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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 19 February 2026

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

General Question Time

Non-Domestic Rates Revaluation (Aberdeen)

1. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any impact of the upcoming non-domestic rates revaluation in Aberdeen. (S6O-05531)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Data showing changes in draft rateable values by council area can be found in an interim revaluation report on the Scottish Government website. Those statistics indicate a total increase in rateable value of 7 per cent for Aberdeen city, compared to 12 per cent across the whole of Scotland.

The budget delivers a reduction in the three tax rates for 2026-27 and provides support through sectoral and transitional relief schemes, including the extended support for the hospitality and self-catering sectors that was announced at stage 1 of the budget bill.

Liam Kerr: Today, Aberdeen is reeling following the announcement that, after decades of trading as community pubs, the Kittybrewster and the Brig 'O' Dee will join the ever-expanding list of pubs and hospitality premises that have closed. The city is witnessing a tsunami of bar and restaurant closures, with many citing the Scottish National Party's eye-watering business rates regime as a key cause. Will the minister give our pubs and hospitality businesses the breathing space that they need by backing the Scottish Conservative plans to exempt most of them from business rates entirely?

Ivan McKee: As I have already indicated, the total increase in rates in Aberdeen is only 7 per cent across the three years since the last revaluation. The Scottish Government is already putting in a total of £870 million in rates reliefs for businesses across the country, including £320 million in transitional support over the next three years, to support businesses facing precisely those challenges. In addition, if Mr Kerr was listening last week, he would have heard that we have put in the budget another relief of 25 per cent on top of the 15 per cent reduction that hospitality businesses benefit from—that is a total of 40 per cent relief for hospitality businesses, which is more than such businesses in the rest of the United Kingdom receive.

Population Health Framework

2. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government how the population health framework will help to tackle the commercial determinants of health. (S6O-05532)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The population health framework sets out a range of actions to tackle the drivers of ill health, including harms caused by alcohol, tobacco and vapes, overweight and obesity, and gambling. Legislation to restrict the promotion of less healthy food and drink comes into force later this year, and the Scottish Government is supporting the delivery of the four-nations Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which aims to create the first smoke-free generation.

In the coming weeks, an alcohol and drugs strategic plan will be published to take forward the learning in the delivery of the national mission. An alcohol harm prevention plan and a diet and healthy weight plan will be published later in 2026 and will set out key actions in those areas to improve population health.

Gillian Mackay: Giving evidence to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, the chief medical officer stated:

"Our prevention agenda is one of the most important things that we can try to do nationally to ensure that we have a sustainable health and care system for the future."—*[Official Report, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, 10 February 2026; c 5.]*

It is clear that we need to do more on prevention to keep people well and, over time, to reduce the burden on the national health service. When will we see comprehensive bans on marketing of alcohol, foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar, and vaping?

Neil Gray: I agree with the chief medical officer and with Gillian Mackay in her assessment of the need to ensure that we move to a more preventative upstream approach. That is exactly what we have set out in the population health framework and the service renewal framework to ensure that we have a sustainable and needs-based health and social care system.

The Government's work to continue and increase the minimum unit price of alcohol is an example of our approach to taking concrete action to reduce alcohol harms. Work is under way to consider the range of options for any future uprating of minimum unit pricing. We are also considering Public Health Scotland's recent evidence review of restricting alcohol marketing, although no decisions have been made. Our tobacco and vaping framework sets out the actions that we are taking to make Scotland tobacco-free by 2034 and to reduce vaping among non-smokers and young adults. The legislation that I

referred to in my earlier answer to restrict the promotion of less healthy food and drink from October 2026 delivers one of the first actions under the population health framework.

Baby Box

3. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the baby box, including current availability and the easiest way of applying for one. (S6O-05533)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am very proud of Scotland's universal baby box programme, which is the only one in the United Kingdom, and I am delighted that, since its inception in 2017, more than 367,000 baby boxes have been delivered, with 89 per cent of parents taking up the opportunity to receive a box.

Scotland's baby box is available to all parents of newborn babies, who are supported to apply by their midwife. All parents are informed about the baby box at the 12-week appointment. At around 25 weeks, they can register for a baby box by completing a freepost registration form with their midwife.

Bill Kidd: Every child in Scotland deserves the best start in life. Can the cabinet secretary say more about how the draft Scottish budget is investing to ensure that we continue to support children and families throughout the early years and beyond?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The member is quite right to point to the fact that the baby box is but one part of the Scottish Government's determination to ensure that every child has the best start in life. That includes the provision in the budget of £100 million over three years to support the delivery of a universal breakfast club offer for primary school-age children and the £50 million a year whole family support package, in addition to continuing to uprate the Scottish child payment and working to increase the payment to £40 for families with babies under one in 2027-28.

Deep Vein Thrombosis and Pulmonary Embolism (Primary Care)

4. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to increase the identification of deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism in primary care. (S6O-05534)

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): Primary care teams play a key role in recognising and assessing deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism. Those teams have access to Healthcare Improvement

Scotland tools that support evidence-based care for patients at risk, and the Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network—SIGN—provides guidance on preventing and managing venous thromboembolism, which primary care and other clinicians can use.

Members of the public can find information on NHS Inform, and the Scottish Government has endorsed Thrombosis UK's leaflets online. Those resources support awareness and timely assessment. Anyone with symptoms of deep vein thrombosis or pulmonary embolism should seek clinical advice promptly.

Fulton MacGregor: My office was recently contacted by the family of David Kellett, who died suddenly from an undiagnosed deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism. I am told by his wife that, over nearly four months, David repeatedly sought medical help for worsening symptoms and was assessed by multiple healthcare professionals.

Despite those opportunities, DVT and PE were never considered, investigated or discussed, and, less than 48 hours after his final general practitioner appointment, David died at home. His family are now calling for a review of current practices, stronger clinical pathways and safety nets, and improved training and accountability to help to prevent similar avoidable deaths. David's family are still waiting for a report by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman on his treatment, which has been delayed since last year.

What work is being done to identify DVT and PE? What assurances can the Scottish Government give, as far as possible, that no family will go through such a tragic experience in the future?

Maree Todd: The Scottish Government extends its deepest sympathies to all families affected by DVT and PE, and we recognise the importance of strengthening early identification.

National health service boards are responsible for developing and maintaining local clinical pathways to support safe and effective assessment of patients with suspected deep vein thrombosis or pulmonary embolism. Clinical guidance is being kept under review, and SIGN 122 is currently on the programme for review. We remain committed to supporting best practice and improving awareness so that tragic experiences such as those that Fulton MacGregor has described are avoided in future.

Warm Homes Plan

5. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any impact on Scotland

of the United Kingdom Government's warm homes plan. (S6O-05535)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): [*Inaudible.*]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, cabinet secretary. Can you check that your card is inserted?

Màiri McAllan: Apologies for the delay, Presiding Officer.

The UK's warm homes plan acknowledges the importance of improving energy efficiency and supporting households, but it falls short on the meaningful action that is needed to accelerate clean heat and bring down energy bills. Despite promises, the UK Government failed to set out an enduring solution to reduce electricity prices, which continue to plague households in this energy-rich country. Energy bills remain around £190 higher than they were at the general election, when the now Labour UK Government pledged to reduce them by £300. I will continue discussions with the UK Government, urging it to use its reserved powers to go further, including through the adoption of a social tariff.

Marie McNair: I recently met MPC Energy, a business in Clydebank, to discuss the impact of Labour's short-sighted plans on its business. MPC has more than 10 years' experience and has helped hundreds of people on low incomes make their homes energy efficient, but, as a result of Labour's plans, it now faces uncertainty. Is the cabinet secretary willing to hear more about its work and consider what more can be done to ensure that my constituents and others across Scotland can continue to have access to warm and energy-efficient homes?

Màiri McAllan: I am aware of the concerns that have been expressed by businesses about the effect of the UK Government's delay in publishing its warm homes plan and the uncertainty that exists about future policy and support for heat and energy efficiency measures. I understand MPC Energy's concerns in that regard.

By contrast, this week, we marked a milestone of 50,000 households that have been supported to live in warmer, better homes through our warmer homes Scotland scheme. My officials and I will provide Ms McNair with the best information on how she and her constituents should approach the UK Government in respect of the continuity of support.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The Scottish Government's home energy scheme is far more expensive than the equivalent boiler upgrade scheme in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, the number of installations in England is going up, while installation numbers in Scotland have

stalled. When will the Government get a grip on the home energy system so that we can get people's bills down in the way that they need, and so that we can get warmer homes, too?

Màiri McAllan: I highlight to Willie Rennie the fact that the number of homes with a heat pump installed is higher than ever before in Scotland. According to the Scottish house condition survey in 2019, 23,000 homes had a heat pump installed, and that figure had increased to 45,000 by 2023. Equally, energy efficiency across all tenures has improved, with the share of domestic properties achieving an energy performance certificate rating of at least C increasing from 40 per cent to 52 per cent between 2019 and 2023.

Willie Rennie compared the home energy scheme with schemes in England. I am always open minded as to how Scotland's schemes can operate better and more efficiently, although the take-up that I have referred to speaks to their success. What I will not do is allow any of the protections that exist in our scheme to be eroded, because, as we have seen with schemes in the rest of the UK, customers can be left out of pocket with damaging installations having been made in their homes.

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if colleagues joining the meeting were to do so quietly.

Budget 2026-27 (South of Scotland Infrastructure)

6. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how its draft budget 2026-27 will ensure meaningful infrastructure improvements in the south of Scotland. (S6O-05536)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The draft budget includes investment to facilitate the installation of railway electrification infrastructure on sections of the Borders line and to complete the new Dumfries high school. Across the south of Scotland, it will support the delivery of affordable homes, around 2.5 hectares of woodland creation, 268 hectares of peatland restoration and a new water treatment works in Boreland. Through the growth in city region deals, it will ensure that work continues on creating the 113-mile walking and cycling trail connecting Berwick-upon-Tweed and Moffat, and it will promote growth by developing new fit-for-purpose business units in Tweedbank.

Finlay Carson: I welcome this week's announcement of the £1.1 million ground investigation works contract for the Springholm and Crocketford bypass project, which is a clear escalation of preparatory work. However, communities want clarity on the financial direction

of travel, not just technical studies. Will the cabinet secretary confirm in unequivocal terms whether full dualling of the bypass remains a funded and actively supported option for the Government? Will she set out precisely what formal engagement her Government has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the budgeting, cost sharing and assessment of the dualling option, so that we can understand whether the necessary financial structures are in place?

Shona Robison: I would say first of all that there is specific reference to improvements to the A75 and A77, including the Springholm and Crocketford bypasses, in the new infrastructure delivery pipeline that was published on 13 January and that an outline business case that is in development will define that further.

I am pleased that Finlay Carson has welcomed the £1.1 million for the ground investigation works contract, and I can tell him that the design assessment work to consider options for realigning the trunk road, with bypasses at those villages, is well under way and proceeding at pace. We welcome the announcement that the UK Government has committed funding for the remainder of the current study, as that will enable us to complete the initial work on considering improvements to the key route at Springholm and Crocketford and to identify a preferred route option by early 2027.

For Women Scotland Case

7. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to continue providing funding to any organisations that challenge the judgment in the For Women Scotland v the Scottish Ministers case. (S6O-05537)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The equality, inclusion and human rights fund supports a range of civil society organisations that deliver work focused on tackling inequality and discrimination, furthering equality and advancing the realisation of human rights in Scotland. Those organisations must fulfil and meet their obligations under the grant requirements in place for that fund. Each organisation must deliver against its agreed obligations and those are monitored via biannual progress reports and quarterly finance reports on funded services.

Sharon Dowey: Various organisations have recently sought to reverse the implementation of single-sex spaces, ignoring last year's crystal-clear ruling by the Supreme Court and, in turn, the rule of law, but the Scottish Government still insists on funding them. Meanwhile, 10 months on, the Scottish National Party has still failed to ensure that its public bodies are fully following that

judgment, leading to costly legal challenges at the taxpayer's expense. Will the Scottish Government finally issue an apology to women and girls in Scotland for its failure to fully implement that judgment, and will the SNP Government finally ensure that any body or organisation that it funds is committed to providing single-sex spaces?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I reiterate that the Scottish Government accepts the Supreme Court judgment and is implementing it.

I would point out that the schemes that Sharon Dowey refers to are helplines and befriending organisations and offer community engagement. I would also refer her to the recent hate crime statistics, which came out on 17 February and which point to hate crimes based on race, sexual orientation, disability, religion and being transgender and to the on-going challenges that we face due to misogyny. The Tories stoke up division, but I am proud that the Scottish Government continues to promote and protect equality and human rights throughout Scotland for everyone.

Care Pathways (Postural Tachycardia Syndrome)

8. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide further details of the support provided to NHS boards to develop specialist care pathways for postural tachycardia syndrome. (S6O-05538)

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): We expect national health service boards to provide safe, person-centred care for people with postural tachycardia syndrome.

Although responsibility for specific clinical pathways lies with NHS boards, we have allocated more than £137 million to boards this year to help tackle the longest waits for appointments and procedures. That sum includes more than £500,000 for cardiology and £500,000 for neurology, which are the specialties most likely to support people with postural tachycardia syndrome.

I have every sympathy with postural tachycardia syndrome patients and the challenges that they face, and we want patients to receive all the support which they are entitled to.

