrictive practice is considered.

Healthcare staff have a professional responsibility to accurately record all elements of a patient's care and treatment, including use of restraint and the reasons for it. The expectation is that episodes of restraint would be recorded in clinical case records.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): As the minister is aware, many of the young people in Skye house were diagnosed with eating disorders. We know that compassionate care and treatment are essential parts of optimal recovery.

This week marks eating disorders awareness week. Can the minister advise how the Scottish Government is working to support improvement of in-patient eating disorder services and wider services in Scotland, including for people who require further care and treatment?

Maree Todd: As Emma Harper said, this week is eating disorders awareness week. Later this afternoon, I will be pleased to speak in Emma Harper's members' business debate on the issue, and to talk about our work to improve the support and services that are available. We have recently published new national guidance for eating disorder services to ensure that everyone has access to a high standard of care across all stages of care and treatment. We have also made good progress in responding to the short-term recommendations that were made by our national review of eating disorder services.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): The testimony from people at Skye house is horrific. I hope that the Government is supporting those who went through that, and that it is

ensuring that they get the mental health support that they deserve.

Although NHS Lothian and NHS Tayside were not covered in the "Disclosure" programme, will the minister ask those boards to look into practices at their in-patient units to ensure that any issues in relation to care standards are properly investigated and resolved, and to ensure that the issue is not more widespread?

Maree Todd: Let me reiterate that the care and treatment of young people that were described in the programme are completely and wholly unacceptable. I absolutely agree with Gillian Mackay on that.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I are planning to meet NHS Lothian and NHS Tayside—which also have adolescent in-patient units—tomorrow. All three adolescent in-patient units will be visited by HIS and the Mental Welfare Commission, in combination.

We absolutely agree that broader scrutiny and assurance of the system of in-patient care in Scotland are required, and we are determined to deliver them.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The barbaric conditions and behaviours at Skye house that were described do not take place in our care homes because of the rigour and reach of the Care Inspectorate, and they do not take place in our prisons because of the rigour and reach of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland.

The "Disclosure" documentary revealed deficiency in the rigour and reach of the Mental Welfare Commission. It is true that the commission visited Skye house on seven occasions, but six of those visits were announced. What more is the minister's Government doing to examine the powers and reach of the Mental Welfare Commission to make sure that it has the teeth that are necessary to stop such behaviours happening again?

Maree Todd: The Mental Welfare Commission gives us assurance on application of the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003. Its understanding of the situation in in-patient units is limited by a visit's being a snapshot—a single visit.

As Alex Cole-Hamilton said, the commission has powers to visit unannounced. I am clear that we are asking the Mental Welfare Commission and HIS to make joint inspections of all our adolescent in-patient units to provide exactly the scrutiny, assurance and confirmation of the quality of care that we would all expect and are seeking at this moment in time. That is why we have instructed that we will meet them before they plan

those visits, and why we are keen to give input on how the visits are supported.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): No young person should have to endure what the brave young people who featured in the Skye house documentary underwent. I commend them for coming forward.

Will the minister outline how those young people are currently being supported in the aftermath of the incidents, and how NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde will be fully equipped to ensure that such incidents never occur again?

Maree Todd: I absolutely agree with my colleague that young people should be able to expect a high standard of care and treatment in our mental health services.

I understand that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is actively engaging with the families of those who were highlighted in the programme to discuss their experiences and to provide answers to any additional questions that they might have.

As I have set out, I consider it to be of paramount importance that we ensure that those kinds of experiences are not repeated. That is why I have asked HIS and the Mental Welfare Commission to carry out a series of visits and to recommend what is required to ensure the quality and safety of our CAMHS in-patient units, now and into the future.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In the statement, the minister committed to taking very seriously all resultant recommendations on how we can improve scrutiny of our CAMHS facilities.

It is shocking that young people have been treated in such a manner, as is the delay—which has already been mentioned by my colleague Meghan Gallacher—before anything is done by the Scottish Government.

The minister rightly states that the Mental Welfare Commission is an independent body that has limited time frames for its visits. However, we need to ensure that communication between the commission and NHS boards is not only robust but is able to flag up relevant concerns as a matter of urgency. Will the minister outline what the current communication process is between the Mental Welfare Commission and NHS boards, and how the Scottish Government intends to review the process to ensure that nothing falls through the gaps?

Maree Todd: Roz McCall is absolutely correct to shine a light on the question of how boards respond to Mental Welfare Commission concerns. The commission will write after either an announced or an unannounced inspection, and in doing so will make recommendations. It is the

expectation of ministers that those recommendations will be acted on. They will go into the usual clinical governance processes in the health board, so they should be acted on.

The reason why the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I are meeting the three chief executives and commissioning both the internal and external reviews and the Mental Welfare Commission's visits is that we are absolutely determined to scrutinise whether that process has occurred, and whether boards are taking on board the concerns that are being raised and acting on them.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I am sure that all members will welcome the news that HIS and the MWC will undertake a range of visits to all three adolescent in-patient units in Scotland. Will the minister advise whether they are to become regular occurrences? What role does she expect HIS and the MWC to play in holding service providers to account in the future?

Maree Todd: I welcome the commitment from HIS and the MWC to visit all three adolescent in-patient units. As part of that, I have asked them to consider future arrangements for scrutiny and assurance, and I will consider very carefully their recommendations and advice. The MWC already undertakes regular visits, including unannounced visits, to mental health in-patient settings, and those will, of course, continue.

Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill: Stage 3

15:16

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is stage 3 proceedings on the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill. In dealing with the amendments, members should have the bill as amended at stage 2—Scottish Parliament bill 56A—the marshalled list and the groupings of amendments. The division bell will sound and proceedings will be suspended for around five minutes for the first division of the stage 3 proceedings. The period of voting for the first division will be 45 seconds. Thereafter, I will allow a voting period of one minute for the first division after a debate.

Members who wish to speak in the debate on any group of amendments should press their request-to-speak button or enter RTS in the chat as soon as possible after I call the group. Members should now refer to the marshalled list of amendments.

Section 4—Overall cash authorisations

The Presiding Officer: We move to the group entitled “The Scottish Administration: allocation of resources”. Amendment 1, in the name of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, is grouped with amendments 2 and 3.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The three amendments proposed today update the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill to include an additional £25 million to support Grangemouth, which the First Minister announced to Parliament on 18 February. That additional financial support will be funded through ScotWind revenues. It will be used to establish a Grangemouth just transition fund, and it will be made available immediately in the new financial year to support businesses and stakeholders.

The aim of that additional funding in 2025-26 is to expedite any of the potential solutions that will be set out in the project willow report, as well as to support other proposals that will give Grangemouth a secure and sustainable future. I also welcome the United Kingdom Government’s £200 million investment in Grangemouth. It is important that our collective funding responds to the needs of business, the workforce and the community, which are central to Grangemouth’s future.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the £25 million and the £200 million that

the cabinet secretary mentioned, but the devil is always in the detail. Will she tell us a bit more about how that £25 million will be administered? Will that be done by the Grangemouth future industry board? If so, who exactly within GFIB will administer it?

Shona Robison: I know that the First Minister has already set out some of the detail. The aim is not only to expedite any of the potential solutions that will be set out in the project willow report, but to consider proposals made by Unite and its members, for example, and to continue to pursue other options, including as yet unknown potential investments.

We want this money to work as quickly and as flexibly as possible to give the opportunity to secure jobs at the Grangemouth site. However, we must also see an urgent decision on the Acorn carbon capture and storage project if a just transition at Grangemouth is to become a reality. Amendment 1 therefore amends section 4 of the bill to increase the Scottish Administration’s overall cash authorisation by £25 million to cover the additional portfolio spend that is provided for by amendment 2.

Amendment 2 amends schedule 1 of the bill to increase the maximum spend of the net zero and energy portfolio by £25 million to create the just transition fund for Grangemouth. To take account of that additional authorised spend, amendment 3 amends schedule 1 of the bill to increase the total amount of resources that the Scottish Administration is authorised to use by £25 million.

I urge all members to support amendment 1 and the other amendments in the group.

I move amendment 1.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I, too, very much welcome this £25 million. It is quite clear that the announcement laid down the gauntlet to the UK Government to do something and to come to the table after a period of some seven months, when it could have used National Wealth Fund moneys in the first place. I am also pleased to note that it is what I would consider the proper use of ScotWind funds, to build a future.

In terms of how quickly we can get projects on the table that can provide a return, investment at pace will be vital. I am pleased that this money will be available immediately in the new financial year, and I hope that that can start the process of enabling—

Stephen Kerr: Does the member have any concerns about how the money will be distributed—the process by which that will be done? Does she have any concerns about the involvement of GFIB?

Michelle Thomson: I do not have concerns about how the money will be distributed; I agree with Stephen Kerr that the devil will be in the detail, and I think that that detail needs to be worked out at pace. However, I have no concerns that that will not be the case, because the Scottish Government has clearly stated that the money will be available in the new financial year. Therefore, in some respects, it is a more critical enabler than the £200 million, in relation to which—if people have read the National Wealth Fund criteria, as I have—there is clearly a great deal of work to do.

During topical question time, I made a comment about the need for policy certainty. That is the elephant in the room. We need policy certainty around the likes of the Acorn project for carbon capture, utilisation and storage. It is critical if we are to enable green hydrogen, which might be a project that we can move forward with at pace. We also need the UK Government to come to the table if sustainable aviation fuel is to be a possibility in the future.

To summarise, I very much welcome the additional funding, and I thank the Scottish Government for taking such action.

The Presiding Officer: I invite the cabinet secretary to wind up.

Shona Robison: I have nothing further to add, Presiding Officer.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Schedule 1—The Scottish Administration

Amendments 2 and 3 moved—[Shona Robison]—and agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: That ends consideration of amendments.

As members will be aware, I am required under standing orders to decide whether, in my view, any provision of the bill relates to a protected subject matter—that is, whether it modifies the electoral system and franchise for Scottish parliamentary elections. In the case of the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill, in my view, no provision relates to a protected subject matter. Therefore, the bill does not require a supermajority to be passed at stage 3.

Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-16562, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill at stage 3. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call the cabinet secretary to speak to and move the motion.

15:24

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

I am pleased to open the stage 3 budget debate. The budget is delivering record national health service investment; record local government funding; £4.9 billion in climate-positive investment; a universal winter fuel payment for the elderly; and the decisive steps that are necessary to effectively scrap the two-child benefit cap in 2026.

The budget has been made stronger through engagement across the Parliament to build the broadest possible support. As a result, there is progress on a range of matters that will help to make Scotland a better place, not least the funding for neonates affected by drugs and the piloting of a £2 bus fare cap.

I hold no expectations, of course, that the Conservatives will abandon their downward spiral as they chase the spectre of Nigel Farage—there is nothing new there. However, I still hope that Labour members will back the budget, thereby supporting the scrapping of the two-child cap, the reintroduction of a universal winter fuel payment, investment of £34 million for culture and investment in primary care, among other matters that they suggest that they support.

Last week, the First Minister set out further amendments to the budget to provide an additional £25 million to support the Grangemouth industrial cluster, and I am pleased that Parliament has supported those. That takes Scottish Government support for Grangemouth to almost £90 million. I welcome the Prime Minister's subsequent announcement of the allocation of £200 million from the national wealth fund to investment in Grangemouth. Our funding will be available immediately in the new financial year and can be utilised without match funding; I hope that the national wealth fund moneys will be offered on a similar basis.

Carbon capture and storage is vital for a just transition to net zero. Advice from the United Kingdom Climate Change Committee describes carbon capture, utilisation and storage as a “necessity, not an option”. The Acorn project and the Scottish cluster are central to our

environmental commitments and our economic ambitions, and that is why I continue to urge the United Kingdom Government to confirm the Acorn project as a matter of urgency. I back both the funding from the UK Government and the new funding that we are putting forward.

We have worked constructively with the UK Government as we try to secure a just transition for Grangemouth. The question for Labour members is whether that constructive approach should be repeated today. Will they join us in delivering nearly £90 million for Grangemouth in the final budget vote? I certainly hope that they will.

Our distinct, inclusive approach to social security aims to tackle child poverty and support disabled people and carers. We are proud of the increases in social security expenditure that we are delivering, helping around 2 million people. That includes £644 million in our package of benefits and payments that are available only in Scotland, including the game-changing Scottish child payment.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The minister may be proud of the social security policy, but spending on social security is going to double, to nearly £9 billion, by the end of the decade. How does she intend to pay for that?

Shona Robison: As I have said many times, we will make sure that we prioritise the funding for social security spend, and I will set out further details in the sustainability delivery plan. However, the Tories have to tell us who, out of the 2 million people who are currently receiving support, they will stop giving support to. When the axe falls on support for people, who will be affected? They have to set that out.

In social housing, we are increasing supply by investing £768 million in affordable housing in 2025-26. Growing our economy is central to the delivery of all our priorities, and the Government will invest more than £7 billion in our total infrastructure package. The 2025-26 Scottish budget prioritises major capital investment in the foundations of our economy, such as housing, transport, digital connectivity and the delivery of critical infrastructure.

In delivering the wider investment that Scotland needs, the new 2025-26 Scottish budget will include more than £300 million of ScotWind funding, which will deliver substantial investment in jobs and in measures to meet the climate challenge, investing in the long-term success of our nation.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Shona Robison: I want to make some progress, but if I have time, I will do so.

The budget invests more than £2 billion in our colleges and universities and in the wider skills system. However, one institution in particular—the University of Dundee—is facing an immediate challenge. I thank Joe FitzPatrick for the efforts that he has made to raise the circumstances that the university faces. Other members, including Michael Marra, have also contacted the Government about that.

I can inform members that up to £15 million of financial transactions will be made available to the Scottish Funding Council to support the sector and universities such as the University of Dundee. Further work on the matter will be on-going in the coming weeks, and the Minister for Higher and Further Education will keep Parliament updated.

I know that Joe FitzPatrick, having raised the issue, will back the budget, which will help to sustain the University of Dundee. The question for Michael Marra and his colleagues is simple: will they put the city or their party first? Will they back a budget that gives the university a future, or will they sit on their hands? Dundee will be watching what they do.

On tackling the climate emergency, in 2025-26, we are committing £4.9 billion of investment with a positive benefit for the climate. That includes improving our built environment by investing more than £300 million in our heat in buildings programme, supporting more than 20,000 households to save up to £500 on their energy bills a year and making their homes warmer and more comfortable. That is very important, given that we are now seeing a third rise in household bills, which means that Labour has failed to deliver on the cut to energy bills that the public were promised during the election campaign.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Will the Deputy First Minister acknowledge the fact that there have been year-on-year cuts, and there has not been the investment in retrofitting that our constituents urgently needed?

Shona Robison: This is a massive programme of investment—£300 million in the heat in buildings programme will support more than 20,000 households. However, that will happen only if people such as Sarah Boyack support the budget. If she wants investment in energy efficiency to keep people's bills down, she has to vote for the budget.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I understand that, as of last summer, the overall value of grants issued by the heat in public buildings fund was £99,348,000 for works that were valued at £116 million. In other words, 85 per cent of the work was grant aided. In most cases,

the cost of the grant just for heating and insulating the building was more than the building was worth. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that is an egregious waste of money that should come to an end?

Shona Robison: Two points are important. First, we need to ensure that buildings are insulated and that the bills for running them are kept as low as possible, which is what the heat in buildings programme seeks to do.

Secondly, that work is part of meeting our climate obligations, which the Government considers very important indeed. It is one part of the journey to net zero, but it is an important part nonetheless.

The budget delivers £21.7 billion of investment in health and social care services and takes funding to a record level. We understand that challenges remain and that extra support is needed. That is why almost £200 million is being provided to reduce waiting times and support the reduction of delayed discharge.

The budget also recognises the importance of local government and provides local authorities with a funding package of more than £15 billion in 2025-26, which is a record level of investment for local government. Investment in public services must go hand in hand with reform, which is why I am making available nearly £30 million in 2025-26 to advance reform and enable future savings.

Stephen Kerr: The cabinet secretary mentioned invest to save. We know that the Minister for Public Finance, Ivan McKee, is leading that initiative. How much does she expect it to save in this financial year?

Shona Robison: That will depend on the invest to save proposals that come in to ministers, which Ivan McKee and colleagues will look at. They will be scored, essentially, against what they will deliver in terms of savings. At that point, we will be able to set out what that investment will deliver. I am sure that Ivan McKee will be very happy to keep Stephen Kerr and others updated on the detail of that, and I am sure that Mr Kerr will continue to be interested in it.

As I have said before, in order to see the benefits of this year's Scottish budget, the Parliament must now vote for it. Following spirited discussions, whatever our other disagreements, the Scottish Green Party, the Liberal Democrats and Alba have indicated that they can support the budget, which is very welcome. I thank them for their pragmatic approach, which sees the budget contributing towards their priorities. This is a budget to improve services, tackle child poverty and bring new opportunities, but Labour, so far, will not back it. However, it is not enough to will

the ends—we also have to will the means. *[Interruption.]*

Would Anas Sarwar like to intervene? *[Interruption.]* He needs to put his card in first—dearie me.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): If the finance secretary wants me to come in, I am more than happy to come in. Can she tell me why the Scottish National Party voted against £5.2 billion of spending for the Scottish Government—the very spending that she is now talking about?

Shona Robison: I thought for a minute that Anas Sarwar was going to abstain from his intervention, just to keep the record of sitting on the fence going.

As Anas Sarwar knows fine well, our objection was to the tax on jobs through the hiking of employer national insurance contributions, which is being felt the length and breadth of Scotland. Those job losses can be laid at the door of Anas Sarwar and his Labour colleagues.