Elena Whitham: Constituents in Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, who have, or who suspect that they have, PoTS do not have a dedicated care pathway provided by NHS Ayrshire and Arran, which means that many are misdiagnosed and often end up using accident and emergency services to try to manage that much-misunderstood condition. I accept that such

decisions are made at health board level, but what more can the Scottish Government do to support the creation of dedicated care pathways for PoTS alongside the training of healthcare professionals?

Maree Todd: I thank Elena Whitham for raising the concerns of her constituents in Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley. Although NHS boards are responsible for local service configuration, the Scottish Government is supporting improvements in the recognition, diagnosis and management of PoTS. Alongside the increased investment in reducing waiting times, we have provided £4.5 million in recurring funding to strengthen services for long Covid and ME or chronic fatigue syndrome, which are conditions that are often linked with PoTS.

We also work closely with NHS Education for Scotland to enhance clinical knowledge of autonomic dysfunction, fatigue and related conditions, providing training and resources to support earlier identification and better management of conditions such as PoTS. That is complemented by accessible NHS Inform guidance for both clinicians and patients.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Peter Murrell Charges (Information Sharing)

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Before I start, I want to make it clear that I fully understand the law relating to live criminal proceedings. John Swinney should also understand the law, so I urge him not to hide behind it to avoid answering my questions, which have nothing to do with matters before the court.

On 19 January, John Swinney received a private briefing from the Lord Advocate that contained details of charges against Nicola Sturgeon's husband and former Scottish National Party chief executive, Peter Murrell. That information was kept from the media and the public. Thirty-one minutes after receiving that information, John Swinney passed it to his most senior SNP spin doctor. Why?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Let me make it clear that I understand the importance of protecting live criminal proceedings. That is exactly why the Lord Advocate sent me a minute to warn me about the risk of contempt of court in a significant criminal case. It is abundantly clear that I would be asked about that case in court. She did that in order to ensure that I did not prejudice the proceedings.

The very brief minute that was sent to me by the Lord Advocate, which is a type of communication that I receive from the Lord Advocate on a number of occasions, was issued to the people in the Government who have to speak on my behalf. If it is important that I am reminded by the Lord Advocate that I must be careful and respect the live criminal proceedings, it is equally vital that those people who are authorised to speak on my behalf have the same information.

Russell Findlay: The reason why John Swinney passed sensitive information from the Lord Advocate to his SNP spin doctor is obvious. It was because he knew that it gave him and his party a political advantage in an election year. Thanks to the Lord Advocate, John Swinney and the SNP knew the precise scale of the alleged crime, while the public knew nothing. Mr Swinney was also given key information about potential timescales, which was also concealed from the public.

Yesterday, the Lord Advocate claimed that she briefed John Swinney so that he did not say anything to jeopardise the case. John Swinney says that he accepts that, but her explanation is simply not credible. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear one another.

Russell Findlay: If it really was about preventing any risk to the case, who else did John Swinney share that information with?

The First Minister: The Government has answered a freedom of information request on time to address exactly the point that Mr Findlay has put to me. I want to repeat the reason why that information was shared with a limited number of people in the Government. It is because those individuals act on my behalf and they have to know the information that I am privy to so that they also do not jeopardise the live proceedings.

Mr Findlay has made a number of comments that are, frankly, contemptible—utterly contemptible. On the radio this morning, a prominent King's counsel, Mr Thomas Kerr, was asked what to make of the issues that were raised in Parliament yesterday. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: Sorry—it was Mr Thomas Ross. My apologies.

Mr Thomas Ross KC said:

"I thought it was an absolute disgrace. I mean, the current Lord Advocate has practised at the Scottish bar for 40 years. She has a stellar career. She is trusted by every practising lawyer and every judge in the country, and for her to be accused of corruption without a shred of evidence to support it was one of the most shameful episodes I have seen in that building."

It was a shameful episode, for which Russell Findlay was responsible. He should be ashamed of himself for what he has said.

Russell Findlay: Imagine boasting about getting an FOI answered on time—absolutely desperate.

The First Minister did not answer the question, but it sounds like he did not share the information with his entire Cabinet, but he shared it with his spin doctor.

The Lord Advocate should have known that handing politically advantageous information about an acutely sensitive criminal case involving Nicola Sturgeon's husband to the SNP leader was a gross misjudgment. The Lord Advocate was appointed by Nicola Sturgeon and retained by both Humza Yousaf and John Swinney. As a member of the SNP Government, the Lord Advocate is supposed to be scrupulously politically neutral.

I will say it again: in the real world, this smacks of corruption. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Russell Findlay: It once again highlights the inherent conflict of interest with Scotland's top prosecutor also being a member of the Scottish Government. John Swinney stood on a manifesto promise to address that. Five years later, nothing has changed. I wonder why. Does John Swinney now agree that the Lord Advocate's dual role must end?

The First Minister: Before I address that point, I want to say something very directly to Mr Findlay, the Parliament and the public in Scotland. Dorothy Bain is an outstanding prosecutor. She is an outstanding lawyer. She has 40 years of unimpeachable service to the public interest in Scotland. She alone is responsible for more cases of sexual violence of men against women being brought to justice than any other person. I put on record my absolute confidence in the Lord Advocate in undertaking her duties. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

The First Minister: I am disgusted by the way that Russell Findlay spoke about the Lord Advocate yesterday. He should be ashamed of himself, and he should withdraw every word of contemptible rubbish that he put on the record yesterday and today. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Let us continue.

The First Minister: The Government was elected on a policy commitment to explore, examine and consult on issues related to the dual functions of the Lord Advocate. Those issues are being considered; research work has been undertaken and it awaits decisions among ministers. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister. Thank you.

The First Minister: I point out that the regulation of the arrangements for the Lord Advocate holding the dual functions of being the chief legal adviser to the Government and the head of the prosecution service is in the Scotland Act 1998, which is reserved legislation. If Mr Findlay wants to do something about that, he should support Scotland in becoming an independent country.

Russell Findlay: The Oscar for best phony anger goes to John Swinney. What a desperate deflection—unbelievable. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear our proceedings.

Russell Findlay: After five years of inaction, it maybe will take this rotten episode to finally force the SNP to end the Lord Advocate's dual role.

This scandal is typical of an SNP Government that is obsessed with secrecy and spin, personified

by the First Minister. If John Swinney really does not understand why this stinks, he is in need of a software update.

The Lord Advocate's private memo gave John Swinney political advantage. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another, colleagues.

Russell Findlay: He was Nicola Sturgeon's right-hand man and he got a heads-up about the criminal case involving her husband. The Lord Advocate's actions were wrong and her excuses do not stack up. John Swinney says that he has confidence in the Lord Advocate, so will he therefore support our plan to get her back into Parliament to provide a full statement about this shameful, rotten episode?

The First Minister: Parliament decided on that point last night in a democratic vote by its elected members.

Yesterday, Mr Findlay put on the record all his points to the Lord Advocate. I think that 14 members were able to ask questions of the Lord Advocate, in an extended urgent question in Parliament. This morning on the radio, Thomas Ross KC said:

"I hope that now everything's calmed the Scottish Conservatives are big enough to apologise for making that slur"—

the slur against the Lord Advocate—

"because being trusted is the most important thing for every lawyer in the country, and for somebody who is trusted"—

the Lord Advocate—

"to be accused in some way of dishonesty, I thought, was shameful."

I agree with Mr Ross. I was disgusted by the behaviour of Russell Findlay and a number of other contributors in Parliament yesterday. The most appalling level of behaviour was deployed by members of Parliament. We have a code of conduct and some standards to uphold in this Parliament—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. You will stop shouting. Continue, First Minister. Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: The shouting and bawling from the Conservatives demonstrates my point that they do not deserve to be here, and they will not be here, because they are on their way out at the forthcoming election.

Peter Murrell Charges (Public Information)

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** This week, we learned that the Lord Advocate disclosed to John Swinney information about the prosecution of Peter Murrell that was not in the public domain.

Over the years, we have seen the Scottish National Party apply pressure to institutions to get the outcome that it wants, regardless of consequences. We saw it at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, where pressure was applied to open the hospital early and people died.

This will be in the *Official Report* for future reference. Did the First Minister, anyone acting on his behalf or any SNP adviser ask the Lord Advocate, or any of her advisers, at any point, to be updated on the prosecution of Peter Murrell?

The First Minister (John Swinney): No.

Anas Sarwar: I thank the First Minister for putting that on the record for future reference. It was the answer that I was expecting, but let us see, in the cold light of day, where that goes. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: I remind the Deputy First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government that there have been incidents before in which members have misled this Parliament, so they should be very careful about what they say.

Yesterday, the Lord Advocate appeared to give inaccurate and contradictory information to Parliament. She said that she had not given John Swinney a political advantage because,

"From the point at which an indictment is served, there is no limitation on its terms being made public."—*[Official Report, 18 February 2026; c 77.]*

However, after the Lord Advocate had notified John Swinney, the Crown Office warned the media, saying,

"We have no comment. The indictment is not a public document until it is presented in open court."

Those two statements cannot both be true.

If *The Sun* had not published the story, the only people who would have known the details of the case before the election would have been the Crown Office, Peter Murrell and, bizarrely, because the Lord Advocate notified them, John Swinney and his SNP advisers. How is that acceptable and not the very definition of political advantage?

The First Minister: The point that the Lord Advocate made yesterday is that the minute the indictment is served on the accused, it becomes a public document. It can be made public as a consequence of that. That is why the statement is valid.

The reason why that is important, and why I have contradicted Mr Sarwar's statement, is the contents of the Lord Advocate's letter to Mr Sarwar yesterday.

It is a damning letter. It says—these are the words of the Lord Advocate—in response to correspondence from Mr Sarwar:

“the publication of your letter has put a number of factual errors into the public domain, and it is incumbent on me to correct them quickly and publicly in order to protect the rule of law.”

That tells us all that we need to know. Anas Sarwar is putting factual errors into the public domain, undermining the rule of law. Anas Sarwar is unfit to lead the Labour Party. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Stephen Kerr, I ask you to please be quiet.

Anas Sarwar: That is amazing coming out of the mouth of John Swinney.

These two sentences cannot both be true:

“From the point at which an indictment is served, there is no limitation on its terms being made public.”—*[Official Report, 18 February 2026; c 77.]*

and

“The indictment is not a public document until it is presented in open court.”

Those are two contradictory statements that John Swinney cannot run away from.

There are many questions. If the Lord Advocate was recused from the matter, why was she corresponding with John Swinney about it at all? If it was for John Swinney only, why was the information shared with SNP advisers, and who did they tell? Why did the Crown Office refuse to share it with the media when the Lord Advocate told Parliament that it was public information? Does John Swinney really expect us to believe that he needs a specific warning from the Lord Advocate to give his favourite excuse? It is just not credible.

Will John Swinney confirm that, after he leaked the information to SNP political advisers, none of it was passed on in any form—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: Was it passed on in any form to any other SNP politician or party official?

Is it not the truth that this is just the latest episode of an SNP Government, with a rotten culture at its heart, in which John Swinney and the SNP will always put their party before Scotland?

The First Minister: What this is evidence of is Mr Sarwar's desperation. It is becoming clear, as every week goes by, that Mr Sarwar is getting more and more desperate about everything that he does.

In order for me to answer directly the point that Mr Sarwar has put to me, I say that the individuals to whom the information that was shared with me

by the Lord Advocate was passed is a matter of public record. Those were the only people to whom it was passed; that was to enable those speaking on my behalf to follow the Lord Advocate's guidance.

I have given a direct answer to Anas Sarwar, and I hope that he has the decency to accept the direct answer that I have given him. I do not think that he has because, week by week, Mr Sarwar comes here and attacks somebody's character. He comes here and attacks my character regularly. Yesterday, he did not even have the guts to come here and say to the Lord Advocate's face the things that he put in a letter that prompted her to say that he was undermining the rule of law by his actions. That is somebody who is unfit to lead a political party.

Why is Mr Sarwar desperate? He is desperate because he knows that, for all his efforts, his political ambitions are going absolutely nowhere. For years, he has told the people of this country to back Starmer, but he now wants us to believe that he wants Starmer out so that, somehow, the country can progress.

While Anas Sarwar goes around smearing individuals and undermining their character, I am going to carry on supporting members of the public by reducing waiting times, opening general practice walk-in clinics, keeping unemployment low and making sure that child poverty falls in Scotland. That is an SNP Government delivering, and Anas Sarwar is finished.

Graduate Teachers

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): It has now been six weeks since I asked the First Minister about Margaret MacGill. She has been ready to leave hospital for a year, but the lack of available carers means that she is still stuck there. Her husband, Cathal, says that the First Minister is welcome to visit them any time, because it seems that she is not going anywhere.

I turn to the issue of education. Today, the Scottish Liberal Democrats will publish figures showing that a record 400 recent graduates left teaching last year. Why, under the Scottish National Party, are people who are ready and raring to teach, and who have grafted for their qualifications, being forced out of Scottish education altogether?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have discussed the case of Margaret MacGill with Mr Cole-Hamilton before. I would be delighted to visit Mr and Mrs MacGill, should the opportunity arise. The issue relates to the availability of particular carer support in the community. As I have rehearsed with Mr Cole-Hamilton on a number of occasions, there are challenges with staff

availability to undertake that support. I reaffirm my commitment and my willingness to try to do all that we can to address the issue.