As I said, it is not enough to will the ends—we must also will the means. I invite Labour members, even at this late stage, either individually or collectively to vote for the budget today and show that they are participants in change and not just spectators. With that in mind, I urge Parliament to support the budget.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) (No. 4) Bill be passed.

15:37

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The budget that we are being asked to support today could have been very different. It could have cut taxes for hard-working Scots, it could have been pro-business, it could have set a new direction for social security and it could have tackled the bloated SNP state. However, despite a significant increase in funding, the budget imposes the heaviest tax burden in the history of devolution. We should make no mistake about it—this budget will stifle economic growth and undermine the capacity to raise the revenues that are required to sustain schools, hospitals, roads and railways. It will raise the tax burden not just on lawyers and bankers, but on nurses and teachers.

However, the budget will pass at stage 3 today with the support of the Liberal Democrats and without a flicker of opposition from spineless Scottish Labour. At the weekend, Anas Sarwar said:

"I am submitting my application to be the next First Minister of Scotland."

Now, rather than challenging the First Minister, he resigns himself to letting John Swinney's bad budget pass. This budget is the product of a cosy left-wing consensus—a bubble that is overshadowing Scottish politics and is far removed from ordinary Scottish people, who want the Government to get off their backs, want public services that work and want to keep more of the money that they earn. It is the Scottish Conservatives—and the Scottish Conservatives alone—who are determined to burst that bubble.

Under the SNP, taxes are too high and too complex, the welfare bill and the size of the Government machine are no longer sustainable, and public services are failing. The finance secretary is living in a fool's paradise if she cannot see that Scotland's public finances are sliding into the danger zone. Audit Scotland, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Scottish Fiscal Commission have all sounded alarm bells in recent days.

The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Will Craig Hoy take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I will, in a moment.

Devolved income tax decisions mean that Scottish taxpayers are paying £1.7 billion more than they would if rates and thresholds were the same as in the rest of the UK, yet the net funding that the Scottish Government receives is only £838 million, because the tax base has grown more slowly in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. That tax gap has been made in Scotland by the Scottish National Party.

I will give way, to allow Mr McKee to say how he will plug that gap.

Ivan McKee: Craig Hoy talks about doing the same thing again and again and expecting different results. The result that we expect is a balanced budget, which we have had again and again. Craig Hoy talks about cuts to social security. Should those come from support for disabled people or carers, from the winter fuel payment for elderly people or from the child payment, which is taking tens of thousands of children out of poverty?

Craig Hoy: I thank the Minister for Public Finance for his intervention, because it allows me to remind members and the people who are watching that the SNP's expenditure on welfare is set to double over the next four years. Perhaps he can explain how he intends to pay for that. If the minister knocks on the same doors as I do, he will realise that people would prefer to be getting treatment in the NHS in order to get back to work, not languishing on benefits.

Scottish Financial Enterprise has said that the income tax changes in the Scottish budget fall short.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Will Craig Hoy take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I will not take an intervention at this point.

The financial services sector is clear that higher income tax rates in Scotland have failed to deliver more money for public services. They have deterred investment and have undermined economic growth. This budget freezes upper rate thresholds, and I concede that the SNP Government is not alone in doing so. However, income tax rates in Scotland are higher than those in the rest of the UK, which further erodes and undermines our competitiveness. Freezing the top three income tax bands will cost taxpayers £76 million in the forthcoming year and £244 million a year by 2029-30. Of course, the finance secretary will say that many Scots will pay less, but that is a gimmick—a trick—because, in raising the thresholds, the minister is handing back only £24 million from a £60 billion budget. That is £1.21 per month for many Scottish workers.

Although the changes to the lower tax bands are not significant enough to involve any positive or meaningful behavioural changes, the changes to the middle and upper bands are doing real damage to the way that people are earning and working. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that Scotland's income tax system is completely

"unwarranted"

in its

"complexity"

and that Scots who now earn more than £27,000 are

"facing higher marginal tax rates than in the rest of the UK".

In our discussions with Shona Robison, we argued for tax cuts and a simplification of the tax regime. I do not think that she got it, and I do not think that she ever will, because her Government is now addicted to big-state, high-tax policies. We proposed cutting income tax to 19 per cent for every Scottish taxpayer who earns up to £43,662. Under our plans, 2.7 million taxpayers would save an average of £222 a year.

However, it is not just in the income tax arena that Scots are being bled dry. Many Scots are struggling to get on the housing ladder or simply cannot afford the costs of moving home. That is why we proposed a tax cut for house buyers. Raising the land and buildings transaction tax threshold would benefit up to 60,000 home buyers each year, saving an average of £800 on the purchase of a home. That is more money for first-

time buyers to furnish their first home with and less for the SNP to waste on baby boxes and overseas embassies.

Today, Labour and the Liberal Democrats will endorse 18 years of failure on the economy, tax and public service reform. They are sanctioning the waste in public services that they claim to oppose. Despite Labour's desperate attempts this weekend, it is clear that the Scottish Conservatives are the only party that is willing to tackle waste in the public sector. Our new Scottish agency of value and efficiency would do just that. We proposed to save more than £100 million this year alone by cutting back-office functions and not touching expenditure on the front line. Instead, the SNP has added hundreds more senior civil servants to the payroll and is announcing that it is spending £30 million—as Stephen Kerr hinted—to make savings. Perhaps, in summing up, the minister can explain how that money will be spent.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Will Craig Hoy give way?

Craig Hoy: I do not think that I have time—actually, I will give way.

Kate Forbes: It is remarkable to see the Conservatives full of such great ideas these days, considering the fact that they were in office for 14 years and presided over some of the greatest waste that this country has ever seen—not least the personal protective equipment scams.

Craig Hoy: I dare not remind the minister of the two ferries that cost nearly half a billion pounds after a dodgy procurement process.

It is not just workers and homeowners who are being ground down by the SNP's high-tax regime; it is the businesses that are the lifeblood of our local economies. The Scottish budget has lost £800 million of revenue due to the SNP's failure to grow the Scottish economy. For years, the SNP has failed to pass on business rates relief to Scotland's shops, pubs and restaurants. Despite the ferries and the deposit return scheme, John Swinney still believes that his Government can spend money more wisely than the businesses that generated it in the first place.

This year, we called on the Scottish Government to support 100 per cent rates relief for hospitality venues and called for rates relief to be extended in full to retail and leisure businesses. Ministers have received £140 million in Barnett funding, but they are passing on less than £30 million of that. When pubs and shops close, the SNP and Labour will share the blame for the combined effects of their budget decisions. Many third sector providers risk going to the wall as a result of Labour's tax on jobs, and this budget does nothing to support them.

Across Scotland, councils are being forced to raise council tax to cover the impact of historical SNP cuts and Labour's jobs tax. We have calculated that Labour has cost Scotland £6.8 billion since it came to power last year, through the national insurance contributions increase, the farm tax, the scrapping of the winter fuel payment and the full-frontal assault on Scotland's oil and gas sector.

Despite the decisions of Rachel Reeves and Sir Keir Starmer, the Scottish Government still is not short of money this year. It will receive resource spending that is set to amount to £48.3 billion, with an overall budget that is higher than ever before. Ministers have the resources but they lack the policies and the sense of purpose to drive productivity in our public services. The British Medical Association in Scotland warns that more funding alone will not solve the NHS crisis. It says that we need fundamental reform, not short-term fixes.

Meanwhile, the benefits bill is soaring, with the SNP increasing spending by nearly £800 million this year—far more, proportionally, than is spent on the equivalent in the rest of the UK. The cost of the adult disability payment rose from £2.7 billion in 2023-24 to £3.2 billion this year and is set to reach £3.6 billion next year. I recognise that that is a valuable benefit for many, but nobody beyond the Holyrood bubble believes that it is always an investment to park people who could be working on sickness benefits instead of getting them fit and well and back into employment.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I do not have time, unless I can have the time back, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): There is no time in hand.

Craig Hoy: I do not have time—I have taken several interventions.

The Finance and Public Administration Committee has raised serious concerns about the clear lack of a sustainable and strategic plan for Scotland's public services. The SNP has also been criticised for failing to publish key financial plans, although we welcome the announcement of the medium-term fiscal strategy on 29 May. However, we hope that that is both realistic and robust.

I concede that the Government has announced some concessions as part of the budget negotiations, and some of the new expenditure is welcome, but more money for hospices, the £25 million for Grangemouth and the money that was announced today for the University of Dundee

could have been part of a more sensible—
[*Interruption.*]

Craig Hoy: Mr Swinney, it could have been part of a more sensible and sustainable budget.

The First Minister (John Swinney): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I do not have time—I will be summing up shortly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member has 10 seconds left.

Craig Hoy: Mr Swinney claims that this Government is about choices, but he keeps making the wrong choices. We should not be surprised, because John Swinney has form. He was the education secretary who wrecked the exam system and the finance secretary who bankrupted councils, and he is the First Minister who is ignoring repeated warnings that Scotland's public finances are set to crash around his ears.

This budget will pass tonight because of the support of the Lib Dems, Labour and the Greens. The Lib Dems have cut a deal—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Hoy, you need to conclude.

Craig Hoy: I will conclude. The Lib Dems have cut a deal, but Labour has cut no deal at all. Today is the last chance to stop the SNP's budget and to turn a page on its misplaced priorities—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: —but it will be the Scottish Conservatives alone who stand up for doing so—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Hoy. We will move on to the next speaker.

I call Michael Marra to speak on behalf of Scottish Labour. Mr Marra, you have up to nine minutes, and I advise you that there is no time in hand.

15:49

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): In October, the chancellor delivered the most progressive, redistributive budget in a generation, with record funding for Scotland in the largest budget settlement in the history of devolution. Let us be clear: the only reason we have that additional £5.2 billion is that, last July, we elected a UK Labour Government with Scottish Labour MPs at its heart, making the case for Scotland. The only reason that the measures that are set out in today's budget are possible is that Labour moved decisively to end austerity, to rebuild the public finances and to invest in public services.

Labour brought forward a budget to end austerity; the SNP lined up with the Tories to vote against it.

Meanwhile, the SNP in Holyrood is hailing the spending of the money that the SNP in Westminster refused to vote for. Throughout the debate this afternoon, and when the finance secretary and her colleagues attempt further game playing ahead of decision time, let us remember: when it came to the question of whether austerity should be ended and whether an additional £5.2 billion should be delivered for our NHS and our schools, what said the SNP? Well, the nine SNP MPs voted no. You cannot just will the ends; you must will the means.

Labour has got on and delivered for Scotland. We on the Labour benches will not stand in the way of Labour's record investment reaching the front line of public services. After years of Tory austerity and SNP incompetence, a funding boost is needed badly, but we know that there is no plan from the SNP Government to use that money to deliver lasting change and a new direction for our NHS, our schools and our local services.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will Michael Marra give way?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir.

If the SNP had ideas on how to change the direction of our NHS, our schools and our economy, we would have seen them by now. It has long since lost its way. Take the budget position as a whole. SNP members demanded additional spending at UK level of a scarcely believable £70 billion, yet, as we know, they have opposed every means of raising any of that money in taxation—£45 billion of revenue raisers were all opposed. You cannot just will the ends; you must will the means, cabinet secretary.

Kevin Stewart: Will Michael Marra give way?

Ross Greer: Will Michael Marra take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir, and no, thank you, sir.

It is a negative fiscal adjustment of £115 billion. It is not credible—it is ludicrous. Having opposed all those revenue-raising measures of the UK Labour Government, the First Minister then told the Parliament on 14 November that

“the UK Government should have increased income tax”—
[*Official Report*, 14 November 2024; c 13.]

to the same level as in Scotland. The Fraser of Allander Institute had to set the First Minister right.

Kate Forbes: Will Michael Marra take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, madam.

Its analysis pointed out that

“if the UK Government increased income tax ... the deduction to the block grant would be larger and the Scottish Budget would be worse off.”

Surely the man who negotiated the fiscal framework understands how it works. Labour boosted the budget by £5.2 billion, and John Swinney’s income tax plan would have cost Scotland £636 million. It is fiscal ineptitude of the highest order. You cannot just will the ends; you must will the means, cabinet secretary.

Kate Forbes: Will Michael Marra take an intervention?

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Michael Marra: No, thank you, madam, and no, thank you, sir. *[Interruption.]*

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): You need to take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members, let the member continue to speak.

Michael Marra: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

There are, of course, positive measures in the budget—and I can give you one of them, Deputy First Minister. I welcome support for the University of Dundee, which is the most critical institution in my home city. It has 3,000 staff, and one in seven of the population are its students. Simply put, it is too big to fail.

Joe FitzPatrick: *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir. Let me set this out.

The consequences for staff, the city and the wider economy do not bear thinking about. I met the First Minister one to one on 28 January to set out to him how serious I believe that situation to be, and I appreciate his interest in the matter.

I know that the Scottish Funding Council has been working intensively with the university since then, and I have met and spoken with the chief executive of that organisation to assist her. There is still no recovery plan in front of the trade unions or the community, but it is right that the Scottish Government stands ready to intervene. I and colleagues will wait to see whether the funding is equal to the challenge.

There are two reasons why there is a crisis at the university: a catastrophic failure of spending controls by the leadership of the university, which is set against a business model that is based on a 22 per cent real-term cut to Scottish student funding. That is driving universities across the country to make ever-riskier decisions,

endangering the long-term future of the institutions.

Today’s funding is welcome, but what we have here is an illustrative case of the SNP fixing one symptom of a much greater problem that it has helped to cause.

Nothing in today’s announcement gets to grips with the SNP Government’s wider leadership failures, which impair the future of Scotland’s great universities.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: Yes, sir.

Kevin Stewart: I thank Mr Marra for giving way. It seems that he wants to support the University of Dundee. To will the ends, you must will the means; therefore, you must vote for the budget today.

Michael Marra: As I have made clear during the budget process, Scottish Labour refuses to stand in the way of money reaching the front line. However, the record of this Government, which is made up of people who have caused many of those problems, needs to be addressed.

It is welcome that the finance secretary has used the budget to attempt to fix some of the most egregious mistakes that were made in last year’s chaotic budget and the emergency budget that followed. A year has been lost in house building due to the savage cuts that were made to housing budgets, which has led to record levels of homelessness, with 10,000 children in temporary accommodation. Affordable housing funding has fallen in real terms since 2022-23, and the instability wrought on the sector by the Government has served only to fan the flames of Scotland’s housing emergency.

The money from the UK Government for the non-domestic rates relief policy in the budget will fail to be passed on because it is narrowly drawn, which will short-change far too many retail and hospitality businesses across Scotland and hold back our economy. The SNP failure to get to grips with the crisis in our public services—

Craig Hoy: *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir. It is costing Scotland, with millions being spent on delayed discharge alone. From the ferry fiasco to the Barlinnie replacement that is 10 times the original cost to the tens of millions of pounds that were burned on a national care service that did not deliver a single extra care worker, the bill for waste is massive.

At least £6.7 billion of Scottish taxpayers’ money has been wasted on vanity projects, ministerial incompetence, Government by press release and policies that were announced with no long-term

cost analysis. The Scottish Fiscal Commission, the Auditor General, the Fraser of Allander Institute and the Institute for Fiscal Studies—all trusted, independent organisations—have repeatedly warned the SNP of the need to get control of the waste and a grip of the mess of Scotland's budget, and yet it persists.

Scotland is being let down by an irresponsible SNP Government that has been reckless with taxpayers' money and feckless with their public services. Scotland needs a new direction, and Scottish Labour will deliver it. We will establish a Scottish treasury that has full oversight of spending across Scottish Government departments, which will put an end to waste and give Scots value for their money. We will set out key affordability and feasibility tests across all Scottish Government departments and get a grip of the public finances, which have spiralled out of control due to SNP incompetence, waste and mismanagement. We will deliver genuine, lasting reforms in order to rescue our NHS and other key services, end the 8 am rush for general practitioner appointments, scrap peak rail fares and remove the SNP's ideological block on nuclear power in order to secure our energy future.

This weekend, the Prime Minister showed what Labour in Government can do by committing £200 million from the national wealth fund to Grangemouth. Rather than looking for someone else to blame, the UK Labour Government has stepped up to protect livelihoods and communities—that is what Labour Governments do and what Labour Governments have always done. A Scottish Labour Government elected next year will call time on the poverty of ambition and deliver the new direction that Scotland needs.

15:58

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): In the stage 1 debate, I said that a journalist had asked me, when the Scottish Greens announced the agreement that we had come to with the Government, why we had not taken the opportunity to, in their words,

“give the SNP a bloody nose”

after what happened last year, when the Bute house agreement ended. Honestly, I have not been able to stop thinking about why that question was asked, the assumption that it makes about politics and what we are all actually here to do. It assumes that it is all a bit of a game and we are all just here to get one up on one another.

Politics as a game does not feed children, create jobs, protect our planet or meet the needs of the people who sent us to the Parliament, which is what we are here to do. In Germany, over the

weekend, we saw what happens when a Government fails to meet the public's needs. It is happening in real time in the UK, where a Labour Government has already lost the support of a third of the people who brought it into office.

I get why journalists ask the question—conflict is interesting and fun to write about, and co-operation is often boring—but, this afternoon, we are demonstrating which of those approaches has the better outcome for the people who sent us to the Parliament.

Of course, there are limits to compromise. Our parties believe in different things, quite rightly, but we were sent here to deliver. As Craig Hoy is fond of pointing out, the overwhelming majority of MSPs in the Parliament are from parties that identify as being on the left of centre, to a greater or lesser extent. Indeed, by that measure, we have the most left-wing Parliament in Europe. However, there is not quite the socialist majority that Mr Hoy enjoys warning us about—the spectre that, he believes, is haunting this country. If only that were the case, we could go much further and much faster with the reforms that my party believes in.

I find it interesting that the Conservatives, when looking for examples of this apparent left-wing radicalism, constantly alight on the baby box of all things. What is it that the babies have done to them? What is it about giving children the best start in life? Why is that the go-to example of socialist radicalism in this country? I find that intriguing.

When we set out the Greens' position ahead of the budget, we set two red lines. The first was on tackling the climate and nature emergency. That could not have been more timely, because, as we have gone through the budget process, climate scientists have confirmed that the earth has exceeded 1.5°C of global warming. We have failed to meet what the countries of the world agreed to in the Paris climate agreement. Going above 1.5°C is a death sentence for entire nations. By the end of the next session of the Parliament, it is likely that some Pacific island nations will have ceased to exist because of the world's failure to tackle the climate emergency. Therefore, the investment that the budget will deliver—£4.9 billion of climate and nature-positive spending—could not be more critical.

However, it is not just about Scotland playing its part in tackling the global crisis; it is about creating lasting, high-quality jobs in our economy, particularly as we transition away from the energy sources that have caused the crisis in the first place.

The second red line that we set was on the need for a real-terms funding increase for local councils and an end to the council tax freeze,

because councils deliver the public services that we all rely on day to day and about which many people have their greatest frustrations—the lack of staffing for additional support needs in their children’s school, the inability to get a social care package that meets their parent’s needs and the fact that their bins have not been collected this week. Those are the practical problems that people across the country face.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Ross Greer: Not quite yet.

As a result of the real-terms funding increase that has been secured in the budget, a number of councils across the country have taken what would have been damaging cuts off the table. For example, my colleague Mark Ruskell has been campaigning with communities in Perth and Kinross against proposed library closures, and those proposals have been withdrawn as part of the council’s budget-setting process.

However, as I have said before, the annual haggle over a couple of hundred million pounds is a terrible way to resource local government in this country. The vast majority of funding for municipal government being dictated by central Government makes Scotland a significant outlier in European terms. That is why we need to move much further and much more quickly on council tax reform, in particular.

As well as setting our red lines, the Greens made a number of specific budget proposals—something that some other parties apparently found impossible. For example, I am delighted that we have increased the nature restoration fund to a record £26 million. That will create jobs, particularly across rural Scotland, and help us with projects such as those involving the restoration of what is left of our Atlantic rainforest. I have seen the difference that the fund makes in Arran, in my region, where a research vessel was commissioned to allow the charity COAST—the Community of Arran Seabed Trust—to share with the world the benefits of the no-take zone at Lamlash Bay.

As the cabinet secretary mentioned, we will proceed with a trial of a £2 cap on bus fares in one part of the country. That will tackle the climate crisis through helping people to keep their cars at home, and it will address the cost of living crisis. We are delivering free bus travel for asylum seekers, providing funding for the roll-out of default 20mph speed limits in residential areas, providing more free ferry travel for young islanders, increasing the additional dwelling supplement to raise money for public services and help first-time buyers, moving forward with a consultation on the cruise ship levy—a new power

for local government—and delivering more free school meals.

The negotiations were difficult for my party.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will need to bring your remarks to a close, please.

Ross Greer: It was the first time in a long time that we were not in government or the only party that was dealing with the Government and, therefore, in a position with significant leverage. However, I am proud of what we have achieved. I am proud that, as a result of the budget, more children will be fed and lifted out of poverty—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Greer, you will need to conclude.

Ross Greer: —buses will be cheaper and our natural environment will be protected.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alex Cole-Hamilton to open on behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats. I remind members that there is no time in hand. You have up to six minutes, please.

16:04

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I find myself reflecting on Ross Greer’s opening remarks about reaching for consensus in the Parliament rather than conflict. Ross Greer and I entered the chamber on the same day, eight and a half years ago, and much of those eight and a half years have been characterised by rancour and conflict. In our heart of hearts, we should recognise that it is incumbent on us all to reflect the better natures of the communities that we are here to serve. We do not see tribalism or rancour reflected in those communities.

In that spirit, and moving on from the divisions of the past, Liberal Democrats sought to engage with the Government to make the best budget deal possible. That means that the budget will now deliver on Scottish Liberal Democrat priorities, by which I mean a new Belford hospital for Fort William, a new eye pavilion for our nation’s capital and help for babies who are born addicted to drugs, with further investment totalling £2.6 million.

This is personal for me. I remind members of my interest in that I worked for the organisation that will be the beneficiary of some of those funds. In that time, I saw how important such interventions are. Supporting them is why I got into politics in the first place.

We have also secured the right for family carers to earn more without having their Government support withdrawn. My colleague Sir Ed Davey led the way on that at Westminster, and we followed suit here.

There is the reinstatement of the winter fuel payment for Scotland's pensioners. Today, we have learned just how timely that is, as millions of customers' bills will go up from this April, and last month, we learned that record numbers of households in Scotland are still in fuel poverty. That reinstatement is progress, albeit just the start of what is needed for the combination of Scotland's Governments to answer that challenge.

Then there is the £200 million improvement package for Scotland's social care, which, in turn, will help to reduce NHS waiting lists and tackle issues such as delayed discharge, which interrupts flow throughout our NHS. There is more money for local healthcare, to make it easier for our constituents to see a general practitioner at the first time of asking, or to get NHS dentistry near them, which is vital to reduce the strain on our hospitals.

There is extra backing for hospices and funding for new specialist support across the country for long Covid, ME and chronic fatigue. I have battled for more than four years to get help for those who are unable to work or go to school and are unable to get on in life, because they are still living under the shadow of what Covid can become. Support in Scotland has lagged behind that in the rest of the UK, so the challenge for the Scottish Government is to get on and improve the lives and care pathways of long Covid sufferers using the new investment that the Scottish Liberal Democrats have secured.

That is not all. We have secured £3.5 million so that colleges can deliver the skills that our economy and our public services need, with new programmes that are focused on skills in care and offshore wind to create the pipeline of skilled workers for the careers of the future.

We have also secured money to provide a brighter future for the young people with complex needs who attend Corseford College in Renfrewshire. My colleague Willie Rennie visited the college a fortnight ago to see how the money that we have secured will make a difference to the students and staff. It should just be the beginning. We need a permanent commitment from the Scottish Government to ensure that no young person there is left without access to the further education that they need, want and deserve.

There is also an extra £29 million for additional support needs to help pupils and their teachers. That is all on top of progress on business rates, in the hospitality sector in particular. Funding to provide more affordable homes is 26 per cent up thanks to extra investment of £172 million. There is also progress on ring-fenced agriculture funding and a new commitment to focus ScotWind revenues on growing our economy, creating jobs, tackling climate change and driving reform. There

is more money for local council services, including enhanced support for local authorities that operate ferry services, which will make a big difference to Shetland and Orkney.

Ahead of the infrastructure investment plan, we have persuaded the Scottish Government to look in much greater detail at replacing the Kilmarnock special school in Cupar, Newburgh railway station in Fife and the Gilbert Bain hospital in Lerwick. Beatrice Wishart will not let anyone in the chamber forget the urgent need that exists there.

Scottish Labour's decision to abstain confirmed once and for all that there will be no early election—which was always unlikely. That is why, all along, we sought to shape the budget proactively. This is not a referendum on the performance of the SNP; it is a means of getting things done and of unpicking some of the damage in our communities. Sometimes you just have to sit down and talk things through when you want to get things done.

Lib Dem priorities will now be backed by hundreds of millions of pounds of Government investment. There is a long list of policies and projects that we have won for our constituents and for Scotland as a whole, so we will be voting for the budget today.

Let there be no doubt: we are not afraid to tell the truth to the Government. After 18 years, on many metrics, it has long since passed its sell-by date. We have seen the Government fall short time and time again, and we have called it out on delivery. When it comes to the interests of our constituents, however, I got into politics to get things done, to do right by our constituents and to make good on the promises that I made to them when they sent me here. In large part, Liberal Democrats have succeeded in doing that today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate, with back-bench speeches of up to six minutes. I repeat that there is no time in hand, and any interventions must be absorbed within the member's agreed time allocation.

16:11

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government on delivering the budget and on her efforts to seek support from Opposition MSPs. There is now a clear divide between the grown-ups, who are willing to work together, despite policy disagreements, for the wellbeing and progress of Scotland, and those who obstinately refuse to meaningfully engage with Scottish ministers. I struggle to see how disengagement can be other than detrimental to the interests of constituents.

The budget delivers record funding for health and social care, including £1,006.6 million for NHS Ayrshire and Arran, which is an increase of 13.9 per cent or £123.1 million; an additional £57 million for Police Scotland; £768 million for affordable homes, which is a 57 per cent increase on this year; more than £15 billion for local authorities, including an additional £22.8 million—a 6.3 per cent increase—for North Ayrshire Council, which will certainly help to meet next year's public-private partnership costs of over £16 million, bequeathed by Labour almost two decades ago; and ferry services capital allocation rising by 49.3 per cent, from £158.9 million to £237.1 million, which shows that the Scottish Government has put its money where its mouth is to buy and redevelop Ardrossan harbour. I urge those who have bumped their gums about harbour redevelopment to help make it a reality by backing the budget.

Scottish ministers will deliver funding in areas where the UK Government will not, such as free prescriptions, free university tuition and seven social security payments with no UK equivalent, including the Scottish child payment. That will rise to £27.15 per week for a third of a million Scottish children. In previous years, of course, Labour MSPs called for it to be £40 a week. With Labour in power now at Westminster and with the equivalent in England under a Labour Government being precisely zero, we now seldom hear such calls.

The budget delivers for our public sector workers, median hourly pay in Scotland being almost 5 per cent higher than in the rest of the UK. Ultimately, however, to deliver public services we must grow the economy and our tax base.

There is much in the budget for businesses to welcome. The 100 per cent relief for hospitality premises on islands continues. SNP Government action ensures that 4,100 businesses and community organisations across North Ayrshire will receive £17.4 million in rates relief, with 3,500 of them paying no rates at all. The Scottish National Investment Bank's 13.2 per cent funding uplift to £200.4 million will help to attract private sector investment such as the £2 billion earmarked by XLCC for Hunterston in my constituency. The establishment of a Cabinet sub-committee on investment and the economy will help to drive growth.

That contrasts with Westminster Labour decisions, not least its U-turn on £800 million promised for Edinburgh's supercomputer and the failure to deliver £1 billion of promised carbon capture investment. Labour's Scotland branch office was ignored over the women against state pension inequality—the WASPI women—the cuts

to pensioners' winter fuel payments and the two-child cap, and the voters know it.

Michael Marra might believe that Scotland is at the heart of the UK Government, I doubt that many others do. Labour promised not to increase national insurance, but it has. Its tax on jobs is an act of economic stupidity, introduced despite the Office for Budget Responsibility warning the chancellor that raising the levy would impact on wages and investment. Furthermore, 75 per cent of that is on pay and, at £850 an employee, those on low wages are disproportionately impacted. The remaining 25 per cent is lost business investment.

Michael Marra: I recognise the member's opposition to the increase in employer national insurance contributions. What measures would he have taken to raise that money in this year? I am not talking about a future wealth tax—it is about this year.

Kenneth Gibson: First of all, raising a huge amount of money only to have to use some of it to subsidise public services is not necessarily a good idea. However, the Government could have looked at taxing gambling, gaming and big tech or at reversing the tax cuts on big banks, land taxes and online sales taxes. There are a lot of innovative things that could be done this year.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Kenneth Gibson: I am sorry, but I have taken an intervention, and the time for that is coming out of my six minutes; otherwise, I would have taken a second one.

The reality is, Mr Marra, that your party promised no national insurance contributions increases.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, Mr Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson: You should not have said that if you did not mean it, Mr Marra.

According to the "Office for Budget Responsibility: Economic and fiscal outlook—October 2024", the policy will cost 50,000 people their livelihoods. Only last week, car manufacturer Toyota said that it will lead to a rapid increase in the replacement of workers with robots. Labour's tax on jobs will be keenly felt by the public, private and third sectors. It will add £540 million to the cost of delivering public services in Scotland, while the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations estimates that third sector costs will be £75 million. All of that is at Labour's door. Those in the Scotland branch office looked on as their London bosses met only 60 per cent of the public sector impact, despite previous assurances. The £96

million shortfall for local government alone is equivalent to a 3.3 per cent rise in council tax.

Despite the huge national insurance burden that Labour has imposed, its MSPs continue to make a plethora of spending demands without any indication whatever as to how they should be funded. For example, although average household water bills will rise by 26 per cent in England and Wales, Dame Jackie Baillie called for the 9.9 per cent increase in Scotland to be met by the Scottish Government, omitting to say from where in the Scottish budget she would find the £118 million that would be required.

A one-year-only increase in the UK's capital allocation is welcome but, with capital budgets flatlining at best thereafter, by 2029-30 Scotland's capital allocation will be less in real terms than it was seven years earlier, only with less build for our buck.

What of those paragons of fiscal rectitude, the Tories? They go from the ludicrous £700 million Rwanda scheme and the billions squandered on HS2 and personal protective equipment down south, to the profligacy of our very own Douglas Lumsden, the 987-question, £100,000 man, asking daft questions about honey jars and salt sachets.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson, you will need to conclude.

Kenneth Gibson: Those questions are more for prepping for a Holyrood quiz night than holding ministers to account.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson, you will need to conclude.

Kenneth Gibson: We have had the usual £1 billion tax cut mantra—a memorable number obviously plucked from nowhere.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson: Back this budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you.

16:17

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I was a councillor at the start of this session.

I am proud to stand here today with my colleagues as a member of the only party that is willing to stand up to the devolved SNP Government. This budget is bad for businesses and individuals right across Scotland. It will leave them poorer and it will stifle growth, limit opportunities and hit our vital industries hardest. It is shameful that the other so-called Opposition

parties are signing up hook, line and sinker to the budget.

Ivan McKee: Will Douglas Lumsden take an intervention?

Douglas Lumsden: I will come back to the member later if there is time.

Only the Scottish Conservatives are calling out the budget for what it is: a raid on individuals' wallets and business profits. It is a budget that is lacking in ideas and policies to encourage growth and drive innovation in our economy.

I want to focus on two key areas that highlight the selling out of our communities and industries. The first is our local authorities. The folly of the rise in national insurance from the Westminster Government has put our local authorities under immense pressure. The ill-thought-out council tax freeze last year, which flew in the face of the Verity house agreement, has created the perfect storm for our local councils. Inflation-busting council tax rises are being seen the length and breadth of Scotland.

It is no wonder that the Labour branch office is siding so closely with the SNP Government on the budget. They are both equally to blame for the 10 per cent council tax rises that are being imposed on our hard-working communities. With inflation rising—which is, again, due to Labour—that is putting untold pressures on the wallets of individuals throughout Scotland. They are seeing rising costs everywhere and are still paying more in tax than their colleagues south of the border. The SNP promised that the increase in tax would lead to additional funds for services.

Ivan McKee: Will Douglas Lumsden give way?

Douglas Lumsden: If there is time later, I will come back to the member.

As my colleague Liz Smith pointed out at the time, and as economists highlight now, the higher income tax rates in Scotland have led to less rather than more money for public services. It is that knowledge and understanding that we will miss next session, as Liz Smith has decided to stand down. I, for one, will miss her wise words.

That funding matters. As a former leader of a local council, I know how crucial local authorities are in early intervention and prevention. This Government often speaks about early intervention and prevention, but it only talks the talk; it does not walk the walk. So much early intervention and prevention is done by local authorities, particularly in health and social care, which means that less money is needed to deal with crisis situations later on.

My colleague Brian Whittle spoke last week about obesity and the impact that that will have on

healthcare going forward. However, without proper funding for local councils, we are seeing swimming pools and sports centres closing, along with libraries. School sport clubs are being axed and kids are sitting in front of computer screens instead. We need a new approach, and it is much better for the public purse to ensure that issues are dealt with early on.

It is much better to ensure that the elderly can stay at home as long as possible with a great care package, rather than ending up in long-term care or bed-blocking in our hospitals. It is much better to ensure that families get support through well-funded social work and support services than to deal with family breakdown and children requiring additional care. It is much better for local authorities to offer a well-rounded education package to our young people with additional needs than to arrange out-of-area placements because they cannot find provision in the area where they live. However, continued cuts to local authorities, increased wage bills through national insurance hikes and irresponsible pay deals have all meant that local authorities are facing the prospect of withdrawing vital services altogether.

The second area that I will focus on is the lack of funding that has been allocated to the north-east. The just transition funding for the north-east and Moray was announced in 2022. It was meant to be £500 million over 10 years, and so you would expect about £50 million per year, but that figure has slowed right down over the past two years: it was £12 million this year and it will be £16 million next year. That snail's pace, along with the hostility shown to the oil and gas industry, means that there will not be much to transition. Aberdeen is on its knees right now. House prices are falling through the floor as people are moving away. There needs to be urgent action.

That is not the only broken promise to the north-east. Although £200 million was promised to improve rail journey times by 2026, not even 10 per cent of that was delivered, and there is nothing in this year's budget. We have only grand announcements, made years ago, but no delivery—just like the dualling of the A96 and the A90 to Peterhead and Fraserburgh. Why should the people of the north-east believe this Government anymore?

The Scottish Conservatives remain the only party that will stand up to this SNP Government and its partners, the Scottish Labour Party. Only the Scottish Conservatives offer an alternative to the growth-destroying, innovation-depressing policies that are being discussed here today. We will be the only party that stands up for a just transition for the north-east.

I am proud, along with colleagues, to be the only party that will vote against this damaging budget

today. We will stand up for businesses, communities and local authorities when the rest of the politicians in this building will not.

16:23

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I would say that it was a pleasure to follow Douglas Lumsden, but I am not so sure about that.