On the question of teaching, I want to ensure that we have strong opportunities for members of the teaching profession. That is the focus of the work that the Scottish Government undertakes to ensure that we have the appropriate employment and opportunities available and that they are spread throughout the country, so that they meet the needs and aspirations of individuals.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I have to say that it seems that the First Minister has done absolutely nothing to get Margaret MacGill out of hospital in the six weeks since I first raised her case.

Under the SNP, three quarters of newly qualified teachers cannot get the full-time contracts that they need to pay their bills or get a mortgage. It is absolutely brutal. One graduate has been stuck on supply lists for nine years, racking up tens of thousands of pounds-worth of debt. He even tried to take his own life. Many more are being forced to work abroad, when they want to teach here; there is a brain drain. Why cannot the First Minister admit that his Government has made an absolute pig's ear of it, and that tens of thousands of teachers are paying the price?

The First Minister: I do not agree with that characterisation. I say to Mr Cole-Hamilton that there has been an increase in post-probation employment in the past year, which is welcome. In Scotland, we have a higher number of teachers per 100,000 pupils than in any other part of the United Kingdom—by a significant margin. There are 7,584 teachers per 100,000 pupils in Scotland, compared with 5,551 in England and 5,301 in Wales. That leads to a much lower pupil teacher ratio in Scotland of 13.2 pupils per teacher, compared with 18 in England and 18.9 in Wales.

The Government is supporting a much larger teaching profession in Scotland, because we think that that is important. We will continue to do that as part of the budget proposals that we have put forward, which Mr Cole-Hamilton and his colleagues have supported. I am very grateful to them for their support in that respect.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Referral Criteria)

4. **Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what measures the Scottish Government is taking to standardise the criteria for urgent referrals to child and adolescent mental health services for an assessment, in light of reports that it is currently a postcode lottery. (S6F-04690)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The national child and adolescent mental health services specification sets a consistent national standard, requiring boards to ensure that children and young people receive timely support that is appropriate to their needs. Children and young people are added to waiting lists and are seen according to clinical need. Decisions on urgent referrals must follow clinical judgment so as to ensure fair and proportionate responses across Scotland. The CAMHS performance target has been met for the past year, with 91.5 per cent of young people starting treatment within 18 weeks. We continue to support boards to further improve access and to ensure that services remain safe, person centred and consistent.

Christine Grahame: I agree that decisions should follow clinical judgment. However, my question was prompted by a constituency case involving a child who, at home, exhibits extreme behaviour that is deteriorating. She masks the behaviour at school and in public, so the school will not and cannot make an urgent referral. At home, her increasingly violent behaviour to her family and her self-harm impact seriously on her twin sister, who is mimicking that behaviour. I am most concerned about her mother's health as she has a heart condition and, to be frank, is at breaking point.

The girl has waited since June 2023 for a CAMHS assessment, but after three years she is now further down the waiting list. That cannot be right, and hers might not be the only such case. Does the First Minister agree with me that in this case urgency should be created by her behaviour, which consists of self-harm and harm to others, and not the locus, although it appears to have been determined by the locus here? As I have anonymised and abbreviated the circumstances in her case, may I send more details to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care so that he can look into it?

The First Minister: I very much sympathise with the details that Christine Grahame has put on the record. I reassure her that clinical judgment should be applied in all cases. It is difficult for me to make judgments in the absence of detailed knowledge about that particular case, but the performance level for child and adolescent mental health services has been met for the past year, with 91.5 per cent of young people starting treatment within 18 weeks. If Christine Grahame would be so good as to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, we will explore the particular case and will see whether more can be done to consider the questions of clinical judgment that have been applied. However, it is difficult for me to respond on that case at this moment.

Attacks on Teachers

5. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that hundreds of teachers have sought medical treatment following attacks by pupils in the last five years. (S6F-04684)

The First Minister (John Swinney): There is no place for violence in Scotland's schools. Any incident that results in staff requiring medical treatment is deeply concerning. Most young people behave well, but we recognise the challenges that staff face. As part of our joint national action plan with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities we have published guidance on consequences and on risk assessments for violent behaviour. That guidance, which was developed with teaching unions and headteachers, prioritises safety and confirms that exclusion remains available as a last resort.

Our approach to tackling violent behaviour, including in schools, focuses on early intervention and prevention, and it has been backed by more than £6 million of investment since 2023.

Roz McCall: No one should have to go to work afraid that, on any given day, it will result in an assault on them that needs medical attention. However, that is what is happening in Scottish schools. In the past five years, more than 5,200 incidents of pupil violence were recorded in which teaching staff required medical treatment, with at least 225 of them having to attend hospital or their general practice.

We know that Scotland has the worst rate of violent injuries to school staff anywhere in the United Kingdom. Right now, teaching staff and other pupils fear that they will be next to be attacked. Will the First Minister explain what it will take to finally prioritise their safety, restore discipline and take responsibility for that failure to act?

The First Minister: I agree with Roz McCall's fundamental point that nobody should go to work in fear that they will be exposed to violence. I agree entirely with that point.

The Government is taking steps, through the measures that I set out in my original answer, to ensure that support is in place in schools on the basis of early intervention and prevention, to de-escalate in particular instances and to ensure that young people receive the support that they require in schools to address any behavioural issues.

A range of remedies are available in the behavioural guidance that has been agreed with local authorities, which run our schools. The Government will continue to work with local

authorities to ensure that that guidance is applied in full to protect teaching staff.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): No worker should face physical abuse or violence in the workplace. There has been a deterioration of behaviour and standards in recent years, and the present situation is the outcome of it.

I have spoken to teachers in my region, who tell me that the scaffolding of support that used to sit around children and teachers to support young people with behavioural problems or other challenges has been hollowed out by the Government—through its neglect of education, its lack of leadership and its cuts to local authority budgets. Does the First Minister accept that this behaviour problem not only has happened on his watch but has happened because of his party's failure to support our schools?

The First Minister: No, I do not accept that point. The Government has strongly supported investment in education, and it has done that consistently. I have just recounted to Mr Cole-Hamilton the fact that we have a significantly lower pupil teacher ratio in Scotland than exists in other parts of the United Kingdom. We have consistently higher numbers of teachers per head of population than in other parts of the UK. I set out in my answer to Roz McCall the steps that the Government has taken to work with local authorities to put in place guidance to support our schools system.

I agree with Mr O'Kane on the point where I agreed with Roz McCall: nobody should be exposed to violence at their place of employment. That is why the Government has put in place the guidance and the resources to ensure that that can be realised.

Just Transition Plan

6. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):

To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on the development of a just transition plan for the north-east of Scotland, including how communities and workers have been engaged. (S6F-04691)

The First Minister (John Swinney): We are committed to achieving a just transition in the north-east, with workers and communities at the heart of it. We have already invested £120 million through the just transition fund and the energy transition fund, bringing in even more investment, creating jobs and supporting new ideas. We are also driving forward projects such as the oil and gas transition training fund and the investment zone for the north-east of Scotland. Our support is aimed at addressing directly the needs of local people and businesses. Recent site closures show the need for more proactive planning, so we are refreshing the joint transition planning framework

to support more targeted action and guide a new Just Transition Commission in the next session of Parliament.

Maggie Chapman: I thank the First Minister for that answer, but my constituents want to know when they will see a plan that responds to the decline of the North Sea basin. The £500 million just transition fund is not a strategy, and neither is hope.

We need a plan that provides jobs and training for oil and gas workers, creates conditions for the development of offshore clean energy, and supports job creation, economic stability and the sustainability of an effective domestic supply chain.

Specifically, when will the Scottish Government publish its overarching strategy—drawing together existing policy levers, including licensing, procurement and regional planning—which will enable the north-east to be the powerhouse of our new green economy and give workers and communities the future that they need and deserve?

The First Minister: I pretty much agree with Maggie Chapman about the requirements for the transition in the north-east of Scotland. All that material has been set out by the Government in the various steps that we have taken. The transition has to be managed in an orderly fashion. In a telephone call with the Prime Minister earlier this week, I made a point about the importance of our managing the careful balance of the reduction in North Sea oil and gas activity with the upsurge in renewables. I have said to Parliament before that the oil and gas sector is contracting too fast because of the issues in relation to the energy profits levy. In my call with him on Monday, I encouraged the Prime Minister to change course on that. The upsurge in renewables has not happened as quickly as we would like. A balanced, orderly approach is what will safeguard livelihoods in the north-east of Scotland, and that is what the Scottish Government is committed to.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): We all want to see a just transition, but Labour's decision to continue the Tories' energy profits levy is being described by the oil and gas industry as taxing the sector "to death". We know that the levy is causing hundreds of job losses, and experts are warning that it will cost thousands more, block billions of pounds-worth of potential investment and undermine the energy security that a just transition relies on. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Kevin Stewart: Does the First Minister agree that the United Kingdom Government's reckless

approach is sabotaging the chances of a fair and just transition? Can he expand on what his Government is doing to support Scotland's energy workers?

The First Minister: I am certainly making the case to the Prime Minister that the energy profits levy should be ended—and ended now—because it is damaging the transition that we are taking forward. I have made that point to the Prime Minister a number of times and I repeated it in a call with him earlier this week.

In relation to other steps, as I set out in my original answer to Maggie Chapman, we are taking forward a number of steps to invest in facilities and opportunities to develop new energy sources in the north-east of Scotland. The Government is absolutely committed to that work.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): My constituents are at the cliff edge of the so-called transition. According to a recent Jobs Foundation report, the truth is that the Scottish Government has no just transition plan and no energy strategy, and we have a jobs emergency in the north-east.

Will the First Minister support oil and gas workers, and finally back projects such as Rosebank, Jackdaw and Cambo, so that we can have a managed transition?

The First Minister: I have already said a lot in response to some of those points, but, on the issue of new developments, I have set out very clearly the Government's position, which is that any new developments must pass a climate compatibility test. The Government is taking a range of steps to progress its just transition strategy, which is supporting individuals on the ground with investments in a range of projects, whether on the facilities of the Energy Transition Zone or the training support that is in place for oil and gas workers. The Government will continue to deliver that support in the period to come.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementaries. Concise responses and questions will enable more members to be taken.

Donald Russell (Closure)

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The news that Donald Russell is to close its operations in Inverurie is devastating for its workers and their families across Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen city. It is yet another example of a business that is struggling to cope with sky-high energy costs, which have soared on the Labour United Kingdom Government's watch.

Does the First Minister share my concerns that businesses in energy-rich Scotland are paying the

highest price in broken Brexit Britain? Will he commit to engaging with the workforce and trade unions at the earliest opportunity?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am deeply concerned to hear about the difficulties that Donald Russell faces. It is a business of exceptional quality and significance in Aberdeenshire. The Government is supportive of the continued operation of the business, and Richard Lochhead, the Minister for Business and Employment, is urgently seeking a meeting with the company to understand how the Scottish Government can support it. We will work on trying to create a positive outcome.

I am acutely aware of the challenging conditions in which businesses are operating because of the increase in employment costs including employer national insurance contributions, and the increased energy costs with which businesses are wrestling.

Those are some of the practical and hard realities that have been created by the actions of the United Kingdom Government. That is why we must maximise the steps that we can take—and have taken—in Scotland, to temper any impact of business rate changes on businesses, and to ensure that businesses are supported through these difficult times. That is, of course, integral to the Government's budget.

Skye House

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): The First Minister will be aware of the report on the unannounced inspection of Skye house in August 2025. I share the Government's concerns about the report's findings regarding culture, staff resourcing and the use of restraints and other cruel practices. However, the report does not address the journeys of young people and how they entered Skye house in the first place. I am concerned that, when parents and carers raise concerns about culture in our national health service and social work departments, they are being met with a defensive response and an attempt to shut down such concerns without any accountability or willingness to improve services.

Will the First Minister now instruct a review of child and adolescent mental health services, NHS boards and social work services to discover how many concerns have been raised in respect of culture, to prevent young people from being failed and, ultimately, put in institutions that risk causing more harm than good?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have considerable sympathy with the point that Meghan Gallacher puts to me. The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing has already been in contact with the chief executive of NHS Greater Glasgow

and Clyde to request an urgent meeting to express the Government's expectation that all 16 formal requirements and nine areas for improvement at Skye house be addressed and implemented swiftly and demonstrably.

The issues that emerged in the Skye house report make for very concerning reading. I want to signal today, in response to Meghan Gallacher's point, the importance that I attach to those issues being confronted not just by the organisations that are responsible but by other organisations that deliver comparable services. That is the fundamental response that Meghan Gallacher requires—that all providers of such services must be able to be satisfied that they are not presiding over situations like the ones highlighted in relation to Skye house.

I hope that that gives some reassurance to Meghan Gallacher about this case. There has been another case, in which I instructed the health secretary to call in the leadership of NHS Forth Valley to make clear the Government's expectations on improvement. That is the culture that I want to preside over.

I am grateful to Meghan Gallacher for raising the issue, because it provides me with an opportunity to signal the importance that I attach to such issues being taken seriously by NHS leadership in Scotland, which Ms Gallacher has a right to expect from those authorities.

Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis (Funding)

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): This week, Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis closed its waiting list for two specialist services. That decision has come as a consequence of real-term cuts in the Government's proposed budget funding for rape and sexual support services. I do not need to remind the First Minister that sexual crimes have never been higher—the data shows that there has been an 11 per cent increase in attempted rapes. It is therefore difficult to reconcile the Government's commitment to tackling the epidemic of violence against women and girls with

"a budget that reduces the real-terms value of the very services designed to respond to it."

Those were the exact words of the director of the Glasgow service.

How does the First Minister justify a real-terms cut of £3.9 million to the delivering equally safe fund, when, as he keeps telling me in response to every question that I ask, it is the Government's core programme for addressing violence against women and girls? Why does the Government believe that it is acceptable to withdraw that vital support from women and girls who have experienced rape and sexual violence at a time

when the demand for those services continues to rise?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Ministers are actively engaged in dialogue with the Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis. The context is that there has been a 12.5 per cent uplift in the delivering equally safe fund in 2025-26, taking total investment in the fund to £21.6 million. A couple of weeks ago, Sharon Dowe raised issues with me concerning the distribution of that funding in relation to a project in her locality. Ministers are exploring those distribution issues in order to address them. I hope that that assures Pauline McNeill that the Government is investing substantially in the equally safe programme and that it recognises the demand for that support in the country. There might be issues with the programme's deployment around the country, but that is the subject of active discussion with ministers.

Rail Fares (Freeze)

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): While Keir Starmer's distracted Labour Party looks the other way on the cost of living crisis, our Scottish Government is freezing rail fares. Will the First Minister explain how such decisions are putting money back into the pockets of my hard-working Paisley constituents?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is taking every action to tackle the cost of living challenges that members of the public face in Scotland. Last week, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and I were pleased to announce the freezing of rail fares in Scotland for the next financial year. It comes on top of the decision last September to eliminate peak rail fares, which resulted in an average cost reduction of about 17 per cent on all ScotRail ticket types, and a 48 per cent reduction in commuting costs for commuters between Edinburgh and Glasgow. That is demonstrable evidence of the Scottish Government acting to tackle the cost of living pressures that members of the public face. I commit to Mr Adam and to the Parliament that the Government will do as much as it can to support households in these difficult days.

Raigmore Hospital (Specialist Care)

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Some 12 months ago, I warned the Scottish Parliament that Highland NHS Board was intentionally—according to our vascular surgeon—running down care provision in the Highlands. Last week, the First Minister told the *Inverness Courier* that it is acceptable for Highlanders to have to travel for up to four hours to Perth and Aberdeen in order to access treatment, simply because there is not a critical mass of cases in the Highlands. Given the success of the national treatment centre

in Inverness, which I applaud, will the Government focus on delivering specialist care at Raigmore hospital, so that Highlanders can get treatment close to their homes and families?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have not seen the press commentary that Mr Mountain speaks of, but I spoke to a representative of the *Inverness Courier* at the weekend when I visited the Sutherland area with my colleague Maree Todd. I will look at the remarks to see how they have been set out.

The fundamental point that I was making—which I think that Mr Mountain will understand—is that a certain level of active delivery of cases is required in an area to sustain the safety of clinical services within it. We want to maximise the delivery of services in as many localities as we can, but they have to be clinically safe. We will work to do that in all localities.

Mr Mountain referred to the strength of the national treatment centre, which is an outstanding asset that delivers care not just to patients in the Highlands but to those in the Perthshire areas that I represent and in other parts of the country. We are taking decisions to ensure effective deployment of clinical services, but that has to be done safely. That underpins the Government's decisions.

Fuel Poverty and Energy Policies

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): This week, Scotland reaches a milestone as more than 50,000 households receive support to live in a warmer home, with homes now being cheaper to heat. Meanwhile, the Scottish National Party Government published plans that could mean that communities across Scotland see more money being invested in their areas as a result of onshore renewable energy developments. What action is the First Minister taking to tackle fuel poverty? Does he agree that only through the fresh start of independence can we use Scotland's energy to create a wealthier and fairer Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government continues to use the powers that we have to raise incomes and improve energy efficiency, including by increasing funding for the warmer homes Scotland scheme, investing more than £197 million in our winter heating benefits and providing a further £1 million this year to expand energy bill debt advice services. We are doing everything that we can with our budget, and I am glad that the budget is progressing through the Parliament to enable us to do that.

However, there is a contradiction in Scotland—it is an energy-rich country that has high levels of fuel poverty. I agree with my colleague that it is important that Scotland's energy wealth works for

the people of Scotland, and we can achieve that only with the fresh start of independence.

Robotic-assisted Surgery

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): In England, £26 billion of investment will make 90 per cent of keyhole surgery robotic assisted by 2035, which will result in access being expanded to nine out of 10 patients and waiting lists being cut. In Scotland, there is no national strategy or timetable, and there has not even been a completed review of the current robotic capacity across our national health service, despite the First Minister promising last year to expand access.

Robotic procedures released more than 11,000 bed days back into our NHS in 2025 alone. Waiting lists are soaring, women are waiting years for gynaecological procedures and, 20 minutes across the border, patients in Carlisle will soon have better access than patients in Scotland. When will the First Minister stop the delay and deliver a clear and funded national plan to expand robotic surgery in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Let me correct some of what Sue Webber said. Operation numbers in Scotland are up, out-patient, in-patient and day-case waits are down and the Government is taking forward an investment strategy that is designed to ensure that our national health service is fit for the future. That is what the planning work that is going on throughout Scotland is all about. That is why we are delivering an increased number of operations.

I look forward to continuing that work, in the months and years to come, to ensure that the national health service delivers for the people of Scotland under a strong Scottish National Party Government.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so.

12:48

Meeting suspended.

12:49

On resuming—

Public Services (Funding)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20268, in the name of Alexander Burnett, on a fair share of funding for public services. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak button.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes calls for fairer funding to be allocated among Scotland's 32 local authorities and 14 NHS boards; further notes reports that Aberdeenshire Council is the fourth lowest funded local authority in Scotland, receiving less government funding per capita than the Scottish average; believes that NHS Grampian is the second lowest funded NHS board per head of population, is reportedly facing a deficit of nearly £50 million, has just 1.4 beds per 1,000 people, and has one of the fastest growing elderly populations in Scotland; considers that rural and island communities cover large geographical areas, which come with unique challenges and require significant resources, particularly with regard to infrastructure maintenance, service delivery and issues that arise from extreme weather; recognises concerns that local services are under immense pressure, and notes the view that it is important to ensure that communities are properly resourced to enable them to continue to have access to local services that meet their needs, including reliable public transport, local schools and health and social care services.

12:50

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): I thank those who have supported the motion, which echoes a joint statement put out by 22 community councils in Aberdeenshire. For 19 years, Scotland has struggled under the Scottish National Party. Our councils are underfunded, education standards are slipping, rural nurseries and primary schools are closing, our roads are full of potholes, our bridges are crumbling and our national health service is at breaking point. However, Scotland is the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom.

We need a Government that will focus on Scotland's priorities. For years, there have been repeated calls for the SNP to provide more funding to support local services. Our councils are stretched thin, while the Scottish Government receives the largest settlement of £50 billion from Westminster. The SNP budget for 2026-27 falls £1 billion short of what the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities called for and fails to deliver COSLA's demand for £750 million to fill the cracks in social care. The Institute for Fiscal Studies

highlighted that the SNP's budget for health and social care, which covers hospitals and general practitioners, will fall in real terms. Local services do not get the funding that they need and, as a result, the most vulnerable suffer.

Aberdeenshire Council is the fourth lowest funded local authority. It has the sixth highest population, yet it receives £50 million less than the Scottish average. That forces cuts across all non-statutory services. There are now no adult attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism assessments, and hundreds of people are on waiting lists, left in the dark without support. Despite Aberdeenshire's fragility in the face of flooding, erosion and extreme cold, there were cuts to winter resilience at a time when communities should be getting more support. In an attempt to save money, 1,200 grit bins were cut, leaving some communities without any. However, that is robbing Peter to pay Paul, because the council also shares half a health and social care partnership deficit. That means that, when somebody slips and breaks their hips, the potential cost is much greater.

This is not a challenge to be tackled as a test for the public sector; it is an unwinnable scenario, in which the elderly, road users and council tenants have been set up to fail. Morality is not understood by this Government. The SNP might have seen the countryside on its way to a photo call, but it is incapable of making policy that gives places such as the north-east their fair share.

Population sparsity, geographic area, failing infrastructure and travel times all have a huge impact on services. Aberdeenshire has more than 3,000 miles of roads to maintain—more than double that in Glasgow. It has 1,800 bridges—more per capita than anywhere else in Scotland. Aboyne bridge has been shut for more than two years, forcing people to take a 20-mile detour. It will cost £15 million to repair it or £30 million to replace it. However, that is just one of 200 Aberdeenshire bridges that require repairs and, over the next 20 years, 317 bridges might be forced to close. Can the minister even begin to comprehend what that will look like?

Rural schools are also at risk. Last year, I campaigned with parents to save four nurseries, but they are still under threat. When services are cut, rural areas are hit hardest as resources are redirected to larger settlements. That only encourages rural depopulation. It is no wonder that the SNP Government stands accused of modern-day Highland clearances.

It is no surprise that, two years in a row, the Local Government Information Unit has found that there is no confidence in local government finances. It has called for the Government to

review how local authorities are financed and the funding formula for distribution. Without that, our councils have no option but to increase council tax to make up for the Government's failure to provide a fair share to the north-east.

On health, NHS Grampian is, per capita, the second lowest funded national health service board, yet its elderly population is among the fastest growing. NHS Grampian is £45 million over budget, and, last year, the overspend was £65 million—the highest in Scotland—with auditors warning that staffing levels might have to be slashed.

While the SNP sits back and asks NHS Grampian to make further cuts, costs are still increasing. In Grampian, we have just 1.4 beds per 1,000 people, and there are now no minor injury units on Deeside. Community hospitals have been closed, despite the promises that the SNP made at the election in 2021. Waiting lists are at record highs, ambulance stacking at Aberdeen royal infirmary has caused chaos and care homes that need to run at capacity to survive have empty beds because it is cheaper for the SNP Government to ignore bed blocking than it is to fund people to be cared for in their community. That is having tragic consequences for people's lives.

While our NHS staff are working hard under incredible pressures, we also face recruitment challenges. That is affecting GP surgeries such as the one in Kintore, which has reduced hours, because it does not have sufficient doctors to operate full time. Other GP surgeries, such as the practice in Alford, are being taken over by mega-practices, where oversight is non-existent and GP to patient ratios have plummeted. A proper Scottish Government would have improvement initiatives such as offering golden hello payments to encourage people to move from the central belt and would invest in local training opportunities so that people could work in their communities.

If members think that the situation is bad now, they should just wait. Audit Scotland forecasts that Scottish Government funding will fall in real terms in 2028. Things are going to get worse. Will the minister take any responsibility? He will undoubtedly talk about balancing the budget, as though it is an achievement rather than a legal obligation. He will talk about Conservatives not backing the SNP's budget or identifying savings, despite the fact that we pointed out that independence spending had rocketed by £36 million and that there was a 25 per cent spike in foreign aid. He will talk about how Aberdeenshire Council is responsible for its budget, as Swinney did last week when he refused to help the Aboyne bridge group. He will pass the buck on to COSLA and its funding formula, knowing that it does not reflect rurality.

When will the Government take responsibility and govern, rather than hiding behind organisations that it controls? Politics is about spending choices, and the SNP Government is choosing to defund and destroy our rural communities.

12:57

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast)

(SNP): I am grateful to have the opportunity to debate the motion, and I thank Alexander Burnett for bringing it to the chamber. However, there is something quite ironic about the subject of the debate, and I will not shy away from calling that out.

We cannot let the Conservatives off the hook for their record or for what is happening locally. Over the past decade and a half, they had ample opportunity to do something about the situation, and they chose not to. In fact, they chose to do the opposite. Conservative politicians have a track record of voting for public spending cuts. That is on the public record. That is the ideology of Conservatism. The Conservatives cannot spend years squeezing the state and demanding tax cuts for millionaires and then call for a bigger share of a pot that, through their design, is smaller.

Let us say the quiet part out loud: public services did not get stretched by accident. They have been systematically squeezed for years by UK austerity. People at home do not need MSPs to explain what pressure looks like. They feel it in their everyday lives, and I see it reflected in my casework.

I agree that rurality, distance, harsh weather and an ageing population mean that it costs more to deliver services in Aberdeenshire, and Brexit has caused a serious labour shortage. That is why the Scottish Government has ensured that local government funding in Scotland is at record levels. Councils will receive almost £15.7 billion in the upcoming budget, and that matters. I am not saying that that will solve everything, but it cuts clean through the idea that the Scottish Government is simply not putting money into local services.

There are two issues that we need to bear in mind: first, how the pot is shared out through COSLA's distribution process; and, secondly, what happens after that. Councils choose priorities locally, and that local accountability matters. Councillors are democratically elected to make those decisions. What the motion tries to glide past is the fact that Aberdeenshire's budget choices are made by the Tory council administration—it is those councillors who decide what is protected and what is cut. However, time and again, we see the same trick: local cuts are made, and then the

Conservatives point to Holyrood and say, "It's not our fault."

There were alternatives. In Aberdeenshire, for example, the SNP council group put forward a different budget proposal and priorities to reduce the damage, but those options were rejected. People deserve to know that, because it means that some of what we are seeing was a choice and was not fate.