I note that, if Douglas Lumsden wants to spend money wisely, he should think about not lodging so many apparently artificial intelligence-generated questions, which cost £100,000, a sum that would be much better spent on public services. *[Interruption.]*

Colleagues—and I do mean colleagues—

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: I will take your intervention, yes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Speak through the chair, please.

Douglas Lumsden: Maybe he wants to silence the Opposition, but I will not be silenced.

Maybe he can tell me when he gets this figure of £100,000 from? Were there 25 extra staff employed here in January? *[Interruption.]*

Kevin Stewart: I get the figure of £100,000 from the fact that, the last time the question, “How much does it cost to answer a written parliamentary question?” was asked, the answer was £98.25. There we go. *[Interruption.]* Mr Gibson has just reminded me that that was back in 2008, so the cost now is probably well over £100,000. That money could have been spent on public services instead of trying to find out about salt sachets in the canteen.

Colleagues—and I do mean my colleagues—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat, Mr Stewart. There is far too much shouting across the chamber. I am sure that it is not for my benefit—it is not benefiting anyone. Mr Stewart, please continue.

Kevin Stewart: Thank you, Presiding Officer. Colleagues—and I do mean my colleagues in the Parliament—we follow the European norm of proportional representation, co-operation and coalition building. I thank Scottish Green and Lib Dem members, and Ash Regan, for working constructively with the SNP Government to produce a budget for the whole of Scotland.

On the other hand, it is sad to see the old guard of Labour and the Tories being so wed to the politics of Westminster and opposition for opposition's sake that all they can do is carp from

the sidelines, as per usual. The First Minister has made it clear that the budget is about delivering on the issues that matter most to the folk of Scotland. The budget will address the priorities of improving public services, eradicating child poverty, growing our economy and tackling the climate emergency. It will deliver a record £2 billion increase in front-line NHS spending, which will take our overall health and social care investment to £21 billion.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: I am sorry—I have no more time.

That sum includes a record £2.2 billion for primary care services to ensure that people can see a GP when they need one. I hope that some of that new investment will go into community pharmacy. As I heard during a visit to Charles Michie's pharmacy in Aberdeen yesterday, it is doing its level best for people and delivering preventative services. In addition, the budget contains specific provision to reduce waiting times and improve capacity, treat more than 150,000 extra patients and expand the hospital at home programme by 600 beds.

Many of our most vital public services are provided by local government. To recognise that, the budget will send a record £15 billion to local government to support essential services. However, it is a great pity that local authorities are having to face the burden of Labour's employer national insurance contribution hike. A large proportion of the council tax increases that we have seen is entirely down to that unexpected hike, which is a tax on jobs. Although the Scottish Government's budget provides for public services that Scots rely on, we simply cannot ignore the impact of Labour's national insurance tax grab.

Alongside all that, we will begin work to lift more than 15,000 children out of poverty by ending Westminster's two-child cap in Scotland. That will sit alongside our world-leading Scottish child payment. Eradicating child poverty should be at the very heart of all that we do.

At the heart of this budget, as always, is the social contract. We will continue to deliver for the people of Scotland, with: free prescriptions; free university tuition; free school meals; free childcare for three and four-year-olds, as well as eligible two-year-olds; free bus travel for almost 2.3 million people; and an NHS that is free at the point of use. We believe in using progressive taxation to pay for that social contract. Although we ask the richest in our society to pay a little more, most people will pay less tax in Scotland than they would do in England.

We know where the Tories stand, but Labour members must decide today whether they want to

support the NHS and eradicate child poverty. Will they vote for the benefit of Scotland or for the benefit of Starmer? The choice is theirs.

16:29

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I start by apologising to the finance secretary, Shona Robison—I inadvertently promoted her to Deputy First Minister earlier, so I had better correct the record now.

As Michael Marra highlighted, we have had years of mismanagement and poor decision making, which have led to cuts in vital areas instead of the investment that we should have had. As a Lothian MSP, it has been incredibly frustrating to me to see the flip-flopping on the eye pavilion, through which patients' treatments are now being disrupted. The years of delay mean that when the much-needed new eye pavilion is finally designed and built, it will be years late and way more expensive.

We need investment now in Lothian that we are not getting. It is urgent that our young people get access to child and adolescent mental health services and the community projects that would give them the support that they need, instead of long waits and their impact not only on their health but on the wellbeing of their parents.

We have also seen millions of pounds being wasted on the SNP's centralising national care plans, which have not resulted in any new carers when we urgently need them now for care in our communities, and to support people to live at home, instead of being stuck in hospital.

Although the SNP is highlighting the amount of money that is being put into those services now, that has been made possible only by the £5.2 billion increase in funding—record funding—from our UK Labour Government. We want more done on outcomes, not more self-congratulatory minor changes to previous budget cuts.

The situation is really frustrating, because on all the areas that I have highlighted the SNP Government has been told for years about the need for strategic and consistent investment, but instead it is making cuts to our councils' budgets that have put massive pressure on our schools and our communities. Those cuts have harmed our councils in terms of their being able to play their vital role in supporting our local communities to tackle our climate and nature emergencies.

I was deeply disappointed to see the budget lines on energy efficiency and decarbonisation, which are facing real-terms cuts. That is another missed opportunity. We also have the proposed heat in buildings bill being delayed—it is missing in action—solar power support is being removed

from energy efficiency grants, and it is now over a year since councils submitted their local heat and energy efficiency strategies proposals. Therefore, I have to say to the cabinet secretary that there is no actual plan to deliver on decarbonising heat in our homes and buildings.

We need investment and support for our colleges and access to funding and support for small and medium-sized enterprises so that there is access to the training and apprenticeship opportunities that are needed to get good-quality jobs and training in every community across Scotland now, to lower our climate emissions and to provide warmer homes.

Ross Greer: Sarah Boyack makes an absolutely fair point about energy efficiency, but she will be aware that it is an incredibly expensive programme. The only tax policy that Scottish Labour has proposed would take hundreds of millions of pounds out of the Scottish budget. How would she fund that energy efficiency programme?

Sarah Boyack: I go back to the £5.2 billion opportunity that is being missed, and to the fact that this is a year-on-year problem: this is about money being cut year after year, and it is not just about our homes and buildings. How are we supposed to tackle the urgent issue of protecting our planet if nature and energy are not even given a second or third thought in the budget?

Look at the £15 million that has been allocated for the just transition fund. The SNP previously made a commitment that £500 million over ten years would be given to that fund, which surely means that there should be £50 million this year, not £15 million. We have been hearing that a lot of people now see the term “just transition” as meaningless. We need real policies. If we want jobs in clean energy, clean heat and renewables technology for years to come, those industries need to have proper investment now, not in a decade.

Thankfully, our UK Government is absolutely serious about the climate and about the just transition. That is why Keir Starmer, at the weekend, made a commitment of £200 million for Grangemouth, which is vital investment that is needed for new jobs and innovation, with decent jobs and opportunities now.

The Just Transition Commission has been clear that our communities need support for training to enable people to develop their skills and to benefit from new tech and the new opportunities that are here, if we seize them.

I want to highlight an issue that has not been mentioned yet—the huge opportunities that can come from developing community renewables, energy efficiency projects and low-carbon infrastructure. Good work is happening in

Scotland, but it is stretched and it is not at the scale that we need. Our communities need a lot more support if they are to fully realise the potential of our renewables revolution.

We also need investment in adaptations, because communities are being hit now by the impact of extreme weather. That means that we need flood management schemes, peatland restoration and land management that creates local jobs and investment to address our climate and our nature emergencies.

However, we have to be strategic with that investment. Once again, the Scottish Government can celebrate the cash that has gone towards peatland restoration, but it avoids talking about why we are consistently missing our peatland targets. It is because the workforce and supply chains are currently insufficient to meet the significant challenge of restoring 250,000 hectares of peatland.

With an additional £5.2 billion from the UK Government, the budget could have delivered so much more. However, after 18 years of inefficiency and spending waste, our constituents will not see the investment that we urgently need. The budget is not good enough—it could have been way better with the additional money that the Scottish Government now has.

16:35

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): As we all know, across the public sector, a substantial proportion of the funding that has been allocated to the NHS and to education—indeed, to all public services—is for fixed costs. That includes the costs of staff, including wage increases, employer pension contributions and national insurance contributions, to which I will come shortly.

In addition, the funding includes, in the NHS, the costs of the Scottish Ambulance Service, of running hospitals, of medications and of payments to general practitioner practices—for example, for their contracts with NHS boards. There is not, therefore, much room for flexibility. There is room for reform and efficiency, and that is a task for the minister, Ivan McKee. I am thankful that he is not Elon Musk.

The budget has had to cover increased salaries across the public sector, with their ancillary employer costs, none of which we would begrudge nurses, the police and so on. However, the body blow of the increase in employer national insurance contributions has made a huge dent in the money that is available for those front-line services. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has estimated that the additional cost to councils alone will be £240 million. It is welcome

that the SNP Government has committed to providing councils with an additional £144 million to support the cost of that hike. However, that does not cover the entire cost, and across Scotland, public services will face a bill of more than £700 million.

Despite that, the UK Government has suggested that it will not reimburse the cost in full, which could leave Scotland some £300 million short. The increase in provision to councils will help to cover the additional and recurring costs of pay rises for teachers, social workers, refuse collectors and so on. Those pay rises are deserved, and are mainly a consequence of years of Tory austerity, which climaxed in Trussonomics. Now, however, Labour's national insurance increase will make sure that some of that money will simply go straight back to the Treasury.

That is not all. The impact across the economy of the national insurance increase will be damaging to all sectors. I know of businesses that are already not expanding and of some that are looking to cut staff because they cannot meet the increased bill. There are serious consequences for the care sector, which is supportive of the real living wage but is finding that paying it, on top of increased national insurance contributions, is a measure too far.

There is also the impact on charities to consider. In Scotland, 136,000 people are employed in the charitable sector. It is reckoned that the NI rise will cost charities £17 million a year; for example, it will cost the Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals £400,000 a year.

Four Square (Scotland) is an Edinburgh charity that supports people who face homelessness. It employs about 120 people and has a turnover of less than £4 million. It delivers public services on behalf of the local authority and has very limited options for finding money for the unexpected NI costs. It is considering whether it can afford a cost of living salary increase for staff in April 2025, or needs to cut posts. The strain on the voluntary sector will impact on public services, because there is bound to be displacement from voluntary services to the public sector and increasing demand.

To that national insurance pressure we can add the current 3 per cent rise in the cost of living, which is on an upward trajectory. That is now compounded by a 6.4 per cent increase in the energy cap, which will cost Scottish consumers £281 on average per year, with the average energy debt in Scotland—this figure is from Citizens Advice Scotland—being £2,500. In rural areas, it is worse, at £3,100.

That is the economic climate that has been set by UK plc, against which the Scottish

Government's budget endeavours to deliver, with increasing demand on our public services.

High on the list is poverty, particularly child poverty, which will increase for the reasons that I have outlined. Although they have already been mentioned, I mention again the highly popular baby box, which has more than 90 per cent uptake; universal free school meals from primary 1 to P5; the Scottish child payment, which is currently £26.70 for every child under 16 in a qualifying household; removal of the two-child benefit cap; the return of the universal winter fuel payment; the introduction of breakfast clubs; free travel for pensioners, for many disabled people and for under-22s; and no tuition fees. That is a great list, and those things are what our taxes pay for.

Finally, as we all know, not everything can be achieved, so setting a budget is about choices, and this Government has made good choices. What a contrast that is with UK Labour, which is undermining our farming community with an inheritance tax, leaving pensioners out in the cold, removing the universal winter fuel payment, defending the two-child benefit cap and hiking employer national insurance contributions.

What a difference there is in our budget priorities, and what a difference there would be if we had full control over our economy with independence.

16:41

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests as a farmer.

Prior to the SNP Government publishing its budget for the year ahead, there was in agricultural circles a sense of hope that, unlike the Labour Government, which has taken an axe to rural life with its budget decisions, the Scottish Government was listening to farmers and crofters. However, when the budget was published, rural communities realised that the SNP Government was never listening at all.

The rural affairs, land reform and islands portfolio was the only Scottish Government portfolio to have a real-terms cut of 3.1 per cent in day-to-day spending, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Meanwhile, the SNP hiked spending in the constitution department by 9.2 per cent. That is the real priority of this SNP Government laid bare.

Many people in the rural sector were disappointed—and I have no doubt that they remain disappointed—that the SNP Government has failed to deliver a multiyear funding announcement for agriculture, yet it has the cheek

to blame the UK Government for that. The Labour Government has given the SNP Government the choice of what to do with agriculture funding that is in excess of £600 million each year. Is it not telling that, even with that level of funding guaranteed, the SNP will not commit it to agriculture for the years ahead?

I am equally concerned about the cuts to the marine directorate's budget. I have heard from fishermen in my region that they are increasingly alarmed by what they see as the increasing levels of European Union vessels breaching rules that domestic vessels abide by, and that that will only get worse, especially if Labour and Sir Keir Starmer increase EU access to Scottish fishing waters next year. Those breaches happen primarily because of a perceived lack of action by the marine directorate and infrequent patrols.

However, my concerns about the budget do not relate only to farming and fishing. On health, I remain worried that rural Scotland will once again be left behind on new infrastructure projects and investment. Although projects such as a new hospital for the Isle of Barra, upgrades to Dr Gray's hospital in Elgin and a new hospital for Fort William have been in the pipeline for many years, no progress has been made, despite repeated promises.

On transport, the budget does little to convince me that investment in important arterial roads in my region will be taken any further forward. Constituents in Argyll and Bute, for example, remain exasperated at the glacial pace at which the Government is delivering a long-term solution for the A83 Rest and Be Thankful, while communities in Moray and the north-east remain weary at the failure to dual the A9 and the A96, which is, in large part, thanks to the Government's pandering to the Greens.

On education, the Scottish Government's "School Estate Statistics 2024" shows that rural schools are twice as likely as urban schools to be in poor or bad condition. A prime example of that is on the Isle of Mull, where parents are currently battling with Argyll and Bute Council to deliver new schools to replace a mould-infested, dilapidated building. The Scottish Government seems uninterested in delivering what will truly work for many generations of islanders to come. The funding pot is simply not big enough to support what is actually needed.

Although investment in school buildings largely falls to local government, as a councillor, I experienced years of funding cuts and increased use of ring fencing, which makes it impossible for many local authorities to make investments that will bring long-term gain for communities.

On infrastructure, the SNP's much-vaunted reaching 100 per cent—R100—programme, which was supposed to deliver superfast broadband to every property by May 2021, is now set to be delivered seven years late. In my region, not a single property in the Western Isles has yet been upgraded. For all those reasons and many more, I will join my Scottish Conservative colleagues in voting against the budget.

The First Minister wants to convince Scotland that this is a budget for its people. It is not. The budget does not meet the needs of ordinary hard-working Scots, who want investment and real change in their front-line services. How any SNP MSP can genuinely suggest to me that local authorities have received record funding while essential public services are cut and council tax is increased by extraordinary amounts by councils of all political colours, including their own, is beyond me.

As the newest MSP, I picked up quickly on the SNP's ability to spin. However, spin this as it might, I am confident that the SNP has no real vision for Scotland. At best, it has a short-term vision that is centred on politics and not on people. Years of council tax freezes have destroyed local democracy and essential public services. There has been a constant need to raid the ScotWind moneys to balance poor budget choices. There has been no progress on essential internet, and progress on tackling child poverty has stalled. We have an NHS in crisis, GPs on their knees, teachers facing increasing violence, and houses not being built. The national care service plan is in pieces, we have a land reform plan that is so bad that the SNP's own quango rejects it, and we have a tax policy that the SNP keeps telling us is progressive even though we all know that, really, it is not.

I would not often quote a former Labour MP, but Brian Wilson, writing in *The Scotsman*, was right. The SNP's modus operandi has been and always will be to start with a headline and work backwards. The SNP will always play the politics first and worry about making any real, lasting difference later. [*Interruption.*]

Presiding Officer, SNP members are upset because they know that I am speaking the truth.

I am a Scottish Conservative because we sit on the side of taxpayers. We are the only party with commonsense policies that meet the needs of ordinary Scots with a desire to see growth, improvement in public services and, for once, a focus on real, lasting change.

16:47

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I actually quite enjoyed Tim Eagle's

audition for the fringe in his comments a few moments ago.

I am pleased that the budget will pass today. The First Minister has made it clear that his focus is on delivering on the people's priorities of eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, improving public services such as our NHS and tackling the climate emergency. The engagement of the Greens, the Lib Dems and Alba on the budget has been welcome, and it provided a level of reassurance that the process would not be dragged out, which would have led to a sense of uncertainty for local government, businesses and the wider public.

I welcome the record £2 billion increase in front-line NHS spending, which takes overall health and social care investment to £21 billion, including an increase in capital spending power of £139 million compared with 2024-25.

Brian Whittle: What I have a problem with is not actually the health budget, but how the Scottish Government directs it. Does the member recognise that it is the underinvestment in policies such as the development and adoption of healthcare tech and artificial intelligence, as well as the lack of investment in people's ability to be active, that creates the need to continually increase the budget, with poor outcomes?

Stuart McMillan: There are many areas that Brian Whittle and I will agree on when it comes to aspects of health. I genuinely believe that there can be more investment in the use of technology to help with the preventative approach. However, I gently remind him that we had 14 years of Conservative austerity—

Brian Whittle: We have had 17 years of the SNP.

Stuart McMillan: We had 14 years of Conservative austerity before Labour won the election, and it has continued some of that austerity since it came into power last year.

I welcome the record £15 billion for local government to support the services that communities rely on; the commitment to match the UK Government in raising the earnings threshold for carer support payment and carers allowance to £196 a week; the provision of £768 million for affordable homes, which will enable the building of more than 8,000 new properties for social rent, mid-market rent and low-cost home ownership in the coming year; the restoration of the universal winter heating payment to every pensioner household; and the development of the systems that are necessary to effectively scrap the impact of the two-child cap in 2026.