I will make a constructive call: when Aberdeenshire councillors set their budget later this month, I ask members on the Conservative benches to speak to their colleagues, asking them to work with the SNP council group and across parties to protect the most vulnerable. They must stop the blame game and do the hard work that it takes to get consensus for the benefit of the community. When cuts hit disability day services, that is not an abstract saving line, because families are left carrying the weight on their own. If we truly care about the ageing population, we cannot ignore the people who need support now or the carers who are already at breaking point. If Conservative members genuinely want a way forward, there it is.

We were promised the broad shoulders of the UK, but people in my communities do not feel at all upheld by UK broad shoulders. Instead, they feel weighed down by decisions that have been made elsewhere. Scotland can do better than this. With full powers in our hands—the hands of an independent Scotland—we can keep more resources here and invest in our public services in a way that people deserve.

The motion for debate is spin, dressed up as concern. My constituents deserve honesty and real solutions, and that is what I am offering today.

13:01

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The motion poses a simple question about whether the way in which the SNP Government chooses to distribute its record funding among our local authorities, NHS boards and infrastructure investment projects is a fair distribution. Those are all devolved services, as Karen Adam would know if she bothered to learn how devolution and funding work.

Presiding Officer, the north-east has such a consistent and sustained imbalance of distribution that the dogs on Union Street would tell you that we do not get a fair distribution. For example, for more than a decade, NHS Grampian has received less than the level of funding that is required by the Government's own allocation model. Since 2010, the disparity between needed and actual funding is around £250 million. That funding shortfall has resulted in reports just this week that NHS

Grampian is projecting a deficit of £76 million, having made £62 million-worth of savings this year and needing a further £40 million of savings next year. That translates to the fewest beds per head in Scotland. It means delayed projects, stacked ambulances and enormous waiting lists for people in the north-east.

The funding shortfall embeds pressure across the system, because NHS Grampian funds a significant share of Aberdeen city and Aberdeenshire health and social care partnerships. Due to NHS Grampian starting from a low financial position, with its below-target allocation, the HSCPs, too, are under strain. Care provision tightens, recruitment becomes challenging and local urgent care services operate with limited flexibility. Those are entirely predictable consequences of sustained unfair underallocation by this Government.

Our north-east local councils face the same unfairness. Aberdeenshire Council is the fourth lowest-funded local authority per head in Scotland, receiving less than the national average. Aberdeen City Council also ranks among the lower-funded councils. Both have been consistently almost the worst-funded—if not the worst-funded—councils in Scotland for years. Starting from a lower funding baseline immediately limits what local services can be delivered effectively. Karen Adam desperately tries to say that it is nothing to do with the Scottish Parliament, but that is not standing up for her constituents; that is abandoning them, yet again.

As the motion highlights, the unfairness extends to infrastructure investment in the north-east, or lack thereof. To the south of Aberdeen, the growing communities of Cove and Newtonhill, which sit directly on the east coast main line, need new stations. People have been demanding them for years, and several thousands have signed my campaign petition to deliver them. However, the Government refuses to deliver, just as it will not address our poor local and regional bus services or deliver the vital upgrades that are so desperately needed on the A90 and the Laurencekirk, Toll of Birness and Cortes junctions.

When communities lack proper transport infrastructure, the result is congestion, pressure on local roads and reduced economic activity. Earlier today, when I asked the minister whether, in response to the tsunami of pub and hospitality closures in Aberdeen and the north-east, he would support Scottish Conservative plans to exempt most from business rates, he blithely ignored the issue, failed to provide any solutions and completely ignored the question about whether he would support that.

North East Scotland is a region that contributes significantly to Scotland's economy, its energy, its food production and its advanced manufacturing and research. We in the north-east have an expectation—actually, a right to expect—that our essential services and infrastructure are funded in line with assessed requirements.

The fact is that fairness to the whole of Scotland should be baked into decisions that the Scottish Government makes. The sustained gap in the north-east demonstrates that it is not—that is not what is being delivered. We need a commitment to fairness for communities across the north-east and a Government that finally delivers a fair share for the north-east.

13:05

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): I thank Alexander Burnett for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is on a wee subject that is dear to my heart, as I have over 40 years of experience in the public sector at a senior level, and I know that, over a long period, we have had both good times in the public sector and some very hard times. That aside, since 2010, all of us as chief officers, whether in health, social care or education, or just in general bread-and-butter services such as refuse collection or fixing potholes, have been managing decline.

We used to categorise services as being: statutory services, where you must do it or face a fine or imprisonment; essential services that affect people's lives; services that are nice to have; and, finally, the category that we still do too much of, which is the "What are we doing this for?" category—and the answer is usually, "Because we have always done it" or "I don't really know what the answer is."

During this period of managed decline, we who manage and provide public services have still managed to work wonders, doing the impossible while being starved of funds. However, that is mainly down to the hard-working, committed workers and staff, many of whom are on low wages but have a true sense of pride in their work and a profound respect for the people they are providing the service for.

Over the same period, the Scottish Government has habitually wasted significant pots of money. We have had the ferries fiasco; Gupta's invisible Fort William smelter; and thousands of civil servants spending time redacting responses to freedom of information requests, to name but a few examples. The cost of those alone comes to about £1 billion. What about the blunders and cover-ups that we have not even heard about yet?

We are running more than 130 unelected quangos that are eating into public money. Some are supposed to distribute public money, but, in some cases, they are hoarding public funds while—in my experience—we had to beg to get access to those funds. If we did not do what the unelected organisations wanted, we did not get the funds. They used it as a method of control, and that is the Scottish Government's fault. I will name and shame a couple of them: Sustrans, Zero Waste Scotland and Strathclyde Partnership for Transport. SPT has almost £200 million in reserves. We could pay for 1,000 doctors, 1,000 nurses, 1,000 street cleaners and 1,000 road workers all at the one time from that £200 million pot.

Why are we, the Scottish people, putting up with that nonsense? It is a disgrace. Many chief executive officers and directors in those organisations pay themselves inflated salaries and bonuses for delivering poor, out-of-touch services. While I acknowledge that increasing funding for something does not necessarily mean that it will get better, rebranding organisations or adding commissioners, or some other fudge mechanism, does not improve things either.

A public service should be exactly what it says on the tin—it should be fit for purpose and have the ability to do what it is designed for, as an efficient, sustainable, fully funded public service. We need a full shake-up from top to bottom, rather than the jigsaw that we have at present. We need to improve the staple methodology for funding public services in a way that the Scottish people deserve. Transition should not be pie in the sky.

To achieve that, we should be setting a challenging, achievable and clear road map to success. We need to untangle the current cash-absorbing, shambolic mess. We in this Parliament should spend less time talking about seagulls, greyhounds, independence and kicking Americans out of Prestwick airport. We should concentrate on the bread-and-butter services that affect every single person—even people in the chamber. Creating more of the same without fixing the basics, including the funding methodology, is wrong. We need to roll up our sleeves and get on with the job in hand.

13:10

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Alex Burnett for bringing this crucial debate to the chamber. I must admit that I am still a little bit dizzy from Karen Adam's speech. My word—that was some amount of political spin from a former councillor. How on earth she thinks that she can say that in the chamber is beyond me.

I agree with some of the points that Davy Russell made about concentrating on key things. Seagulls are a very important subject, though, especially in my community in Moray, and we have to talk about them.

I could not believe it when, on Thursday 4 May 2017, I was elected to Moray Council. I stood in the seat of Buckie, a strong SNP area, and I thought that I was never going to win, but I was elected, and I was happy. I was serving as a football coach in the community, I worked in the church and I was on the community council. However, for the two weeks after I was elected to the council, I was plagued by the chief executive and the deputy chief executives telling me just how dire it was in the council. They said that there was no money, that we could not do anything positive and that all we could do was make cuts.

I spent the next five years learning why, and the reason is discussed in the COSLA document that I am holding up. I know that we are not meant to use props in the chamber, but I want to quote from the document, which is called "What does the 2026-27 Budget mean for Councils?" It is worth pointing out that the president of COSLA is an SNP councillor, that almost half of the councils in Scotland are run by the SNP and that the document has been agreed by all council leaders in Scotland. It says:

"COSLA Leaders have agreed this is a very poor settlement which fails to address the dire financial situation of Local Government in Scotland."

It is dire; it has been dire every year. On another page, the document points out just how dire it is. While the SNP Government has put more and more money into benefits, it has slashed local government.

Karen Adam: Will the member take an intervention?

Tim Eagle: I am not allowing Karen Adam an intervention. She would not take an intervention from any of us.

The 2026-27 budget is another dire one that will force all council administrations, whichever party leads them, to make cuts and put up council tax. Alex Burnett made the key point that council tax is going up because, for a long time, the SNP prevented councils from doing anything to council tax but did not make up the shortfall in funding, and because it has also not funded revenue over the years. We have seen massive increases in costs in education. Additional support needs and social, emotional and behavioural needs are through the roof, as are needs in other areas such as social care, but none of that has been funded. In addition, we are taking away services that have previously been provided. Why are swimming pools under threat? We need them. School crossing patrols are

also under threat, and that is all because we are funding what this Government wants and not what we should be doing on the ground. To me, that is simply not good enough.

COSLA states:

“The budget reality is that this a cash reduction in core capital funding”.

That is not going to help with the bridges that I and Alex Burnett want to protect across rural Scotland.

A lot of councillors are trying their best and doing great work across the country, but it is very difficult. I say to the people of Scotland, “Don’t blame your councils—blame this SNP Government”. Ministers are the ones who have destroyed council funding because they are not up to the challenge of taking on the difficult things.

I will finish with a comment on NHS Grampian. A couple of days ago, it put out a press release that I found really frustrating. It says that it is an “incredible achievement” that NHS Grampian has managed to make budget cuts. I do not think that that is an incredible achievement. NHS Grampian is cutting its budget at a time when I have constituents coming to me with breast cancer or eye problems who cannot get into hospital. We should not be seeing cuts in those budgets. We should be seeing services being delivered, with more beds at Dr Gray’s and the hospital in Aberdeen. We need that so that our constituents, whom we care for and want to serve, can actually get the services that the NHS delivers. This Government has to step up to the plate and put more money into local services, particularly in rural Scotland.

13:14

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to Alexander Burnett for the opportunity to speak in this debate for the communities of the north-east, and particularly the people of Aberdeenshire, who know all too well what it means to be asked to do more with less. However, he and I have quite different solutions to the problems that his motion identifies: I support higher taxation on individuals and businesses with significant wealth. I am proud that Scotland has a fairer tax system than anywhere else in the UK, which is thanks to the Scottish Greens. At its heart, however, the debate is about how public spending is prioritised.

Karen Adam was right to highlight that it is Mr Burnett’s Conservative colleagues who are making the decisions in the shire. However, it is also true that Aberdeenshire Council is the fourth lowest funded local authority in Scotland, and that it receives less per head than the national average. It is also true that NHS Grampian is the second

lowest funded health board per capita, with a deficit of nearly £50 million and only 1.4 beds per 1,000 people, despite serving one of the fastest-growing elderly populations in the country. I agree that that creates significant challenges that other health boards do not face.

I appreciate that the local authority funding allocation is devised by a formula that is agreed by COSLA, but perhaps it is time to open up discussion about that formula and the allocation. However, we cannot do that on our own in the Scottish Parliament—that is not in our gift. The numbers that we see in the motion are not abstract—they are not simply lines in a spreadsheet. They represent delayed care, overstretched staff and anxious families and communities who are worried about the future of the services that they rely on.

In Aberdeenshire, geography matters. Rural and island communities cover vast distances; roads must be maintained across huge areas; public transport must connect disparate and scattered towns and villages; and services must withstand extreme weather events that are becoming more frequent and more severe. Delivering equity in such circumstances requires more resource, not less, and I think that we agree on that. However, this is not simply a question of fairness between local authorities or health boards; it is about social justice. I was proud to stand alongside communities across Aberdeenshire in their fight to save sheltered housing, disability services and community care facilities that enable people—particularly older and disabled people—to live independently and with dignity. I pay tribute to those from Cuminestown, Portsoy and all the other northern Aberdeenshire towns and villages for their campaigns last summer. I am sorry that we did not halt all the closures and cuts.

When sheltered housing accommodation and wardens are cut, daycare services for disabled people are reduced and local facilities close—decisions that were made by Conservative councillors—the cost does not disappear. It is displaced on to families, unpaid carers and, ultimately, our NHS. If we are serious about relieving pressures on the NHS, we must invest upstream and fund preventative services properly. We must recognise that good social care, accessible local transport, warm and secure housing and strong community facilities are not optional extras but the foundations of a healthy society.

Aberdeenshire’s rapidly ageing population should be a call to action, not an afterthought. Fair funding must take into account changing demographics, rurality and deprivation, all of which can be hidden in affluent-looking areas. The real

cost of delivering services across large dispersed communities must be acknowledged.

This debate is about whether we are willing to match our rhetoric on equality with meaningful financial commitment. It is about whether we accept a system that leaves one of Scotland's largest local authority areas persistently underfunded and one of its key NHS boards struggling to meet demand.

Communities in the north-east are resilient and resourceful, but they should not be expected to compensate indefinitely for structural underfunding. A fair share of funding is not a special favour; it is a matter of equity and dignity. It is essential if we are to build a Scotland in which every community—rural, coastal, urban or island—can access the public services that it needs and deserves.