I also want to highlight some other aspects of the budget. I welcome the additional £1 million for

hospices, which takes the total support to £5 million, as I know how challenging hospice funding is. Ardgowan hospice in my constituency advises that running its services costs approximately £11,000 per day. We need to go still further on hospice funding, a thorough examination of which is supported by a variety of colleagues across the chamber.

Hospice finances are to be raided, as other finances are, by the Labour UK Government, through increased employer national insurance contributions. That demonstrates how decisions that are taken at Westminster impact devolved areas, especially financially. As the Labour UK health secretary Wes Streeting stated last year,

“all roads ... lead back to Westminster”,

so the financial hit that our public and third sector organisations must attempt to deal with is the sole responsibility of the Labour UK Government. That is why I support the calls for the UK Government to fully fund that raid on third and public sector organisations. Inverclyde Council has not yet set its budget—that will happen next week—but the first 7.1 per cent of any increase in council tax is Labour's to own.

Another welcome announcement in the budget is the £158 million uplift for the education and skills portfolio, which includes additional investment in additional support for learning. That will involve the delivery of an extra £28 million, through the local government settlement, to improve support for children with additional support needs. I highlight that example because childcare provision and support in schools for pupils with ASN is a key issue that local SNP councillors and I have been working on over the past year, as local parents have highlighted the challenges that they face in accessing sufficient support for their children.

Scottish taxes are often a bone of contention when it comes to the budget. We have heard that this afternoon. We know that household incomes are tight. However, we need to raise funds to invest in services, rather than stripping them of moneys. The austerity approach harms only those who are most vulnerable, and it risks costing the Government more money in the long run.

As I touched on a few moments ago, we have had 14 years of austerity. People at the lower end of the financial income ladder cannot deal with any more austerity.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will Stuart McMillan take an intervention?

Stuart McMillan: I am sorry—I took an intervention earlier.

I therefore welcome the fact that Scottish taxes are forecast to raise £24.6 billion in 2025-26. That is £1.7 billion more than they would have raised if Scotland had followed UK policy on tax, and it is £777 million higher than was forecast in December 2023. That is partly due to increased income tax revenue, which is a result of average earnings growing faster in Scotland than in the rest of the UK.

This is a good budget that delivers for our constituents. The electorate will know who is on their side with this budget, so those who do not support it will need to own their failure to deliver for the people of Scotland.

16:53

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practicing NHS GP.

As have many colleagues in health and social care, I have seen at first hand the consequences of years of SNP failure. Despite claiming to prioritise our NHS and public services, the SNP has left us with a system that is creaking under mismanagement, short-term fixes and economic stagnation. This budget, which is backed by a left-wing Holyrood cartel, continues the SNP's high-tax, low-outcome agenda, stifling growth and threatening the services that we rely on.

After 18 years in power, the SNP has a legacy of failure, and its latest budget—which is endorsed by Scottish Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Greens—is no exception. We need to recast how we manage healthcare and start doing things that yield better outcomes. That is common sense but, unfortunately, it is beyond the SNP's competence.

The consequences in Glasgow are severe. Waiting times at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital remain dangerously high, Glasgow royal infirmary's accident and emergency department is overwhelmed and GP surgeries are struggling to cope with rising demand. Beyond mismanagement, that is a betrayal of NHS staff. The SNP Government pledged fair pay and safe staffing levels, yet our nurses remain overstretched, with many leaving the profession due to stress, burnout and poor working conditions. John Swinney and Neil Gray should be ashamed of themselves for betraying our nurses by not honouring their agreement on terms and conditions. They struck a deal and they have turned their backs on our nurses.

The root cause of all these ills is economic mismanagement. The SNP has controlled income tax since 2017, yet its decisions have weakened Scotland's economy and tax base. Despite forcing Scottish taxpayers to pay almost £1.7 billion more than they would under the UK system, the SNP

budget is missing out on more than £800 million due to sluggish economic growth. The SNP calls that progressive, but tell me what is progressive about losing revenue that would fund hospitals, social care and public services.

The SNP spends way beyond its means while failing to generate growth. Nowhere is that clearer than when we look at SNP-controlled Glasgow City Council's financial crisis. Years of SNP Government neglect coupled with incompetent SNP councillors have left Glasgow facing devastating cuts to local services. The council's debt has soared to £1.6 billion and the city is suffering. The council is making deep cuts to community projects, road repairs and front-line services. Could Glasgow actually declare itself bankrupt? Libraries, sports centres and community hubs are at risk, while bin collections and road maintenance continue to decline. Even the Glasgow school of sport, which was home to Olympians such as Michael Jamieson and Kirsty Gilmore, is threatened with closure. It is shocking that such a gem might be lost.

Let us talk about Glasgow's crumbling infrastructure. Roads and pavements are riddled with potholes, making daily life harder for businesses and residents alike. The SNP's decision to exclude pubs and restaurants from UK Government rates relief was an attack on Scotland's hospitality sector—businesses that create jobs and support local communities. The SNP's tax policies are not just damaging, they are absurd. Scotland now has an unnecessarily complex tax system under which those who earn just £26,562 are considered rich by this SNP Government and face higher rates than people anywhere else in the UK. For Glasgow, that is a disaster. The city's financial sector is struggling to attract talent, with fintech and banking companies warning that skilled professionals are being lured away to London and Manchester.

Nowhere is SNP incompetence clearer than in social care. The sector is in crisis, yet the budget does nothing to address long-term structural problems. While the SNP pours £800 million more into social security—far above the forecast levels—it fails to deliver funding models for social care. Donald Macaskill of Scottish Care has called this “a budget that kills”. In Glasgow, the crisis is dire. Care homes are stretched beyond capacity, leaving elderly residents waiting weeks—sometimes months—for support. Home care services are in chaos, with families struggling to secure help for loved ones. Instead of improving services, the SNP increases dependency while stifling economic opportunity.

There is another way. The Scottish Conservatives would cut income tax to 19 per cent for every taxpayer who earns up to £43,662,

delivering a fairer, simpler system that puts money back into people's pockets and encourages growth. We would fully exempt pubs and restaurants from business rates, which would help nearly 7,000 venues to survive and would protect jobs. We would cut home buyer taxes by raising the land and buildings transaction tax threshold to £250,000, helping up to 59,000 buyers a year to afford homes without facing excessive taxation.

The choice is clear. The SNP, propped up by Labour, the Lib Dems and the Scottish Greens, will continue down the path of economic decline, high taxes and underfunded public services. They will keep shifting the blame while failing to deliver real change. The Scottish Conservatives, on the other hand, offer a path to prosperity that encourages rather than punishes work, investment and enterprise. It is time to reject SNP failure and choose a better future.

16:59

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I am very pleased to support this budget. From speaking with my constituents, I think that it is a budget that they support, too, because it invests in the things that they care most about. It maintains the SNP's most popular policies and demonstrates our clear ambition to move Scotland forward.

We are putting some big numbers into the basics. For health, there is a record uplift of £2 billion. In housing, £768 million will result in more than 8,000 new affordable homes being built. In social security, an £800 million uplift will put more money directly into folk's pockets. Headteachers will get £120 million to tackle the attainment gap. Across Scotland, councils will share an extra £1 billion.

It is a budget that builds on much of what the SNP has already delivered in Scotland—what Anas Sarwar recently described as the “successes of devolution”. If anyone wants to be reminded of those SNP successes, they include extending free education from nursery to university, supported by the expansion of free school meals; maintaining free healthcare at the point of use, from the cradle to the grave, including free prescriptions; free bus travel for more than 2 million folk; and seven social security payments that have no equivalent elsewhere in the UK, including the Scottish child payment, which helps to give every child in Scotland the best start in life.

It is worth remembering that those policies faced challenges to get over the line in the first place. Even after we could see the policies changing lives, the SNP Government had to fight to keep them. I remember when Scottish Labour described it as a “something for nothing” culture. Perhaps if Labour had run with that as we went into the

previous election, there would not have been such a sense of shock and utter betrayal about its first few months in charge of the UK Government. Instead, Sir Keir Starmer promised change and Anas Sarwar said to read his lips when he said there would be “no austerity under Labour”, but, after the election, Labour refused to end the two-child cap and, within weeks, it announced that it was scrapping universal winter fuel payments.

My ambition for the Parliament is to do more than simply mitigate the worst policies of the UK Government, but that is what needs to be done today. Today's budget will reinstate the winter heating payment for every pensioner, helping them through the long and cold Scottish winter. Today's budget takes the first steps towards abolishing the two-child cap, which will see more than 15,000 bairns lifted out of poverty. That is change that people want to see.

I invite Anas Sarwar to read my lips: the Scottish Government is mitigating Labour austerity. Will his party support that by backing this budget? Will at least his colleagues in the north-east support it? This is a budget that delivers for Aberdeen. The £34 million uplift to the culture budget has already seen multiyear awards made to eight organisations in Aberdeen: Aberdeen Performing Arts, Applied Arts Scotland, Belmont Community Cinema, Citymoves Dance Agency, Grampian Hospitals Art Trust, Jazz Scotland, Peacock and the Worm, and the Word centre for creative writing at the University of Aberdeen. They will receive more than £5 million between them across the next three years.

The budget allocates £25 million to increase the number of jobs that are available in the green energy supply chain. With Aberdeen being the future net zero capital of the world—I will keep calling it that until I can shorten it to simply the “net zero capital of the world”—we need investment in clean and green energy, and we need to give people the confidence to invest in their futures, whether by taking up training or by putting down roots. The continued support of the Scottish Government for a just transition for the north-east alongside Grangemouth is very welcome.

The move to being a net zero capital is not just about what happens 100 miles off Aberdeen's coast; it is also about what runs through the city. One of the later additions to the budget is a £2 bus fare pilot in a regional transport area, which is a fantastic idea. Encouraging more folk to use public transport is part of the journey to net zero. I would like to see affordable and well-used buses running through the streets of Aberdeen and connecting it to communities across the north-east.

The north-east is the perfect region for that pilot to take place in. Our region offers a good mix of urban and rural communities, with a city at its

heart. We have a city council that has supported bus services, from backing hydrogen and electric buses to funding night services. We have an opportunity to further bolster Aberdeen's net zero credentials with the pilot. I will use the final words of my speech to urge ministers to pilot the £2 bus fares cap in the north-east and to urge members across the chamber to vote in favour of this budget, which delivers for Scotland.

17:04

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The UK Labour Government delivered record investment for Scotland with the largest block grant in the history of devolution, which has resulted in £5.2 billion being available for the SNP Government to spend. However, after the appalling education statistics today, do not ask me to sit here and endorse this Government's failed approach. Despite a record settlement, the budget delivers no change in direction, as the current state of Scotland's education system shows starkly.

Today's report shows that attainment is down; the proportion of pupils leaving school with a nat five is down; the proportion of pupils leaving school with a higher is down; the proportion of pupils going on to positive destinations is down; the number of pupils leaving school with no qualifications at all is up; and, at every single level, the gap between pupils from the most and least deprived areas has widened. Despite the efforts of staff in schools and the fact that 50 per cent of local authority spending goes to education, it is clearer than ever that the SNP Government is not improving outcomes for Scotland's young people.

The picture for pupils with additional support needs is particularly shocking. They are less likely to achieve curriculum for excellence levels or go on to positive destinations.

Rachael Hamilton: Will Pam Duncan-Glancy take an intervention?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I am happy to take an intervention.

Rachael Hamilton: I completely agree with Pam Duncan-Glancy's comments about the state of education under the SNP Government. However, will she abstain on the budget, or, if she is so disgusted with it, will she vote with the Scottish Conservatives against it tonight?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: My party and I will not stand in the way of £5.2 billion extra for public services across Scotland, but nor will we endorse the Government's failing agenda.

The parents of pupils with additional support needs are left fighting day and night for the support that they need, with data showing that

applications to the ASN tribunal are up by 67 per cent. Staff are not getting support, either. The Government committed to assessing teacher hours for ASN and was due to publish proposals for support assistance accreditation and registration in 2023, but, unsurprisingly, no update has been provided on either.

In a round table with support staff last week, I learned that they are being badly failed by the Government. They are not invited to attend team around the child meetings. They experience daily violence, which, they said, they have now "come to expect", and there is no consistent process in place for them to report or deal with incidents. Although the number of pupils with ASN has risen hugely, the Scottish Children's Services Coalition has found that, over the past decade, the Government has presided over a funding cut of 33.9 per cent per pupil with additional support needs.

The Government's back-and-forth with local authorities on teacher numbers has let them down, too. Rather than use the opportunity of an extra £5.2 billion from the Labour Government to deliver a properly resourced work plan for schools that recognises workload, fills vacancies in key subjects and geographies and gives newly qualified teachers jobs, the Scottish Government has presided over insecurity and uncertainty, with the back-to-the-future ambition of back-to-2023 teaching number levels. It is no wonder that the Educational Institute of Scotland said at the weekend that the SNP is in a "visionless vacuum" on education.

Despite claiming that colleges and universities are crucial to economic growth, the SNP has failed to change direction with its budget, handing them continued real-terms cuts, which is having real-life consequences.

Today, a report showed that the number of full-time places in Scottish colleges has plummeted by more than 8,000 in a year, which takes the number of places to the lowest level in nine years. Despite colleges asking time and again for real funding flexibility so that they can deliver agile and responsive courses, they have faced inaction on the funding model and decades of budget cuts.

Student need is rising in colleges and universities, but funding has been reduced for mental health and student support, and institutions are having to rob one budget to pay for another. Retention is down, and it is worse for the poorest students. Progress on widening access has plateaued, and we do not know whether life chances are being improved because, conveniently, the Government collects data on entry only, not student experience or destination. On the SNP Government's watch, Scotland's young people are being failed. Everything in the

education system proves that, and it is going in the wrong direction. The budget is a tragic missed opportunity for them.

I will use the short time that I have left to talk about the experiences of people in Glasgow and disabled people in Scotland—groups who are being badly let down by the Government.

A recent survey by Glasgow Disability Alliance found that 89 per cent of its disabled members could not access healthcare appointments or healthcare that met their needs, and that 67 per cent could not access social care that met their needs. The botched National Care Service (Scotland) Bill has not delivered a single additional hour of social care for those people. Given the lack of progress on public service reform, it is hard to see how the budget will change the direction for them.

Although the Government was dragged kicking and screaming to finally reverse its nearly £200 million cut to the affordable housing supply programme, funding for affordable house building has still fallen in real terms by nearly £160 million since 2022-23. Those cuts are having devastating impacts on the lives of thousands of people in Glasgow. In 2022, more than 60,000 people were on housing waiting lists—the equivalent of 10 applicants for every home that was let during the previous year. Record numbers of children are in temporary accommodation, and 56 people tragically died while they were homeless in Glasgow last year.

Not a single public service is better off on the Government's watch. Instead of using the opportunity of the budget, with the biggest settlement since devolution, to transform Scotland's public services, the SNP has squandered it to correct its worst mistakes. The budget will pass today—that has been obvious for months—and, because we want the money to get to the front line, we will not stand in its way, but nor will we endorse it. Scottish Labour is clear that a new direction is necessary to properly deliver the change that Scotland needs, and we are ready to deliver it.

17:11

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Today, we have heard what MSPs think of the budget, but, in due course, we will hear what people think of it. It is probably useful to look beyond the details of the budget—which we have heard a great deal about this afternoon—to some of the broader themes.

Many people will form a judgment on the budget based on the issue of trust. The SNP has balanced its budget for 17 years. It built the new Queensferry crossing with £400 million less than was budgeted for it. It built the Aberdeen western peripheral route, which previous Administrations had just talked about. It built in the Borders the longest piece of new rail infrastructure in the UK for 100 years. It built many new primary and secondary schools across Scotland, and it provided the child payment, free tuition fees and free prescriptions.

We also abolished the bedroom tax. We used to hear a lot about issues with the bedroom tax from Labour, but we do not hear about them any more, given that the bedroom tax has been left untouched in England.

As for the Tories, they brought us the highest tax burden since world war two, with the country more than £2 trillion in debt. It is the party of financial incompetence on a grand scale. The Tories also gutted the armed forces in terms of both personnel and equipment. Sandesh Gulhane said that the SNP spends beyond its means, but his party left us £2 trillion in debt and with the highest tax burden since the second world war. Where are the bankrupt councils in the UK? They are not in Scotland—they are in England and Wales.

What about Labour? It is the party that started by saying, "There's no money left," and, by abstaining on the budget, it is now the party with no conviction left. In the words of the dictionary, it has decided to refrain from performing a public duty. That says it all about the Labour Party—it has absolutely no conviction whatsoever. Since Labour was elected in the UK, it cannot be trusted on finance. It has already changed the fiscal rules, and the headroom that it talked about has already gone. On trust, the SNP Government comes out well ahead.

There are two very big issues underlining the budget of which the public will certainly take note. The first relates to the tax on jobs through ENICs. I will give a local example of the detrimental impact of that policy. Scottish Autism, an organisation that is anchored in my Clackmannanshire and Dunblane constituency, provides indispensable services across communities, but it is now confronted with an unsustainable financial burden. It has forecast an annual increase in costs of up to £850,000 due to the policy. That £850,000 should be channelled into improving lives and enhancing services in communities; it should not be wasted on mitigating the fall-out from an ill-conceived policy decision.

The jeopardy that organisations such as Scottish Autism face underscores a profound policy failure that threatens the very fabric of our

community support systems. We cannot and must not allow that to continue. The Labour Party's choice to stay silent and abstain from this historic budget vote speaks volumes, not least in relation to the impact on the fabric of our communities.

The other major issue that casts a huge shadow over the budget relates to Ukraine. The budget is perhaps not directly affected, but it has to be formulated against the backdrop of the threat of future major public spending cuts. I speak for myself when I say that there is no option other than that we will have to contemplate a substantial increase in defence expenditure in relation to personnel and equipment. That means rearmament, recruitment and research. We will do that because we want to defend not just Ukraine but Europe. However, in my view, this Parliament cannot be asked to subsidise nuclear weapons or an even more obscene nuclear weapons system such as the one that might replace Trident. That cannot be demanded of us.

Nor should we be subsidising the complete failure of successive UK Governments, which have gutted the armed forces to the extent that they are now 20,000 below what they were in Napoleonic times. That has now been admitted by previous Labour and Conservative secretaries of state. The equipment and the training are not there.

Nobody can deny that Russia poses an existential threat, especially given the fact that the guarantees that we have taken for granted since the second world war are now absent. The idea that we protect countries only if we can extort their mineral resources is the geopolitics of protectionism, and we should have no truck with it. We should protect Europe because we want to protect Europe.

In summary, we have to make that contribution, but we should not give carte blanche to a UK Government that has not shown itself to be capable of properly building a defence infrastructure. The response should be European-led—I say “European” rather than EU, because I do not know how Romania and Hungary will respond. We should be willing to back a European-led response.

I will make one final point. Some big issues have been touched on in the debate, such as social care and reform of local government finance. It would be ideal if, before the election, the parties could show that they have the maturity to get together to agree some common ground. That would squeeze out room for manoeuvre for whoever is successful in forming the Government, but the long-standing issues of local government finance reform and social care have to be addressed if we are to improve the quality of life of people in Scotland.

There is no question but that there are difficult times ahead, but I am delighted to support what is an excellent budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Brown. I will now take—briefly—two final speakers in the open debate. I call Ash Regan, to be followed by John Mason. You have up to two minutes, Ms Regan.

17:17

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): The Scottish budget is a testament to what constructive politics can achieve and what productive opposition delivers. For Alba, this year was the first time that we were a participant in the process, and it delivered tangible benefits for some of Scotland's most vulnerable—pensioners and children—by negotiating from a point of principle. Protecting the most vulnerable in the face of the brutal decisions made by the UK Labour Government is not just an economic choice, it is a moral imperative.

Alba's persistence has secured mitigations of enhanced heating support for pensioners this winter, in addition to the winter fuel payment for all pensioners next winter. However, until fuel poverty is consigned to the history books of our energy-abundant nation, we will not have done enough. Westminster Exchequers cannot continue the exploitation of Scotland's resources. They must, instead, start directly benefiting our people and businesses. With bigger thinking, we can push devolution to its limits, exposing the walls that stifle Scotland's ambition.

Hunger must never be a barrier to learning. Today, we are one step closer to eradicating that barrier, but we must continue to strive to fulfil the Government's election promise to primary school children in the current parliamentary session. Glasgow City Council's announcement about joining Inverclyde Council in funding universal school meals in primary schools is welcome and it should drive other councils to put politics aside and find solutions for every school child to have the nourishment that they need to grow, learn and thrive.

Each budget is a step forward on the road to independence. Each pound invested in our communities and every measure that is designed to protect our people provides proof that Scotland can govern itself effectively and more compassionately than Westminster ever would.

17:19

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I do not want to repeat what I have said in previous budget debates. However, I still hold to some of the key points that I have made before, including,

first, that taxes in the UK and Scotland are too low: if we want better public services, we need to have higher taxes. Secondly, we need to replace council tax and raise more money. Thirdly, economic growth is all very well, but the benefits of that growth have to be shared out more equally than they currently are.

My theme, in my limited time, is the relationship with Westminster. First, around half of our resource budget comes in the form of a block grant. For 2025-26, it is estimated to be £26 billion, out of a total Scottish resource budget of £51 billion. The way that the block grant is worked out is one of the most complex that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has seen. As the OECD has told us in the past, it is not well understood by most people or, I suspect, by most MSPs. Although the fiscal framework is better than it might have been—which is thanks to John Swinney, when he was finance secretary—it was meant to be properly reviewed after it had settled down in 2023. However, as Shona Robison told us, Westminster refused to do that.

That leaves us trying to compete with London and the south-east of England—something that few parts of the UK have ever managed to do historically. As a result, our budget and block grant get squeezed year by year. On top of that, the Barnett formula further squeezes our budget year by year. If we set up a new tax, such as the aggregates tax, Scotland has to bear all the admin costs of getting it going, and we pay any costs that His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has in switching off the old tax. It really does seem that the fiscal framework is set up so that it is a case of heads the UK wins and tails Scotland loses.

Continuing on the subject of the relationship with Westminster, the Finance and Public Administration Committee wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, inviting her to a committee evidence session. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury replied that he was

“unable to accept this invitation”

because

“the UK Government is accountable to the UK Parliament”.

Surely that does not stop it talking to us.

I am happy to support the budget for 2025-26, but Scotland's deal from Westminster really has to improve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to closing speeches.

17:21

Ross Greer: When we debated the rates resolution last week, Willie Rennie made what I

thought was an important point: the devolution of income tax powers to this Parliament has strengthened the institution, because it has forced us, in these budget debates, not just to think about spending allocations but to consider the wider impact of the decisions that we make and the wider health of the Scottish economy.

I am proud of the impact that the Scottish Greens have made on income tax since it was devolved. The £1.7 billion of additional revenue that we have for public services that our Conservative colleagues so regularly deride is a result of Green changes to the income tax system, and that, in turn, allows us to deliver unique Scottish spending decisions such as free bus travel for young people, the Scottish child payment, and those Bolshevik baby boxes that so haunt Craig Hoy's dreams.

Income tax is not the only area of tax where we have made different decisions in Scotland. With the change that we have just made to the additional dwelling supplement, we have doubled that particular tax on the purchase of second or holiday homes in the course of this parliamentary session, raising money for public services and helping first-time buyers, putting them in a better position to have their offers accepted.

I was intrigued by what the Conservatives were saying about property tax: that we actually need a cut to LBTT to help first-time buyers. However, all the evidence that we have seen shows that cutting property taxes helps sellers, not buyers. The efforts of the UK Conservative Government to cut property transaction taxes only increased house prices and pushed them further out of the reach of those who wanted to be first-time buyers.

I am proud that we have doubled council tax on holiday homes, but I think that we can go further. We could emulate the system in Wales, where it is possible to go up to 300 per cent. My preferred position would simply be to lift the cap entirely, allowing local government to make those decisions for themselves, whether they want to increase or decrease the amount. Whatever locally elected representatives wish to do with that tax, they should be able to do it, rather than having limits dictated to them by us here.

All of that combined is still not enough, in my view. There is a need for further tax reform and for further resources to tackle the challenges that this country faces.

Michael Marra quite fairly challenged those of us who oppose the UK Labour Government's decision to increase employer national insurance contributions, asking where else we would have raised that money from. I am sure that Mr Marra and his Labour colleagues will not be surprised to hear that the Greens have a range of alternative

ways in which that money could be raised. For a start, sticking with national insurance contributions, if we removed the ridiculous reduction to those contributions above £50,000 of earnings, that would raise in the region of £10 billion.

If we extended national insurance to investment income, that would raise billions more. If we closed the loophole in the oil and gas windfall tax that actually incentivises further exploration for more fossil fuels, that would raise £6 billion a year. If we equalised capital gains tax with the English income tax system, that would raise £16 billion, and if we equalised it with the Scottish income tax system, it would raise even more. Of course, if we abolished the non-domiciled status, as Labour promised to do before it was elected, that would raise £4 billion. However, the UK chancellor has said that, after conversations with the group that she referred to as “the non-dom community”, she will not do that, as if that was some kind of protected status—as if someone’s being a multimillionaire or billionaire who is going out of their way to avoid tax made them deserving of a unique audience with a Labour chancellor.

As well as tax reform, we need reform in our public services in Scotland. I am proud that the Scottish Greens secured the pilot of the four-day or reduced working week in our public sector. The Finance and Public Administration Committee took evidence on the interim findings on the impact of that pilot in South of Scotland Enterprise, which is one of the bodies involved. Its chief executive reported to us that there has been no loss of productivity but a hugely significant reduction in the number of staff working days lost due to ill health. That is a positive development that needs further evaluation and rolling out more widely across the public sector.

I was intrigued by what Craig Hoy said. He used what I think is incredibly inappropriate language in talking about people “languishing on benefits” as he discussed what in his view is Scotland’s unaffordable social security bill. He failed to acknowledge that a huge number of the people who he is speaking about—indeed, the majority of them—are either children or adults who are in work. The Conservatives consistently fail to acknowledge that. The Conservatives’ position seems to be that, to get people into work, we need to cut social security. However, after 14 years of Conservative cuts to the UK’s social security safety net, that absolutely was not the result. The result was pain and misery for many of the most vulnerable people in our society, many of whom wanted to return to work but needed employability programmes, training and other support to do so. They needed more support from the public sector, not to have that essential safety net taken away from them.

I was interested in what Michael Marra said on the point that Labour will not stand in the way of the £5.2 billion of additional spending that the UK Government has delivered. In Labour’s approach to the budget over the past few months, it has made a fair case about the impact of Scottish Labour MPs at Westminster—I disagree with it, but it is a fair case. However, Labour has failed to make any case whatever for electing Scottish Labour MSPs to this Parliament next year, as it failed entirely to engage in the budget process. The Labour Party could have asked for anything and may well have got it, as the Greens and Liberal Democrats have managed to do, but it decided to ask for nothing and then to get nothing as a result.

Compare that to what the Scottish Greens have done—we have delivered for people and planet. More children will be fed, our natural environment will be better protected and public transport will be cheaper as a result of our interventions. Surely that is exactly what we were all sent here to do.

17:28

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I will begin by responding directly to Ross Greer. The case for electing Labour MSPs will be written in our manifesto, and I encourage him to read it. Maybe he should have been following what we have been saying. We do not aim to simply influence a budget; we want to set a budget as a Labour Government after the elections in 2026.

I genuinely always try to sum up debates by listening to them, because I do not like reading out pre-scripted speeches, but perhaps I could have saved myself some time. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I encourage members not to engage in chat across the chamber while someone is delivering their speech and responding to the debate.

I can give you the time back for that, Mr Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: Thank you, Presiding Officer. It is always wonderful to hear from the Minister for Parliamentary Business, but maybe not while I am trying to speak.

In July, the UK electorate made a critical decision to end 14 years of Conservative Government, but let us be clear that it was not until the budget in October that the serious step was taken to end the worst excesses wrought by the Conservative Government and the economic damage that it meted out. It was the budget that changed that. It was that budget that took the first steps towards delivering on the mandate that the UK Labour Government was given: to fix the foundations of the public finances following the

disastrous economic legacy left by the Conservative Government, to halt the destruction of our public services, and to provide a Government that genuinely sought to focus on being in the service of working people.

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Daniel Johnson: If he would not mind letting me finish this point.

That required difficult decisions to be made, but there is no doubt about the overarching impact of the budget. There is a massive injection of funding to our public services, including £5.2 billion for Scotland alone. That is the very real difference that a Labour Government can make. That is a real start; it is not the end point, but a start on alleviating the damage that was caused by the past 14 years of UK Government.

John Mason: Daniel Johnson goes on about the UK budget, but would he accept that the Labour Government knew what was coming in the UK budget—that it was not a surprise, that it was well warned, and that it should have been more honest with the constituencies?

Daniel Johnson: No. Let us be clear. There were issues that were known about. However, as the correspondence between the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Government made clear, the full extent of that £22 billion black hole was not clear. It had not been laid bare. It was a black hole that needed to be addressed. *[Interruption.]*

For anyone to come to this place and talk credibly about the budget, they need to answer how that £22 billion black hole would be addressed. Let us be clear—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Johnson, please resume your seat.

I will allow a bit of reaction to what is being said, but I will not have the front benches shouting at each other while Mr Johnson is trying to speak.

Mr Johnson, please continue.

Daniel Johnson: I can do more than enough shouting by myself, Deputy Presiding Officer. I do not need any help—you are quite right.

It is about not just the £5.2 billion. The budget has delivered the largest ever block grant; there is a 5.8 per cent increase in the block grant alone. There is a total funding envelope available to the Scottish Government of £56 billion. Resource spending alone is at £49.8 billion and there is a 6 per cent real-terms increase.

Those are the figures that are laid out very clearly by the Scottish Fiscal Commission: there is a 6 per cent real-terms increase. *[Daniel Johnson has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]* That is the extra money that the Scottish

Government has to spend. The SNP has a decision to make about how it spends it.

Kenneth Gibson: The Scottish Fiscal Commission made it clear that the real-terms increase was 0.8 per cent—that is, less than 1 per cent. Further, that £5.2 billion is over two years, but you are talking as if it is gaun intae next year's budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please, Mr Gibson.

Daniel Johnson: If he wants to correct my numbers, they are right here. Resource funding is real: last year, it was £46.9 billion and this year it is £49.8 billion. I have done the maths. Maybe my calculator is wrong, Mr Gibson—feel free to come back, but those are the numbers that I am basing that on.

Kenneth Gibson: It is on your numbers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson, you have had an intervention. Please stop.

Daniel Johnson: We had 14 years of Tory decline, 14 years of dismantling public services and 14 years of chaos and incompetence. That is what that budget set out to address.

The cabinet secretary says that to will the ends, we must will the means. However, what did her colleagues do? Did they vote to end those 14 years of decline? Did they vote for the record increase in funding? Did they vote for those things? Did any of them vote for it? It was not nine of them that voted for it—it was none. Frankly, that argument has absolutely no coherence whatsoever.

Ross Greer: I accept the premise that Daniel Johnson is outlining: that the UK Government delivered a funding increase to the Scottish Government.

However, although he challenged me to read Labour's manifesto for the next election, what about Labour's manifesto that elected every Labour member here today? Was there not a single policy in that manifesto that they could have gone to the Scottish Government with and asked for in this budget? Why did they ask for nothing? I simply do not understand.

Daniel Johnson: We will not stand in the way of the much-needed additional funding, but we cannot simply carry on as this Government has done over the past 18 years. *[Interruption.]*

We have had 18 years of decline in public services and 18 years of seeing our waiting lists get worse. One in six Scots is on a waiting list. We have also seen education sliding down the rankings. My colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy set that out very clearly. Just today, we have seen that attainment is down, that the number of children

leaving school with highers is down and that the number of young people going to positive destinations is down. Those are the consequences of 18 years of SNP Government.

Will we support that? No, we will not. That is why, although we will not block the funding going into the Scottish budget—

Members: Oh!

Daniel Johnson: We cannot support the record of this Government.

We need reform—[*Interruption.*] We need Scots to have public services that serve their interests—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: For the third time of asking, could we have a bit of respect for the member who is on their feet? Daniel Johnson, please continue but begin to wind up.

Daniel Johnson: Thank you very much, Presiding Officer. I am grateful. I know that it is hard for members to have respect for what I am saying, but clearly I am getting them very excited.

Critically, if the SNP's argument had any credibility, it would have come forward with alternatives to the measures set out in the UK Labour Government's budget, but it has offered none. We have not heard a word about what it might do. We certainly have not heard SNP members repeat the First Minister's claim that we should equalise tax rates, because we know that that would lead to £636 million being lost from the Scottish budget. Neither have we heard them repeat their claims, which they made during the general election campaign, that we should borrow more. I do not think that anyone could credibly claim that they are doing that.

Frankly, the SNP is out of credibility on the budget, because it simply has no alternatives—it has nothing to say. The budget is an important step. It will see increases in the revenue that is available to our public services, thanks to that £5.2 billion in the block grant.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Daniel Johnson: What Scotland needs is not simply an increase in funding but a new direction, which can be delivered only by a Scottish Labour Government.

17:36

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Gosh, how I will miss these debates. [*Interruption.*] I will miss you, too, Mr Swinney.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, Ms Smith—particularly with that sort of comment.

Liz Smith: I am sure that the First Minister will miss me, too.

As Craig Hoy rightly pointed out at the start of the process, the budget has exposed a fundamental divide in Scottish politics between, on the one hand, those who prioritise economic growth in order to stimulate investment, create jobs, encourage aspiration and, crucially, increase both the tax base and tax revenues that we need for our public services, and, on the other, those who believe in the big state and a higher tax agenda, so that the Government can take more of the public's money and spend it without, in our view, having due regard to its impact on the wider economy. If ever there was any evidence of that lack of regard for the wider implications, it was shown in the Scottish Information Commissioner's remarks last week, when he said that our 130 or so quangos now cost £6.6 billion per year.

We really must reflect on that—not just from the Scottish Government's point of view, but as a Parliament. From the Scottish Fiscal Commission's projections, we can see the stark nature of the problem, which is that Scottish taxpayers are paying £1.7 billion more than they would if we had the same tax rates and thresholds as the rest of the UK, but the net funding is £838 million, which the commission rightly describes as the economic performance gap.

That is before we even come to the bloated public sector or the unaffordable size of the welfare budget, to which I will return in just a minute. The reason that the SNP put forward for apparently being willing to accept the pain of that economic performance gap was that it is wholly committed to the so-called social contract with the people of Scotland. In its eyes, it provides a much more compassionate and munificent benefits system.

If there were to be any evidence for that justification, the SNP would have to prove three things. It would have to prove, first, that people really feel that they are getting good value for money when it comes to public services and putting up with a higher tax burden; secondly, that there is demonstrable evidence that all the social contract policies are delivering better outcomes; and thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, that people have enough money coming in to pay for that social contract.

Shona Robison: Will Liz Smith give way?

Liz Smith: I will, in a minute.

Craig Hoy rightly identified why that is not the case.