13:18

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I thank my colleague Alexander Burnett for bringing this debate to the chamber.

Many of the issues that have been highlighted in Aberdeenshire are also present in other parts of rural Scotland, not least in my region of South Scotland. Communities across Ayrshire are well aware of the impact of the Scottish Government's fiscal approach on them. Health services have been decimated, local authorities are buckling under enormous demand and everyday things that we used to be able to count on seem to be on borrowed time.

We do not need to look much further than at the plight of NHS Ayrshire and Arran for the evidence of that. The dire state of affairs there got so bad last week that the Scottish Government had to raise its emergency intervention to the second-highest level. That should not have come as a surprise to ministers. After last year's emergency loan of more than £50 million, Scotland's public services watchdog said that there was "no evidence" of financial sustainability in that health board. Patients can see how bad things have got. The severe situation there is not the fault of hard-working staff and medics; it is a symptom of years of underfunding from central Government, which, having failed to properly resource the organisation, is now having to shell out for expensive sticking-plaster solutions.

Life in the region's councils is not much better. We know that many people from across Scotland choose to come to South Ayrshire to retire. Of course their presence is welcome, and their contribution to local life is considerable. However, for too long, the Scottish Government has ignored the impact on demographics. South Ayrshire has one of the country's highest proportions of people

over the age of 65; already, they account for more than a quarter of the population, and that will increase to a third within a few years. That will bring the region into competition with areas that have the oldest demographics in the world, yet there is no funding mechanism to reflect that, and it will have an extraordinary impact on demand for health and social care.

The sums do not add up, which is why councils are left with no option but to raise council tax or close facilities. Such counterproductive moves make people only poorer—financially, educationally and culturally. Councillors take the hit for that locally, but the decisions that are made by the Scottish Government in Edinburgh are to blame.

Health boards and local authorities are being asked to sweep up where the SNP Government has failed, whether in relation to delayed discharge, intolerable environments for teachers or the impact of policing cutbacks. All those things are felt locally but could have been prevented nationally. That is why I fully support Alexander Burnett's motion to finally give councils and health boards the money that they need to do the job properly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Ivan McKee to respond to the debate. Minister, you have around seven minutes.

13:21

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I will come on to members' contributions shortly, but I will first cover off some general points.

The Government recognises the essential role that local authorities and health boards play in delivering high-quality health and care services across Scotland, including in rural and island communities. That is why the draft 2026-27 budget provides a record investment of £22.5 billion in health and social care services.

Since 2007, the Government has delivered a balanced budget and has taken steps to support the long-term sustainability of Scotland's public services, despite significant inflationary pressures and increasing demand on services. Both the NHS Scotland resource allocation committee—NRAC—formula and the local government grant-aided expenditure distribution methodology provide objective, evidence-based methods for assessing the relative needs of services across the country.

We recognise that strong and on-going partnership work is essential, and the Government remains absolutely committed to constructive engagement with local authorities, NHS boards, integration authorities, COSLA and local communities to ensure that reforms are co-

designed and that funding decisions support sustainable long-term improvement and improve outcomes for the people and the communities that they serve.

As I said, the draft budget that was recently introduced in the Parliament provides £22.5 billion of investment in health and social care services. It exceeds the health consequentials from the UK Government and provides a real-terms uplift, to ensure more sustainable and resilient services. In 2026-27, NHS boards' baseline funding will increase, bringing a total investment of more than £17.6 billion—an average real-terms uplift of 1.8 per cent. We will also be fully funding pay deals in 2026-27. We recognise, of course, that it remains the statutory responsibility of NHS boards to achieve a balanced budget.

As I mentioned, the NRAC formula is an objective measure of the need for healthcare services across Scotland. However, in addition, since 2012-13, the Scottish Government has provided more than £4 billion of additional funding to ensure that each territorial board remains within 0.6 per cent of NRAC parity.

The NRAC formula is refreshed annually to reflect changes in population and service needs, including in remote and rural communities. That supports vital work to reduce health inequality and ensures that we continue to allocate funding according to the relative need for healthcare in each board area. In particular, in 2026-27, NHS Grampian will receive nearly £1.5 billion in baseline funding, which equates to an increased investment of £130.7 million compared with 2025-26 and includes a 2 per cent baseline uplift of £28 million. NHS Grampian will also receive an additional £11.4 million to ensure that it remains within 0.6 per cent of NRAC parity.

Liam Kerr: Among all the statistics that the minister is trotting out, let us get specific. How would he suggest that NHS Grampian makes a further £40 million of cuts next year?

Ivan McKee: I was just coming on to that point. The board was escalated to stage 4 of the NHS Scotland support and intervention framework in May 2025 in order to provide it with the support that it needs. The Scottish Government has set targets to improve the board's position over the next three years, and the board remains on course to achieve those targets.

With regard to local authorities, the Government has provided another real-terms increase in funding for the next financial year. We will continue to work with COSLA to ensure that our communities continue to receive the high-quality services that they expect and deserve. The grant-aided expenditure funding formula is agreed by COSLA leaders, and Aberdeenshire Council

receives additional funding due to Aberdeenshire's rural nature. If Alexander Burnett disagrees with any of the evidence that is used to make that calculation or if he believes that other evidence would merit inclusion in distribution considerations, I am sure that his points could be raised directly with COSLA, which makes decisions on the funding methodology.

Tim Eagle: I want to focus on that point, because it is crucial. I came down to the Parliament in 2018 to discuss it with the then Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution, Derek Mackay. The problem with the COSLA funding formula is that it requires the entire COSLA body—all the council administrations—to come together and agree. The councils that do well out of the funding formula will never agree to reset it; therefore, the Government will need to step in. Recognising that rurality is not taken into account, will the Government promise to do that in the future, to make sure that the funding formula is fair?

Ivan McKee: I have identified that Aberdeenshire Council receives additional funding due to its rural nature. It is interesting to get it on the record that the Conservative Party is calling on the Scottish Government to overrule COSLA on matters that relate to local issues.

Tim Eagle: That is not what I said.

Ivan McKee: That is exactly what he said. I think that COSLA would have something to say about that.

Under the two existing formulas, the additional cost of providing services in rural and remote areas is a key component in determining funding allocations. In the 2026-27 provisional settlement, Aberdeenshire Council will receive more than £20 million in additional allocation based on rurality indicators, making it the authority with the sixth-highest such allocation per person.

I will turn to some of the members' speeches. There was no change in the typical approach from Alexander Burnett, Tim Eagle and other Conservative members. On the one hand, they call for £1 billion in tax cuts—Alexander Burnett opened his speech with a comment about Scottish tax rates. At the same time, they argue for increased resources to be provided to public services. It fell to Maggie Chapman to give the Tories a lesson in basic arithmetic and economics, and I am glad that she did. That shows the state that the Conservative Party is in. Given that it has no chance of being in a position to make decisions in Government, it has the luxury of being able to call for contradictory things in debates.

Karen Adam clearly laid out the reality of the situation at the national and local levels. In that

regard, we were entertained by a bit of a dispute between Opposition parties on the position of seagulls—that was a piece of brief entertainment in the debate that broke up the monotony of the hypocrisy from the Tory party. *[Interruption.]* I already answered Liam Kerr's question—perhaps he was not listening, or perhaps he was too excited about the speech that he made.

With regard to non-domestic rates, in Aberdeen city, the total increase in rateable value is 7 per cent compared with a total increase of 12 per cent across Scotland. The Scottish Government is putting £870 million into reliefs this year to support business with those increases. Rather than being in the situation that was indicated by Liam Kerr earlier, we are giving the hospitality sector more support in percentage terms than it is getting south of the border.

As I outlined, the Government remains committed to ensuring that funding is distributed fairly and that it supports sustainable and high-quality services across Scotland, including in remote and rural communities. We will continue to work collaboratively with local authorities and NHS boards, and we will drive the reforms that are needed to improve outcomes for all our communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. I suspend the meeting until 2.30 pm.

13:29

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The next item of business is portfolio question time, and the portfolio this afternoon is education and skills.

Disruption in Classrooms (Social Media Use)

1. **Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what analysis it has undertaken of any link between social media use and violent disruption in classrooms in Scotland. (S6O-05539)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): We recognise concerns about the impact of social media use on children's behaviour and wellbeing. The behaviour in Scottish schools research highlighted that behaviour is influenced by a range of complex factors, including the impacts of the pandemic, poverty, family circumstances and wider societal influences. That is why our focus is on preventing the development and escalation of unhelpful behaviour, particularly through encouraging positive relationships in schools.

I also welcome the fact that a number of local authorities and schools either have banned mobile phones or are exploring doing so.

Stephen Kerr: Children now spend, on average, around three hours a day online, and 70 per cent of them are being exposed to real-world violence during that time. Teachers across Scotland are telling us that concentration is falling, behaviour is deteriorating and disruption is rising. Given the Government's acknowledgement that violent disruption in classrooms is increasing, does the cabinet secretary accept that unregulated mobile phone use during the school day is contributing to the problem? If she does—I think that she might—will she move beyond guidance and commit to a clear nationwide ban on mobile phones in Scottish schools?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Kerr and I have discussed these issues at length. I should pay tribute to his colleague Pam Gosal, who led a round table on the matter last week, which I attended, and where we discussed the issue in more detail.

I accept the member's substantive point in relation to the harmful impacts of mobile phones in our schools and the disruptive impact that they can have on behaviour. The BISS research brought some of those issues to the fore.

There are broader issues in this space in relation to the regulation of the internet and social media in particular, which is what the member's first question was about. On Monday, I will be in London, meeting United Kingdom Government ministers at the interministerial group on child sexual abuse, which I expect to talk about those issues in more detail.

More broadly, the member is aware of the Government's position on mobile phone bans in schools. At the current time, we do not have a nationwide ban; the guidance says that that power rests with headteachers. For the Government to introduce a national ban, we would have to legislate, and I will not be able to do that in advance of the election or give confirmation at the current time. I hear the issues that the member has put on the record today, and I am sympathetic to the general points that he has made.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): As children and young people encounter new and evolving challenges, can the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government is supporting work such as the digital discourse initiative to equip them with crucial skills to counter negative online content and behaviour?

Jenny Gilruth: The programme for government committed us to supporting the digital discourse initiative, which was a joint project by Time for Inclusive Education and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. The initiative supports schools to counter the impacts of disinformation and online hate. During my visit to Cathkin high school last year for the launch of the project, I heard positive feedback from staff and pupils. I am delighted that the initiative continues to receive such positive feedback. It is one of several useful online resources that complement the recently updated statutory guidance that the Government has published on relationships, and sexual health and parenthood, which provide learners with the knowledge to develop safe and healthy relationships.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): We know that there is a clear link between social media use and behaviour. I hear what the cabinet secretary says about her position on mobile phones, although I would ask her to furnish Parliament with further information about why she thinks that there has to be a legislative intervention for her to ban mobile phones in Scotland's schools.

Given that the cabinet secretary has responsibility for child safety and wellbeing, as she referenced in her answer to Stephen Kerr, what is the Scottish Government's position on the proposals currently under consultation to ban under-16s from social media use, as other countries around the world have done?

Jenny Gilruth: What I said about the banning of mobile phones is not something that I think; as a minister, I have commissioned advice on it from my officials. Legislative power does not rest with the Scottish ministers at the current time, which is not to say that it may not do so in the future.

I expect to discuss the issues that Mr O'Kane raises with regard to online behaviour and social media with UK Government ministers on Monday at the interministerial group on child sexual abuse. I am very sympathetic to the proposals that the UK Government has put forward in that regard. However, I recognise that an element of powers here rests in a reserved space, so I will continue to engage with my colleagues in the UK Government. I am happy to give an update on that, following my meeting on Monday.

Qualifications Scotland (Learner Interest Committee)

2. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the Education (Scotland) Act 2025, how the new body, Qualifications Scotland, will ensure that the learner interest committee is representative of all of Scotland, including rural and island areas and neurodivergent learners. (S6O-05540)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am pleased that Qualifications Scotland opened the application process for its new learner interests committee on 2 February this year. It will ensure that a range of perspectives are represented on the committee, including from learners across Scotland's regions and people with additional support needs or a disability. It is also important to be clear that the Education (Scotland) Act 2025 places a statutory responsibility on Qualifications Scotland to encourage equal opportunities when appointing members of the committee. That sits alongside specifically requiring them to consider the appointment of individuals who are care experienced, who come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and who have additional support needs in education.

Emma Roddick: We know that many neurodivergent learners struggle with neurotypical processes and structures in school settings, and that can be further compounded by rurality. Equally, I know from young rural voices that they face multiple barriers such as being young carers, being disabled themselves or suffering from mental health issues. Many of those characteristics can cause the others, so how will we take an intersectional approach that recognises the multiple barriers that some learners face?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for her question and the issues that she raises.

Qualifications Scotland is at arm's length from ministers, but I should say that it already undertakes a range of activity that is designed to support the needs of disabled and neurodivergent learners. That includes reviewing and updating the content for its designing inclusive assessment academy course for staff and appointees who develop qualifications and assessments.

Qualifications Scotland also engages directly with organisations that represent neurodivergent learners via its equality and inclusion group. The organisation and the Government are very aware of the needs of disabled and neurodivergent learners and any barriers to accessing current qualifications that they may face, and, to Emma Roddick's point, they are keen to address those needs through improvements to accessibility and inclusion as part of qualifications reform more broadly.