Shona Robison: I do not fundamentally disagree with Liz Smith's point. Incidentally, though, I do not think that Craig Hoy identified any

of those points. Is not one of the pieces of evidence that has come to light recently that, out of the whole of the United Kingdom, Scotland is the only place where child poverty levels are falling—they are rising elsewhere? Surely that is a concrete piece of evidence that this Government's investment is working.

Liz Smith: Cabinet secretary, when it comes to the Scottish child payment, I have put on record several times in this Parliament that I think that the evidence is quite strong on it. However, is that the case for all the policies within the social contract? I am sorry to say that the evidence is just not there to prove that. With due respect to you, cabinet secretary, and to the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, I have been asking for months now about what you feel the justification is when it comes to the extra additions. The percentage changes to some of the social security budget are far in excess of what is happening in the other parts of the UK and we simply cannot afford that sum total. I believe that the Scottish Government understands that—I think that you know what the problem is—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please.

Liz Smith: Therefore, when you are making that agreement with the Scottish Fiscal Commission, cabinet secretary, I think that you have to be very honest about the financial burden that it is putting on the Scottish economy. That is the main problem.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always through the chair, please.

The First Minister: I put on the record that I will miss Liz Smith's contributions to this Parliament and I welcome the contribution that she has made over the years.

On the point about issues such as the Scottish child payment, does Liz Smith recognise that the investment that is made in lifting family incomes, in and of itself, assists as an economic stimulus in communities because it boosts the spending power of individuals to spend locally on crucial investments in their family circumstances? Is that not part of the evidence that supports the cabinet secretary's point that Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom that is demonstrating that child poverty is falling compared to other parts of the United Kingdom, where measures such as the child payment do not exist and child poverty is rising?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Liz Smith—I can give you some of that time back.

Liz Smith: I thank the First Minister—I will probably have to reverse my decision if the compliments are going to flow as frequently as he

has indicated. However, he makes a serious point. It is not about that one specific policy, which, again, the Scottish Conservatives willingly admit is effective. In fact, we supported and voted for the Scottish child payment because the evidence shows that the payment is effective, for exactly the reasons that the First Minister has just set out.

However, does that analysis pertain in the other policies? I am sorry to say that that is not the case, because we can put on record several dialogues within the Finance and Public Administration Committee and the Social Justice and Social Security Committee where that evidence has not been forthcoming. That is the point. Is the First Minister going to intervene again?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: First Minister—briefly.

The First Minister: I thank Liz Smith for giving way again.

The Conservatives can make that general comment, but they do not then go on to give a specific commitment on what elements of the social contract should be removed. Should it be the expansion of early learning and childcare? I think that that would be an absolutely foolhardy decision. Should it be the reintroduction of tuition fees? I think that that would be a foolhardy decision as well. We have made huge progress on access to higher education—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: First Minister—briefly.

The First Minister: Therefore, the challenge for the Conservatives is, at what point will they spell out where the swingeing cuts will be made?

Liz Smith: On that point, First Minister, I have been asking for quite some time whether it is essential to have quite so many people on social security benefit for such a long time, because the case load in Scotland is much longer term than it is in other parts of the UK. That in itself would save quite a lot of money.

I have taken up too much time, but I come back to the point that, if the Scottish Government is going to argue for its policies, when it comes to the future of the economy of Scotland, it has to provide the evidence to support those arguments and I do not think that the public believe that the evidence is there. That is why we will not be supporting this budget—we do not think that it is good for the public; we do not think that it is good for business; and we do not believe that it is good for the social security budget. For a whole range of reasons, we will be opposing the budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Ivan McKee to wind up the debate. Minister—up to 10 minutes, please.

17:44

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Presiding Officer, the budget focuses on the Government's four top priorities, which are the priorities of the people of Scotland. I will show how it will deliver on those priorities.

It is a good budget for the economy. It will support the Government's priorities for enterprise, innovation and business. Our spending plans target people, places and businesses right across Scotland and will support the growth of our economy over the next year.

To do that, we are investing £320 million in our enterprise agencies, £200 million more in the Scottish National Investment Bank and almost £90 million in helping to secure Grangemouth's future.

In addition, through the budget, we will continue to spend £90 million on delivering employability services, including specialist support for disabled people, young people and parents across the country.

This is a good budget for the culture sector, with an additional £34 million being provided for it. That is, I believe, the biggest-ever increase in the culture budget—a point that was not mentioned by any of the Opposition speakers this afternoon, which is very telling.

The budget will deliver on the Government's priority of eradicating child poverty, and we continue to use our social security powers to support those who are most in need. Just last month, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation set out in its "UK Poverty 2025" report that, across the UK, it is expected that only in Scotland will child poverty rates fall by 2029, thanks in part to measures including the Scottish child payment. To help to keep children out of poverty and invest in our people, the budget will provide a record £6.9 billion in social security benefits and payments, which will reach around 2 million people—about one third of the people of Scotland. That includes £3 million to develop systems that will help to mitigate the two-child benefit cap—something that Labour members were not able to bring themselves to support at the UK level.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I ask the minister to respond to the fact that a report that was published today has found that the attainment gap is widening at all levels for pupils across Scotland.

Ivan McKee: We will continue to support the education system by providing record funding to deliver on our priorities. That is central, and we will continue to focus on reducing the attainment gap.

To further our ambition for everyone to have a safe, good-quality and affordable home that meets their needs, the Government will invest £768 million in affordable housing in 2025-26.

The Tories keep coming back to this point, so I will ask them this question: if they want to cut social security spending, where do they want to cut it? Do they want to cut support for disabled people, support for carers, the Scottish child payment—which is lifting children and families out of poverty—or the winter fuel payment, which this Government is providing despite what the UK Labour Government has done to that benefit?

Liz Smith: In that context, is Ivan McKee concerned about the increase in adult disability payments and child disability payments, and the fact that that spend is going up by such a degree? Is that not a concern for the public finances?

Ivan McKee: This Government always balances our budget. We will look at what those demands are—[*Interruption.*]

Members can talk about what might or might not happen in the future, but we are focused on understanding how trends are, moving forward, and how we can mitigate them. We do that every year in the budget and we deliver—we do not just talk about it.

As the cabinet secretary brings forward the medium-term financial strategy and the fiscal sustainability plan, we will continue to address the issues seriously to ensure that we can continue to afford our priorities and the priorities of the people of Scotland—

Craig Hoy: Will the minister take an intervention on that point?

Ivan McKee: I will come back to Craig Hoy.

On our priority of tackling the climate emergency, delivering on our net zero targets continues to be a priority for the Government. We are investing almost £3 billion in capital and almost £2 billion in resource for activities that will have a positive impact on delivery of our climate change goals.

I turn to our priority of providing high-quality and sustainable public services. In local government, meaningful budget engagement has secured a record settlement: local authorities will receive funding of more than £15 billion. Investing in the Verity house agreement, the Government has baselined a further £525 million of funding.

We will provide £16.2 billion for front-line NHS boards as part of the all-time high of £21.7 billion that we are investing in health and social care. To address the challenges in our NHS, the budget will provide about £200 million to support improvements in waiting lists and in delayed discharge.

Brian Whittle: I always ask this question, but I never get an answer.

If we have a record health budget, why does Scotland have the worst health outcomes in Europe? That is why we have such high welfare costs.

Ivan McKee: That is obviously a legacy, which we are hugely focused on fixing, of things that happened over many decades. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, members.

Ivan McKee: We are investing a record amount of money to deliver improvements in the health service, and members can already see from trends that things are moving in a better direction in that regard.

I will address some comments that members made. Ross Greer was absolutely correct that we are here to get results for the people who sent us here, and not just to engage in performative politics.

Alex Cole-Hamilton managed to fill almost his entire six minutes with listing all the things that the Liberal Democrats got from taking part in their budget negotiation. Likewise, Ash Regan talked about what Alba received from its engagement in the process. It is telling that those Opposition parties willed the means to will the ends.

That contrasts with Scottish Labour's negative approach, which we see—if we look at its poll numbers—the electorate has noted. With Scottish Labour, it is not about willing the means or the ends—although its approach will mean the end of its electoral prospects. In fact, we will need money to invest in a fence that is big enough for all the Labour members to sit on.

I will turn to the Conservatives' comments. To be frank, I say that Craig Hoy was concerningly disconnected. He talked about cutting costs, but then talked about investing and spending money to set up a new agency that would add to those costs. He talked about the money that we invest in our overseas offices without recognising the fact that the inward investment that they bring in helps to support Scotland's economy, which has the best-performing inward investment record in the whole UK, outside London.

Craig Hoy: Will Ivan McKee take an intervention on that very point?

Ivan McKee: I will do so in a minute.

Craig Hoy talked about saving £100 million without recognising that the data that we have published indicates that we have already saved £280 million over two years, so we are already performing better than the amount that the Conservatives are talking about.

Craig Hoy also called for a £600 million tax cut, while his back benchers—Brian Whittle, Sandesh

Gulhane, Tim Eagle and Douglas Lumsden—called for more spending.

Craig Hoy: The minister is proposing to spend £30 million of taxpayers' money on an invest-to-save scheme. How much money will that save?

The Scottish Fiscal Commission says that the welfare bill is set to double to £9 billion by the end of the year, which will constrain public expenditure elsewhere. Where will the minister's Government make that £4.5 billion of savings? What will it cut?

Ivan McKee: I will talk about the invest-to-save fund in a minute, because it is important.

The contribution of the day was from Douglas Lumsden. Maybe I am wrong, but I do not think that I have ever heard Douglas Lumsden take an intervention. All that I was going to ask him during his speech was how many jars of honey are sold in the Parliament canteen. He is hugely interested in that and has spent £100,000 on trying to find out the answers to such critical questions. That was monster of a question from Mr Lumsden about jars of honey.

I will move on to public service reform. I must let Christine Grahame know that I am, indeed, not Elon Musk—that is something that I can confirm. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Ivan McKee: The public service reform summit that I led just last week brought together 150 representatives of public bodies, local government, the third sector and the wider economy to take forward more work on that critical agenda. We focused on prevention, delivering more efficiencies and connecting and integrating our public services across the country. We set out our vision and expectations and invited public leaders to come together to inform that strategy. That work will continue, as we drive best practice across the system.

On the specific subject of the invest-to-save fund, of course we do not know the answer to Craig Hoy's question yet. The whole point is that we have introduced that fund to stimulate bids from public bodies, local government and other organisations working together. When we have received those bids and picked the most effective ones, I will be absolutely delighted to come back to the chamber to inform members how much we will generate from that £30 million.

The 2025-26 budget supports our vital public services, delivers on our key priorities, supports those who need it the most, maintains our social contract with the people of Scotland and delivers a range of benefits that are not available elsewhere.

In bringing forward a budget by Scotland for Scotland, we have worked in a positive and

constructive manner across the chamber to deliver solutions for Scotland. Through seeking compromise, we are delivering a budget that will strengthen services and support our communities.

The budget delivers on our collective vision for all of Scotland, so I urge all members in the chamber to support the 2025-26 Scottish budget.

Great British Energy Bill

17:55

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-16578, in the name of Alasdair Allan, on the legislative consent motion on the Great British Energy Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that all relevant provisions of the Great British Energy Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 25 July 2024 and subsequently amended in relation to an independent review of GB Energy (clause 6A) on 20 February 2025, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Gillian Martin*]

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

Decision Time

17:55

The Presiding Officer: There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-16562, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill at stage 3, be agreed to. As the question concerns a motion to pass the bill, it must be decided by division. There will be a brief suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:55

Meeting suspended.

17:57

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S6M-16562, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill at stage 3. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)

Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-16562, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill at stage 3, is: For 73, Against 29, Abstentions 21.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) (No. 4) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: The motion is agreed to and the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill is passed. [*Applause.*]

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: We are still in decision time at the moment.

Tess White: I will wait until after decision time.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms White.

The next question is, that motion S6M-16578, in the name of Alasdair Allan, on the Great British Energy Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I do not think that my vote was registered. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: Decision time is now concluded.

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-16578, in the name of Alasdair Allan, on the Great British Energy Bill, is: For 86, Against 29, Abstentions 7.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that all relevant provisions of the Great British Energy Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 25 July 2024 and subsequently amended in relation to an independent review of GB Energy (clause 6A) on 20 February 2025, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Point of Order

18:01

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would like to raise a point of order under rule 6.2(f) of the standing orders of this Parliament. Today, I tried to ask a question about reports that the former SNP MP Alison Thewliss had been hired by Rape Crisis Scotland—a body that is, of course, funded by the Scottish Government. Two years ago, Alison Thewliss was photographed at a protest near a sign that read “Decapitate TERFs”. Women deserve to know whether she has been hired by a Rape Crisis charity that is funded largely by the Scottish Government. However, not only was I interrupted by the committee convener, but other members of the committee were seen gesturing to the technicians to cut off the live feed of the committee session. Even worse than that, after the session, several members of the committee warned me not to ask similar questions in the future. Presiding Officer, is it ever legitimate for MSPs to be pressured not to ask valid questions of this Government?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, Ms White. My understanding of the points that you have just made suggests that they relate to conduct in a committee meeting, which would be a matter for the committee’s convener. *[Interruption.]* The code of conduct sets out which complaints should be considered by me in my role as Presiding Officer. The code also points out how complaints should be made, and this is not a matter on which I would rule from the chair. It is not a matter that should be ruled on from the chair.

Tess White: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would like to raise—*[Inaudible.]*

The Presiding Officer: Ms White, I am sorry, but your microphone is not switched on.

Tess White: Thank you, Presiding Officer. This is such a serious matter that I would like to raise it with you after this meeting of Parliament today.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms White. As I pointed out, the code explains how complaints should be made.

Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2025

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S6M-15868, in the name of Emma Harper, on eating disorders awareness week 2025. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises that the week of 24 February to 2 March is Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2025, and that the theme is that anyone can be affected by an eating disorder; understands that eating disorders affect at least one in 50 people across Scotland, including people of all ages, genders and backgrounds, with anorexia nervosa having a higher mortality rate than any other mental health condition, and that there is a range of recognised eating disorders; further understands that the sooner someone is treated for an eating disorder, the better their chance of making a full recovery, but that people too often delay seeking help due to perceived stigma and misconceptions about who can develop an eating disorder; welcomes the work of Beat, a UK-wide charity supporting people living with eating disorders and their families; understands that Beat continues to provide help across Scotland through funding from the Scottish Government; notes what it sees as the importance of protecting vital eating disorder services during the current fiscal challenges, and further notes the calls encouraging anyone in Scotland concerned about an eating disorder to contact their GP surgery and reach out to Beat on 0808 801 0432 or at beateatingdisorders.org.uk.

18:05

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Dennis Robertson MSP led the first debate in Parliament on eating disorders awareness week in 2012, following the loss of his daughter, Caroline, in February 2011; she had been diagnosed with anorexia nervosa. This is what Dennis said then:

“I want people to be aware of the symptoms and get help as soon as they can. I’m trying to ensure GPs and other medics become more aware of the dangers.”

As Dennis said, people need to get help as soon as they can.

I thank colleagues across the chamber for signing my motion to bring the debate to the chamber. This year, eating disorders awareness week runs from 24 February until 2 March. The eating disorders charity Beat provides so much support, and I welcome to the public gallery Alex Jones from Beat, along with members of the lived experience panel and trustees of SupportED. I thank them all for being here.

It is necessary to continue to raise awareness so that, as knowledge improves, better care can be provided. An estimated 1.25 million people in the United Kingdom, and one in 50 people in Scotland, are living with an eating disorder right

now. These devastating illnesses can affect anyone of any age, size, gender or background, and they can easily go undetected. We know that the signs and symptoms are not always visible or easy to pick up, but people's symptoms can include spending a lot of time worrying about their weight and body shape; avoiding socialising when they think that food will be involved; eating very little food, making themselves sick or taking laxatives after they eat; exercising too much; having very strict habits or routines around food; and changes in their mood, such as being withdrawn, anxious or depressed.

Each year, eating disorders week takes a different theme that focuses on the many types of eating disorders. They include anorexia and bulimia nervosa; avoidant restrictive food intake disorder—ARFID—and binge-eating disorders; and variants that are classified under other specified feeding or eating disorders, or OSFED.

Last year's debate highlighted ARFID, and those in previous years have included a debate on diabulimia, which is a condition where a person with type 1 diabetes deliberately omits taking their life-saving insulin in order to help them to lose weight. Eating disorders have the highest mortality of all mental disorders and have serious medical consequences, as well as risks of suicide.

A lot of work has been done in recent years, and there have been advances in treatments, as well as in tackling associated stigma. Inclusive services have been created to treat all people, regardless of age and severity, with the development of all-age services and early intervention approaches. Last year, the number of children and young people who presented to child and adolescent mental health services and were then admitted to hospital with an eating disorder increased rapidly. Children and young people are presenting to paediatric settings later and are often more physically unwell. In the past seven years, there has been a significant increase in the annual incidence among 10 to 14-year-olds.

The prevalence of anorexia nervosa in the general population is approximately 1 per cent among women and 0.5 per cent among men. It is reported that half of those who meet diagnostic criteria in the community do not access treatment. Bulimia nervosa is reported to have a prevalence of about 2 per cent, and binge-eating disorders a prevalence of up to 4 per cent. The population prevalence of ARFID is not known, largely because it is a relatively new diagnosis and is still not well known.

At the Scottish Government's request, NHS Education for Scotland has delivered education seminars as a response to the high number of children and young people presenting. That is providing support and learning to staff who work in

acute paediatric settings in order to help better support children and young people and their families. I am keen to hear from the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport about the uptake of those seminars, including attendance rates by NHS board and by clinician specialty, including general practitioners. It would be good to hear how GPs are engaging with assessment and onward referral for persons who have a suspected eating disorder. It would also be good to hear feedback on the uptake of the Turas online learning platform, especially in rural health boards such as NHS Dumfries and Galloway and NHS Borders.