Qualifications Scotland should of course ensure that learners across all Scotland, including those in rural and island communities, have the same assessment experiences, supported by deploying visiting assessors for all assessment centres in Scotland.

Apprenticeships (Care-experienced Young People)

3. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting apprenticeships for care-experienced young people, particularly in rural and island areas. (S6O-05541)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that care-experienced young people can access a variety of apprenticeships, including in rural and island areas. Skills Development Scotland, on behalf of the Scottish Government, provides enhanced contribution rates for care-experienced modern apprentices up to the age of 29. Those enhanced contribution rates ensure that training providers can offer the additional support that is needed to help individuals to sustain and complete their apprenticeship. Skills Development Scotland also provides a rural uplift and an enhanced payment for training providers in rural and island areas to incentivise delivery in those locations.

Ariane Burgess: At present, apprenticeships in critically important sectors are off limits for rural and island-based young people who are care experienced, and who could find it destabilising to leave their forever homes. For example, there are no roof-slating apprenticeships north of Arbroath, which in effect prevents many young people in the Highlands and Islands from pursuing that key line of work.

Given the Scottish Government's on-going commitment to the Promise, what steps will it take to rectify the lack of opportunity for care-experienced young people in my region and across rural and island Scotland?

Ben Macpherson: I thank Ariane Burgess for highlighting those important points about her region, the young people in it and those who are retraining.

The modern apprenticeship demand assessment comprises three phases. The first is establishing a robust evidence base and sourcing and collating strategic and contextual data. The second phase draws on the baseline to support consultation with industry to verify demand. In the final phase, the evidence baseline and consultation insight are analysed and a final assessment is produced to inform the modern apprenticeship contracting strategy. That is all undertaken by Skills Development Scotland.

The member makes important points about making sure that there are opportunities in the area, that the demand is fulfilled and that we build the skills base that is required, not just in the here and now but for the times ahead. If the member would like to follow up on the issue after this question session, we can help her to connect with Skills Development Scotland and, potentially, the Scottish Funding Council.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The initial enrolment in apprenticeships as a post-school destination is a positive step, but the real challenge lies with sustained retention. Nine months after leaving school, the proportion of care-experienced young people in positive destinations drops by 15 percentage points, falling from 86.4 per cent to 71 per cent. In my region, Fife College reports that only 46.5 per cent of care-experienced students successfully complete their course compared to 63 per cent of the general student population. Can the minister outline what mandatory retention measures the Scottish Government is embedding in its new apprenticeship contracts to ensure that care-experienced apprentices are supported to the finish line and not just at the starting blocks?

Ben Macpherson: The member is right to highlight those issues. We have increased access in both college and university enrolment for those from a care-experienced background. However, I appreciate the point about retention and the wider responsibility that we, collectively as a Parliament and a country, have to care-experienced people through the Promise. If the member has the forbearance, I will take that away and engage with Skills Development Scotland, working with my colleague who leads on the Promise. I will provide reassurance and look into any further action that

can be taken to make a positive impact for the people who she rightly highlights need our help, and as much assistance as we can give them, to ensure that we fulfil the Promise.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The lack of provision in traditional building skills training in local colleges for young people in rural and island areas of Scotland creates an obstacle for those who are interested in a career in the sector. I have met industry representatives who have highlighted a delivery model in Canada and Ireland, where a mobile training facility was developed to allow for local training provision in key trades. Will the Scottish Government consider the development of such a mobile training facility to allow all young people in Scotland to have the same opportunities for careers in the traditional building sector?

Ben Macpherson: I met relevant stakeholders recently to discuss traditional building skills. The member is right to highlight the need to retain the skills that we have now and pass them on to the next generation, as well as the need to meet the demand for those skills across the country. I will take away the member's suggestion and will be happy to pick it up with Skills Development Scotland.

Access to Childcare (Western Isles)

4. Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its engagement with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the Care Inspectorate and the Scottish Childminding Association regarding the improvement of access to childcare across the Western Isles, both for children under three and three to five-year-olds. (S6O-05542)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): The Scottish Government continues to work closely with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the Care Inspectorate and the Scottish Childminding Association to support improved access to childcare across the Western Isles. We recognise the distinct challenges and the vital role of childminders in rural and island communities and have funded the SCMA to deliver a national three-year programme of childminder recruitment and retention. More broadly, we are supporting childcare access through national programmes, including investment in early adopter communities, and we have made commitments in the national islands plan to develop practical, place-based solutions for children and families.

Alasdair Allan: I thank the minister for her ongoing engagement on the issue. As she is aware, there has been a huge reduction in the number of childminders who are operating across my constituency in recent years, with no childminders

at all left in Barra, Uist or Harris. In order to support parents back into work, can the minister say anything further about the Scottish Government's work to increase access to childcare in rural and island settings, for example, through exploring the option of permitting childminders to operate in a non-domestic setting?

Natalie Don-Innes: That specific example has been raised with me before by other members across the chamber and I feel that it should be explored further. However, amending legislation to allow the delivery of childminding services in non-domestic premises would be a lengthy process and we would need to carefully consider any consequences of doing so. Safeguarding would be key. In the shorter term, I understand the importance of those issues, which is why I requested that Highlands and Islands Enterprise provide a report on rural and island childcare access. Building on that report, work is under way to arrange a rural and island childcare round table, which will bring together partners across policy, regulation and the childcare sector to focus on identifying realistic and effective action that we could take to improve childcare access to support families in those communities.

Racism in Schools

5. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to tackle racism in secondary schools. (S6O-05543)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): There is no place for racism in our schools and we are committed to addressing it across all education settings. The anti-racism in education programme strengthens professional learning to build racial literacy, and interim guidance on responding to racism was published last June.

A new whole-school approach will be issued shortly, offering guidance on responding to and supporting pupils, staff and families who have experienced racism. This work is supported by anti-racism curriculum principles and calls to action developed with children and young people, alongside resources to embed anti-racism in classroom practice.

Emma Harper: I have heard reports of pupils moving schools due to persistent racist bullying. That can be especially difficult for families in rural areas, where alternatives are limited. In addition, the rise in anti-immigration rhetoric from some political parties might be emboldening parental attitudes that, in turn, influence young people and shape behaviour within school communities. Can the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government is supporting both urban and rural secondary schools to embed effective anti-racism

practice and to ensure that staff are equipped to respond swiftly and protect pupils who might be at risk?

Jenny Gilruth: I am very shocked to hear that pupils have been encouraged to move schools, in some instances, because they have been on the receiving end of persistent racist bullying. That should not be happening in our schools, and I reiterate that there is no place for that type of hatred in them.

Where that type of behaviour does occur, it needs to be robustly addressed. That is why the forthcoming whole-school approach guidance, which I mentioned in my previous response, will offer a further response to our councils and schools on the handling of racist incidents. That guidance has been developed with the racism and racist incidents sub-groups, the work of which is being taken forward as part of the national action plan on relationships and behaviour.

Education Scotland's building racial literacy programme is open to teachers across the country and, as I understand it, it has been a worthwhile initiative that has helped support teachers in our schools. The programme provides access to online learning, which allows teachers from all local authorities to take part. More than 1,000 teachers have completed the programme so far, and 24 anti-racist mentors now support schools across the country, including in rural areas such as Highland and Orkney.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a couple of supplementary questions, which will need to be brief.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Ind): What specific funding allocations will be made to support participative curriculum resourcing with regard to anti-racist materials? How will schools be supported in accessing high-quality materials to ensure that racist incidents are handled effectively so as to prevent far-right narratives from filling the gaps?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Choudhury raises a very important point, and a number of different funding streams are related to the issues raised in his question. The building racial literacy programme, which I mentioned in my previous response, has £78,000 of funding, and there is funding of just over £80,000 for the cohort of the leadership and mentoring programme. From the AREP curriculum budget that I mentioned earlier—that is, the anti-racism education programme—there has been an extension of the partnership with Scotdec, in collaboration with educators.

The focus for 2025-26 is on creating an anti-racism and maths resource, for which the Scottish Government has provided £150,000. Funding to

the value of £67,000 has also been agreed to support the second year of Education Scotland's anti-racist mentors programme.

There are two other funding streams, but I am conscious of the time. If the member will allow me, I will write to him with a bit more detail on those topics. I appreciate that there is a range of different issues here, and I would like to give him a substantive response.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): From the data that the cabinet secretary has available to her, can she say what proportion of incidents result in meaningful disciplinary action? How would the cabinet secretary define a consequence that acts as a real deterrent to that behaviour?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Kerr will be aware that the Government published updated guidance on consequences prior to the summer recess last year. As for data on meaningful disciplinary action itself, those are not data sets that the Government would itself gather.

I should say that there are broader issues in relation to our education data at the current time. I am sure that this will be a matter that the incoming Government, following dissolution and the election, will want to consider in due course, as there are certain issues to look at in relation to data sharing and data being more readily available to ministers who sit at national level.

Grooming Gangs (Public Inquiry)

6. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what the education secretary's position is on concerns that, in light of the national review timeline, victims of grooming gangs may have to wait up to 18 months before ministers decide whether to establish a full public inquiry. (S6O-05544)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): It will not take 18 months. The first phase of assessment is already under way, with local authorities having 12 weeks to respond. The inspectorates have committed to reporting to ministers by the summer of this year once they have assessed the findings.

The findings will be scrutinised by the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, which is chaired by Professor Alexis Jay. Professor Jay has provided advice throughout the development of the national review and will advise ministers on the progress being made.

I will be providing a fuller, more substantial update to Parliament in my statement on these issues next week.

Sue Webber: I am sure that the survivors, along with me, will be delighted to know that they will not have to wait 18 months for the review.

According to their testimonies, victims say that they were brought over the border from England to Edinburgh to be exploited and raped. Will you confirm that the national review will explicitly cover historical cross-border grooming networks, including cases in Edinburgh involving offenders operating from England?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for her question. She is absolutely correct to put on record the importance of listening to survivors' voices. That is why, yesterday evening, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and I joined a meeting of the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. I was very grateful to the group's members for sharing time with Ms Constance and me to talk about their experiences to ensure that the national review listens to their voices and that we get this right for them. That is imperative.

Ms Webber raises a substantive point in relation to historical cross-border cases, and some of the issues that she has alluded to relate to historical cases, too. She will be aware of the work of the child abuse inquiry, which is looking at some of the historical cases in the round. If Ms Webber will allow me, I would like to write to her in more detail about the role of the inspectorate.

Finally, it might give the member some comfort to know that I will be meeting Alexis Jay later this evening. Following that meeting, I would like to write to Ms Webber in more detail on those points.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 was not lodged.

Budget 2026-27 (College Sector)

8. Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any potential impact of its draft budget 2026-27 on the college sector. (S6O-05546)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): The draft budget increases core capital and resource funding for Scotland's colleges by £70 million—a 10 per cent uplift on last year. That provides a strong platform for the sector to support learners, deliver the skills that our economy needs and ensure that our colleges are equipped for the challenges and opportunities of the next quarter of the 21st century.

I meet college stakeholders regularly. This morning, the First Minister chaired a constructive meeting with Colleges Scotland, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government and

I attended, too. Colleges Scotland welcomed the draft budget and recognised the significance of the additional funding for the sector. I hope that members across the chamber will share our commitment to Scotland's colleges and support the draft budget.

Jamie Hepburn: Audit Scotland has reported that New College Lanarkshire's modelling demonstrated that supported learning requires the most staff per academic credit achieved. How can the uplift that the minister speaks of sustain supported learning at New College Lanarkshire and across the further education sector, and support the social good that it can deliver?

Ben Macpherson: I had an excellent visit to New College Lanarkshire's Motherwell campus in recent months, and I was struck by what a remarkable institution it is, by the good that it is doing in the community and by the skills that it is providing to the public and private sectors.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that all our students, including those with a disability, with a long-term medical condition or with additional support needs, are able to access further and higher education and are fully supported throughout their studies. I am confident that the uplift in funding that the draft budget will deliver will enhance colleges' ability to make strategic decisions that strengthen student support and further embed inclusivity at the heart of their provision. The tripartite group of Colleges Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council is also driving forward a fundamental review of the current credit-based college funding model to improve flexibility and responsiveness, which will help in that regard.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In 2018, a comprehensive job evaluation exercise for college staff was initiated, and it has still not concluded. I know that the SFC is going through a lessons-learned process at the moment, but it is estimated that backdating this to 1 September 2018, which the Government has committed to, will cost £100 million. Is that £100 million ring fenced in this year's budget? Does the minister agree with the suggestion that the exercise will cost £100 million? Given the length of time that it has taken to get to this stage, what has the Government done to look at the implications of that for people's tax in the years that have passed since this review, which has still not been completed, was initiated?

Ben Macpherson: I thank Mr Ross for raising the important point about how our college staff are paid and the funding that is provided by the Government to facilitate that through our valued stakeholders.

Of course, a period of work on industrial relations was undertaken prior to my appointment. Thankfully, we have reached a position of settlement with good outcomes for all parties, including, in recent months, support staff in colleges. The staff who work in our colleges are the most important stakeholders, as they deliver for the learners whom we are all sent here to serve and represent.