The national review of eating disorder services in Scotland published its report in June 2021. The "Scottish Eating Disorder Services Review—Full Report" contained 15 short-term, medium-term and long-term recommendations. Subsequently, the national eating disorders network has been established, chaired by Professor Cathy Richards, to take forward the remaining medium-term and long-term recommendations.

It is interesting that the first recommendation related to the Covid-19 pandemic. It asked for emergency funding to

"be provided ... as a direct result of an increase in the number and severity of ... presentations related to the Covid-19 pandemic."

The recommendation prioritised physical health stability, risk reduction, supporting in-patient discharge and preventing admission to hospital.

Recommendation 4 was to establish a lived experience panel to

"advise the Implementation Group and work alongside the National Eating Disorders Network."

That recommendation advised that

"The ... panel should include patients, families and loved ones, and third sector representatives",

with diversity of membership, including representatives of

"all eating disorder diagnoses, men with eating disorders, LGBT representatives and people from ethnic minorities."

Again, I welcome members of the lived experience panel to the public gallery.

I also highlight recommendation 7, on early intervention, which states:

"Key Stakeholders and Healthcare professionals should be able to identify the signs and symptoms of all eating disorders including at early stages and know how to support and sign post people into treatment."

The Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network's guidelines from August 2022 contain key recommendations on early intervention, support for family and carers and achieving and maintaining recovery, as well as healthcare

professional training. I remind members that I am a healthcare professional, as I am still a registered nurse.

Beat has developed training for health professionals that has the potential to save lives, and it is free. The Royal College of Psychiatrists recognises how important it is to have guidance across all healthcare settings, and it has created the “Medical emergencies in eating disorders (MEED): Guidance on recognition and management”. That replaces the previous management of really sick patients with anorexia nervosa—MARSIPAN—and junior MARSIPAN guidance.

A lot of actions have been implemented. I am conscious of time, so finally, I would ask anyone who has a worry about themselves or a family member to consider calling the Beat helpline in Scotland on 0808 801 0432 and speaking in confidence to an adviser.

There is so much work being done, and I say to the minister that it needs to continue at pace. I look forward to hearing colleagues’ contributions and the minister’s response.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I ask for back-bench speeches of up to four minutes.

18:12

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests. I am a registered mental health nurse and hold a current registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council, and I am employed as a bank nurse by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

I am pleased to speak in the debate, which has become an annual fixture in the Parliament, to mark eating disorders awareness week. I thank my colleague Emma Harper for lodging the motion and for her commitment to bringing the subject to the chamber and focusing minds on how important it is.

Eating disorders do not discriminate and anyone can be affected by them. They are serious illnesses that can change, and even end, lives. The eating disorders charity Beat estimates that at least one in 50 people in Scotland are living with an eating disorder, but the real number could be even higher. Disorders such as ARFID, anorexia, bulimia, binge-eating disorder and OSFED are complex mental health conditions. Of course, they affect not only the person with the condition but their family and friends, who can feel helpless and heartbroken as they watch their loved ones struggle.

With that level of prevalence, most of us probably know someone who is, or who has been,

affected. That is why the focus of this year’s eating disorders awareness week is that eating disorders can affect anyone, regardless of their age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity or background, and it is not always those whom we might expect. Eating disorders are often misunderstood, mislabelled or undiagnosed, which can prevent people from reaching out for help.

The risk of not receiving support and treatment for any mental illness can be incredibly dangerous, and that is even more true for eating disorders. Together, they are responsible for more loss of life than any other form of psychological illness, and anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. When they are not fatal, such disorders can still lead to severe long-term physical health consequences, such as organ damage and fertility issues, and can increase the risk of heart problems and type 2 diabetes.

This year, Beat’s eating disorders awareness week survey showed that four in five respondents answered that they would feel

“more comfortable opening up to others about their experiences if there was greater awareness and understanding of eating disorders.”

Respondents reported fearing

“stigma around saying they have an eating disorder due to misconceptions about who is affected and the lack of knowledge about how eating disorders present.”

Challenging those misconceptions can lead to people seeking help earlier, which can increase their chances of a full recovery.

The topic of stigma frequently arises when we talk about eating disorders; last year’s debate in Parliament underlined that with its focus on ARFID, which is a less well-known condition. In that debate, our colleague Kevin Stewart spoke about the fact that

“one in four people who develop an eating disorder is”

male and highlighted that there is still much work to be done to raise awareness of that fact and change attitudes to ensure that

“no one is afraid to come forward for help.”—[*Official Report*, 5 March 2024; c 90.]

Since I first spoke on the subject in the chamber, there has been much positive progress. The Scottish Government’s mental health and wellbeing strategy and delivery plan specifically mentions stigma as a phenomenon that requires a sustained effort to tackle. There has also been a national review of eating disorder services; the establishment of the national eating disorders network; and work with those with lived experience. Challenging stigma is not an easy task, especially as eating disorders are, by their nature, associated with deniability, secrecy, stigma

and shame. However, to help and treat people and save lives, we must all rise to that challenge.

I again thank Beat for all that it does to that end and for the material that it has provided for this year's awareness week. I recommend Beat's website and helplines as a trustworthy, reliable and judgment-free source of support to anyone who is concerned about themselves or about a friend, colleague or loved one.

18:17

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to this members' business debate, and I thank Emma Harper for bringing it to the chamber. As we know from the motion, this year's eating disorders awareness week, which runs until 2 March, is already under way. The theme this year is that eating disorders can affect anybody. I welcome that theme. I feel that it is vital that the great many misconceptions about eating disorders are challenged as vigorously as possible, especially as public misunderstanding and stigma can often prevent people from reaching out for help. Help is available, but we need to make sure that it is provided across all areas and that there is not a postcode lottery, which does happen from time to time.

Not only can eating disorders affect anyone, but it is often the case that they affect those individuals whom we would not expect to be affected. We are currently seeing many younger people being affected, as a result of portrayals and images of what they should or might look like. We know that, at present, around 1.25 million people in the UK are living with an eating disorder, which equates to more than one in 50 people in Scotland. However, the real number is probably much higher, because many cases go unreported.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Is the member aware of last week's Radio 4 programme that highlighted that many children, in particular those in secondary school, and especially—although not exclusively—females, are afraid, for various reasons, to use the lavatories and toilet facilities in schools to the point that some of them refrain from eating and drinking for the whole day?

One mother who contributed to the programme said that that had triggered an eating disorder in her daughter, which had very serious complications for her. Does the member believe that the Government should look at that issue when it is consulting on changing the separate and same-sex provision of toilets in schools?

Alexander Stewart: I thank Fergus Ewing for that intervention—he makes a valid point. We are aware that—as that radio programme

highlighted—a number of schools are finding that girls are now not using their facilities because of what may happen in those facilities, and that that is having an effect on them when it comes to eating. The Government should look at that, and I whole-heartedly agree with Fergus Ewing's comments in his intervention.

As I said, eating disorders are underreported, which may be due to people feeling that their GP may not know how to help them with what is happening. We have heard this evening about the charity Beat and the work that it does, which I whole-heartedly support. We know that eating disorders, which come in many forms, such as anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating disorder, as well as lesser-known conditions, are often misunderstood, mislabelled or even undiagnosed.

It is salient to mention that eating disorders do not affect only the person who has the condition. Friends and family often become carers, with many feeling helpless and heartbroken as they watch their loved one struggle with the disorder.

Eating disorders are one of the largest mental health challenges of our time. Such disorders are about so much more than just food—image, social media and many other issues are in the mix. They can also be a coping mechanism for broader and more complicated issues that have progressed. Beat, which was formerly known as the Eating Disorders Association, does extremely strong and positive work in that regard, and its national helpline encourages and empowers people to seek support and advice.

As we have heard, ensuring that individuals get support for their illness is vitally important. Beat also supports family and friends to ensure that they are equipped with the skills to look after their loved ones. In addition, Beat advocates to increase knowledge of eating disorders among healthcare staff and other relevant professionals.

When people have the courage to come forward, it is important that they get the right help in the right place at the right time. I hope that the minister's summing-up speech will provide the Scottish Government with an opportunity to indicate the position that it is taking, not least as we need to see much more focus on the issue brought to the fore at a national level. We all want to ensure that every individual who has such an issue is supported, and that they and their families can support one another together and live free of eating disorders.

18:22

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Emma Harper for bringing this important debate to the chamber again this year. I also welcome the

guests in the public gallery—it is great to have them here.

Like other parties, Scottish Labour supports the aims and objectives of eating disorders awareness week 2025 and its goal to raise awareness of how eating disorders can affect anyone. I ask people who need support to seek it, if they can, as the motion says, by contacting their GP surgery, or by phoning the Beat helpline or contacting that organisation through its website.

In seeking to better understand these complex mental illnesses and abolish stereotypes, I thank Beat for its survey, which shows that four out of five respondents

“thought that greater public awareness would make them feel more comfortable to talk about their eating disorder.”

That is an important point, and we in the chamber can contribute to that awareness.

We know that eating disorders affect not only the person with the condition but their friends and family, who can become carers and are often forced to watch their loved one struggle with that battle. Having open conversations can relieve the stigma for families, too, so it is important that we ensure that we have those conversations and reduce the stigma to allow the discussions to continue.

Emma Harper: Carol Mochan mentions stigma, which is important. Would she agree that social media is an issue that can contribute to the increased prevalence of eating disorders? Stigma, social media and various other aspects are all tied in and are leading to an increase in the numbers of young children and adolescents with eating disorders.

Carol Mochan: I thank the member for that intervention—it is a very important point. As the parent of a teenage daughter, I am concerned about some of the things that we see on social media. We all have a responsibility to talk about that so that we can address it.

As we have heard, eating disorders are not uncommon: one in 50 people in Scotland, and many people across the wider UK, are affected by them. We know that, tragically, the impacts can be fatal, and that is why we must raise these issues whenever we can.

I also highlight the issue of age at diagnosis, because that can sometimes be misunderstood. We know that most eating disorders develop during adolescence; however, there are cases of eating disorders developing in very young children and in adults, including examples of adults who develop such disorders well into their later years.

That might be shocking but it acts as a reminder to us all that eating disorders are prominent and

serious across our whole population, and that they still have a taboo surrounding them. We know that that is particularly true when men are involved and they feel that they cannot speak about it. Again, that is very important for today’s debate.

As Beat has indicated, it is essential that we, as MSPs, take our role seriously. We need to raise awareness, fight for funding for research and scrutinise the Government’s delivery of full implementation of the plans for eating disorder services. I know that other members have asked the minister to respond to that.

One of the review’s recommendations was to establish a national eating disorder network to oversee implementation of the Government’s plans, and its terms of reference were published in July last year. The network is responsible for co-ordinating training and research implementation, along with improving links between primary and secondary care services. I am very interested in that point. Members will know that I worked in the national health service as an allied health professional, so I am aware of the importance of training and the link between primary and secondary care. Professionals in the network often discuss the importance of training and how we should ensure that people are aware of and can spot the various conditions or build-up across the spectrum to ensure that we can signpost and have appropriate resources.

I am aware of the time, but I want to make it clear that I have been impressed by the speeches in the chamber tonight. I hope that we can continue to have this conversation, because that is what tonight’s debate was about.

18:26

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I am grateful to Emma Harper for lodging the motion and for enabling us to have a debate to mark eating disorders awareness week. I am also delighted to welcome representatives of Beat to the gallery this evening. It is lovely to see them here.

Raising awareness is crucial to understanding the significant impact that eating disorders have on individuals and their families and friends. I begin by assuring members and all those who are affected by an eating disorder that the Government continues to dedicate significant efforts and resources to ensuring that anyone who is affected receives the right support in the right place at the right time. We remain committed to improving eating disorder services in Scotland.

I express my sincere gratitude to everyone across the country who works tirelessly every day to support the recovery of individuals with eating disorders and their families.

As we have heard, the theme of this year's awareness week is about raising awareness that anyone can be affected by eating disorders, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or background. Early recognition of the symptoms and timely intervention significantly improve the chances of a full recovery, so raising awareness plays a crucial role in breaking down stigma, empowering individuals to seek help sooner and ensuring that they receive the support that they need.

During the past four years, we have taken significant action to ensure that those who need support for an eating disorder can receive timely access to the appropriate treatment. We continue to provide funding to NHS services and to the third sector, as well as working with people with lived experience to deliver the recommendations of the national review of eating disorder services.

Since the publication of the review's report, we have made real progress in delivering the short-term recommendations, and work is under way to deliver the remaining recommendations. The recent publication of the "National Specification for the Care and Treatment of Eating Disorders in Scotland" marked a major step forward in improving eating disorder care in Scotland. It provides a clear framework for supporting the NHS and community services in delivering high-quality, person-centred, safe and effective care for children, young people and adults. We will support NHS boards and other partners to implement the specification, aiming to ensure that everyone who is affected by an eating disorder receives the right support at the right time, no matter where they live. That is a crucial milestone in strengthening services, improving outcomes and ensuring that no one faces an eating disorder alone.

We have also established the national eating disorders network to support the implementation of the specification and the remaining recommendations from the review. The network aims to create a more integrated, person-centred approach, leading to better outcomes and ensuring that individuals receive the support that they need. The network launched a series of educational webinars for clinicians to enhance expertise in emerging areas of eating disorder care. For example, the first session focused on the intersection of eating disorders and autism, offering insights to support more tailored and effective treatment approaches. More than 100 people attended that first session in November.

Recognising the value of partnership working, the network has organised regional meetings in the west and south-east of Scotland. Those bring together national health service teams, third sector organisations and private practitioners to share

best practice, foster innovation and strengthen joint working across all age groups.

Emma Harper is absolutely correct that it is vital that professionals feel confident in spotting the early signs of an eating disorder and understanding the complexities of the illness, which is a point that other members have raised. There are key areas in which training needs to be improved and where training is already available that needs to be mapped out. Last month, the training on eating disorders in children and young people was updated. It now includes refreshed resources that incorporate role play. I cannot give Emma Harper a breakdown by board, but training was moved to live online delivery during 2020, and that has continued since. That enables equal access to all boards across Scotland, and we hope that they will continue to take up the offer.

NHS Education for Scotland offers a variety of training courses through Turas, which includes family-based therapy for eating disorders, which has been completed by 175 clinicians; cognitive behavioural therapy for eating disorders, which has been completed by 223 clinicians across CAMHS and adult services; and eating disorder assessment and management training, which has been completed by 213 clinicians. Through the funding that is allocated to Beat, we have introduced "Beyond the symptoms" training seminars for GPs and healthcare professionals to support them to identify when a patient has an eating disorder and to confidently intervene early. By the end of the financial year, Beat predicts that it will have provided training to 300 healthcare professionals. That includes people from all 14 health boards, with the highest rates of involvement coming from NHS Forth Valley and NHS Highland.

I am delighted to share that we have significantly enhanced the eating disorder resources on NHS Inform, which is Scotland's trusted and freely accessible health information platform. Those resources support individuals, families and professionals, acknowledging the challenges of living with or caring for someone with an eating disorder. The resources offer clear and reliable guidance on the different types of eating disorders and their symptoms. Crucially, they highlight that support is available and that recovery is possible. By improving access to high-quality information, we are empowering individuals and communities to take informed steps towards recovery.

I will pick up again on the issue of stigma, because I think that it was raised by every member in their contribution. As I have said before in the chamber, it is the absolute bane of my life. Stigma around mental health issues, including eating disorders, prevents people from accessing

the help that is available and to which they are entitled. We all have a collective responsibility to have open and supportive conversations about our mental health with those who are closest to us, with our communities and in our workplaces. That remains a key priority for the Scottish Government, which is why our mental health and wellbeing strategy sets out a vision for a Scotland that is free from stigma and inequality.

It would be remiss of me not to link to my earlier statement, following the recent BBC programme, which highlighted some completely unacceptable experiences of in-patient mental health care. Many of those who were featured in that programme suffered from severe eating disorders. As I set out earlier, we are taking a number of actions, with health boards and the bodies that scrutinise them, to ensure that our most vulnerable young people receive the high level of care that they deserve. I assure members that enhancing mental health services is a top priority for the Government. The core mental health standards clearly outline expectations for mental health services, including those that treat individuals with eating disorders.

I will also highlight some of our wider efforts to improve support. In this financial year, we have provided just under £3.5 million across the west, east and north of Scotland to support the planning and development of regional elements of the CAMHS service specification, which aims to ensure that services meet the needs of all children and families. That includes the development of a four-bed adolescent intensive psychiatric care unit in the west of Scotland, alongside the development of intensive home treatment CAMHS services and regional pathways.

The north of Scotland is leading the development of the regional intensive mental health home support, ensuring treatment closer to home and reducing psychiatric in-patient admission. Those will be vital additions to Scotland's children's and young people's mental health services. They sit alongside the vital work that third sector organisations such as Beat do to support those with eating disorders—work that we are proud to support.

Like others, I use this opportunity to urge anyone who feels that they need support for an eating disorder to speak with their GP and to access the resources that have been highlighted, to ensure that they receive appropriate help as promptly as possible.

I close by thanking Emma Harper again for lodging the motion for debate. I also reaffirm my gratitude and support for all the people who work tirelessly to care for individuals with eating disorders and their families.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 18:36.

Correction

Daniel Johnson has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

At col 82, paragraph 1, line 1—

Original text—

Those are the figures that are laid out very clearly by the Scottish Fiscal Commission: there is a 6 per cent real-terms increase.

Corrected text—

Those are the figures that are laid out very clearly by the Scottish Fiscal Commission: there is a 0.8 per cent real-terms increase.

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