I am happy to take away Mr Ross's specific question on resourcing, both historically and going forward. I would like to give the member a substantial, detailed response, and do so in writing, if he is understanding of that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am sure that the minister will recognise the role that the Liberal Democrats played in securing the uplift in college funding and in persuading the finance secretary to give that 10 per cent—or £70 million—increase. However, staff, trade unions and college leaders want to know whether this will just be a one-hit wonder or whether it will result in an increase year on year. We need to have certainty for the college sector so that it can plan for the future. Is the minister confident that the finance secretary understands that, and will increases be forthcoming in future years?

Ben Macpherson: I thank the member for both his fair criticism, on occasion, and the constructive approach that he and his party have taken to the budget process. Through that positive and constructive engagement, along with working together on the collective need of, and our responsibility for, learners and the economy, this settlement—if the budget is agreed to fully, as we expect to happen—will have a real, positive impact on communities across Scotland and, crucially, will help our colleges. That is what we discussed in the meeting this morning that I referred to earlier. All of us now have the opportunity to look ahead to what our college sector can provide to ensure that we tackle poverty and realise our economic potential.

The member is right to emphasise that there is a process beyond this financial year, and we are working with the college sector and the SFC on how we start to think about how we, on a shared basis, can invest in people and the economy in the round.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business to allow members on the front benches to change over.

Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20814, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

14:58

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Scotland benefits from having a significant number of first-class sectors that compete with the best in the world, including our world-renowned tourism sector. The Scottish Government is absolutely committed to working closely with the sector to support it and make it as effective as it can be in continuing to attract large numbers of visitors and in enabling those visitors to witness the fabulous culture, heritage and warm welcome that Scotland offers and to take advantage of the services that the tourism sector provides around our country.

We continue to engage significantly with the sector across a range of measures to strengthen the provision for tourists visiting Scotland. In that regard, the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill was introduced to Parliament in January. The measures in the bill build on the existing framework that the Parliament agreed through the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024. Local government and tourism stakeholders sought a mechanism to raise revenue to support local infrastructure and services that are impacted by tourism, which is a desire that the Scottish Government very much supports.

The 2024 act provided the discretionary power for local authorities to introduce a visitor levy on the purchase of overnight accommodation. This bill responds to stakeholder calls for effective and proportionate further measures to increase flexibility in designing visitor levy schemes.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): In its evidence to the committee, the Law Society of Scotland suggested that an exemption from the levy be considered for visitors who are compelled to stay in accommodation for the purposes of attending hospital for diagnosis or treatment and for those attending a court or a tribunal as a litigant, witness or accused person. Will the Government consider lodging a stage 2 amendment to deal with that?

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

Ivan McKee: The exemption powers that local authorities have would already enable such an

exemption to be made at the local level. However, I am willing to engage in further discussions if Sarah Boyack considers that aspects of that issue are not covered effectively by the existing powers.

The bill will strengthen the existing framework in a way that supports Scotland's excellent tourism sector. It reflects the recognition from parts of industry that a clear, workable and locally responsive system can provide benefits for communities and visitors alike.

The bill as introduced will bring positive changes by enhancing flexibility for local authorities with an additional basis of charge that will allow levies to be set as a fixed amount or amounts. It also clarifies the arrangements for sales of accommodation to third parties and amends returns provisions so that returns are calculated on the date of stay and not on the date of the chargeable transaction.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

The minister is right to say that the bill is about responding to need and that it affords additional possibilities. However, he has not acknowledged the fundamental point that the bill is intended to amend another piece of legislation that was recently passed. What reflections does the Government have about how it constructs such measures before it legislates? Could consideration be given to that? I am trying to raise that in as diplomatic a way as I can.

Ivan McKee: That is a very fair point. The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee asked why more of those issues were not picked up at stage 2 of the previous bill, and, in my engagement with the sector, I asked that question. The sector reflected and said that parts of it did not fully understand the implications for them of some of the proposed measures. There are lessons to be learned from everyone's point of view.

However, it is testament to the processes that we have that, where such things occur and where there is consensus—across stakeholders and members in the chamber—that things need to change, we are able to bring forward the changes that are required expeditiously.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I will be less diplomatic than Daniel Johnson. Does the minister regret not listening to the Conservatives, who were making exactly those points to him during the passage of the initial bill?

Ivan McKee: To be clear, they were not making exactly the same points. The Conservative proposition was to not give councils the flexibility to operate a percentage scheme and to limit them to a flat-rate scheme. In other words, the Conservatives did not want to broaden the scope and provide the increased flexibility that councils

and industry very much welcome in the proposals that we have brought forward. If we had taken forward their proposal at that time, we would probably be back here anyway, widening out the provisions through a separate bill.

The bill also includes a regulation-making power, which will enable ministers to give effect to any changes that may be required once the system is operational.

I want to reiterate that I have welcomed stakeholder input throughout the stage 1 process and that I continue to listen. I am grateful to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee for its consideration of the bill and for its constructive engagement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, local authorities and industry throughout the process.

Last week, I arranged a meeting with local authorities and key industry stakeholders to discuss their calls for further changes to implementation periods. They have helpfully provided written suggestions, which I am giving further consideration to as we move towards stage 2.

My recent response to the committee's stage 1 report confirmed that the financial memorandum sets out the best available central cost estimates. However, we will, of course, continue to refine those with local authorities, as the provisions in the bill may change through stages 2 and 3.

The flexibility for councils will be balanced with clarity for businesses. I am considering the committee's recommendations, including those on the practical operation of multiple schemes, fixed amounts and regulation-making powers.

My officials and I will continue to engage closely with stakeholders and the Parliament to ensure that we have a proportionate and effective visitor levy framework for Scotland that suits local circumstances while supporting local authorities and businesses.

Although the bill has been expedited, there has been stakeholder engagement throughout to inform the measures in it. That engagement will continue as the bill progresses through the Parliament and, if it is passed, as we move towards implementation. The bill will provide local authorities with greater discretion to shape schemes in a way that reflects local needs and visitor patterns, and it will support the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of Scotland's world-leading tourism sector.

I am grateful that the committee has indicated its support for the general principles of the bill. Those principles will be welcomed across Scotland as we aim to improve visitor services and support that world-leading sector.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we have a little bit of time in hand.

15:05

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. I thank everyone who gave evidence to the committee, including councils, accommodation providers, national booking platforms, small family businesses and island communities, and the many individuals who took time to share their views. We are grateful for their contribution to our scrutiny.

The bill does four main things. To ensure that we are clear, I will spell them all out. First, it will provide flexibility by allowing councils to charge a visitor levy on the basis of a fixed amount or a percentage of accommodation costs. Secondly, it will allow tailored rates so that councils can set different amounts by place, by season or by type of accommodation to suit local circumstances. Thirdly, it will bring clarity to the administration of bookings that are made through third parties when an online agent or tour operator is involved. The charge will be based on the first transaction between the accommodation provider and the third party. Finally, it will deliver simplicity through levy returns being based on when guests stay, not when they book.

I will cover the committee's consideration of the bill and what we recommended as a result. We launched a call for views as soon as we were designated as the lead committee for consideration of the bill at stage 1, and we received 60 responses. We took oral evidence from those in local government, from representatives of the tourism industry and accommodation providers and, finally, from the Minister for Public Finance.

The committee welcomes the Government's response to stakeholders' calls for greater flexibility. We support giving councils a clear choice of charging a percentage rate or a flat rate for each scheme, so that they can pick what best fits with local circumstances. We heard that a percentage-only model could be hard to operate in practice, especially for smaller operators.

However, we recognise the risk of creating a complicated landscape across Scotland, and even within council areas, so monitoring will be essential. The 2024 act requires a report on the visitor levy three years after the first scheme comes into effect. However, that is a one-off, not

an on-going, mechanism. On-going engagement with councils and other stakeholders, which the minister referred to in his written response to the committee, will be important.

The current uncertainty about whether a single chargeable transaction could be caught by more than one scheme is unhelpful. Therefore, we recommend that the Government clarifies the position through amendments. I welcome the minister's commitment to consider that ahead of stage 2.

We support allowing for a range of fixed-rate options. That will let councils tailor schemes, maintain a progressive element to the levy, protect lower-income visitors and support rural and island economies. However, we also recognise stakeholders' views on the practical difficulties that could arise with a per-person, per-night approach, so we recommend that the Government clarifies how the model will work. I note that the minister has said that that recommendation is being considered ahead of stage 2.

Some councils have already consulted on a percentage scheme and have announced plans to progress with the visitor levy. What options are available to those councils now? We heard that a requirement to consult again and adhere to an 18-month transition period before introducing a fixed-rate scheme could create delay and disruption. Therefore, we welcome the minister's commitment to lodge amendments on those periods when appropriate. The minister told us that that was

"one area where there will absolutely be changes."—
[*Official Report, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee*, 3 February 2026; c 11.]

However, the Government's response to our stage 1 report says:

"We are considering these matters ahead of Stage 2",

so it would be helpful if the minister could confirm today what those changes will be.

We support the clarification in the bill that, when that parties are involved, the initial transaction between the accommodation provider and the third party is the chargeable transaction. That avoids double charging and improves certainty.

We support the regulation-making powers to resolve operational issues quickly but not to rewrite fundamental policy without full parliamentary scrutiny. I acknowledge that the minister's response regarding the broad regulation-making powers was:

"this provision would not apply to changes to the basis on which the levy is charged. We consider that such significant changes are best made through primary legislation".

That is welcome. However, it would be helpful if

the minister could address whether the language in the bill is sufficient to rule out significant changes through subordinate legislation.

Finally, a word on timing: the timetable was challenging. I acknowledge that some of the provisions in the bill will support the smooth implementation of the first scheme in Edinburgh, which is due to commence in July, and that it is therefore helpful that the changes have been proposed now. However, we cannot ignore the fact that some of the issues that are addressed in the bill arose during consideration of the original bill back in 2023.

We support the general principles of the bill. Local flexibility absolutely matters: councils and accommodation providers should have the flexibility to design schemes based on local circumstances.

15:11

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

Let me make it clear from the outset that the Scottish Conservatives will support the bill at stage 1. The bill is a welcome step in the right direction and it follows sustained pressure from the Scottish Conservatives and the tourist industry. For years, we and the sector have been arguing that the visitor levy as proposed in the original legislation is potentially deeply damaging to a tourist industry that is already under severe financial pressure elsewhere. It is good that we are finally seeing recognition of that—at least in part—from the Scottish Government.

As we have heard, the bill does two things. First, it gives local authorities flexibility to introduce a flat-rate charge, or a tiered flat-rate charge, as well as having a percentage scheme. That is a welcome change that local authorities and others have been pressing for, and it will allow much greater local flexibility.

Secondly, the bill fixes an error in the original legislation, whereby third-party providers were not able to properly set and collect the visitor levy. That led to complications where platforms such as Booking.com were asking accommodation providers to manually process refunds to those staying more than five nights in their accommodation. That was an entirely foreseeable mess created by the original legislation, and it is good to see it fixed, although it should never have happened in the first place.

Many of those difficulties could have been avoided if we and others had been listened to at the time. Back in 2024, we lodged amendments to the bill to allow a flat fee to be presented, but those were not supported by other parties. At committee, the Scottish National Party and the Greens voted against our amendments and Labour abstained. It

is good to see that our concerns were vindicated and the changes being introduced now, but it would have been far better if that had been sorted out at the time, rather than our having to introduce remedial legislation.

I pay tribute to all the industry bodies that pushed the Government for action. The Scottish Tourism Alliance co-ordinated a joint letter to the Scottish Government in May last year expressing concerns. It brought together 78 representatives of the tourism and hospitality sector and said:

“Without swift and coordinated action, we risk an unworkable system that will damage confidence and compliance across the sector.”

Others, such as Fiona Campbell of the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers, David Weston of the Scottish Bed and Breakfast Association, and the Federation of Small Businesses, among many others, joined in with those calls, and it is good to see them being listened to.

Although the bill is welcome, it does not fix all the issues with the visitor levy. The Holiday and Residential Parks Association has raised concerns about the proposed per-person-per-night charging mechanism, which it says will fall heavily on families. Staying in static caravans is an attractive option for low-cost holidays in the United Kingdom and is particularly important to those who are struggling with the rising cost of living. However, as the association has made clear, a levy set at the modest sum of £2 per person per night would add the significant extra charge of £168 to the cost for a family of six of staying in a static caravan for a fortnight. For people who are already struggling to meet the cost of a family holiday, that is a very significant additional tax burden.

There are other issues with the visitor levy that the bill does not address. The levy catches not only people who are tourists but those who have to stay away from home for work or for a variety of other purposes. For example, a resident of Glasgow who is sent to Aberdeen for a few days' work as part of their job and has to stay overnight will pay the visitor levy, as will someone who visits a family member in hospital and has to stay nearby overnight. A family whose property is damaged by a flood or a fire and has to stay in a hotel or a B and B on a short-term basis will pay the visitor levy. It is not a tourist tax, as it is sometimes classified. It is paid by everyone who stays somewhere other than in their own home, regardless of the reason.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I cannot speak for all local authorities, but I understood that at least some local authorities had agreed not to charge the visitor levy for people who were visiting their local authority area for the purpose of visiting someone in hospital.

Murdo Fraser: I accept that that may be the case, but I think that it would be far better, from the point of view of clarity, if we had a scheme that made it very clear who was eligible to pay and who was not, rather than leaving it up to individual local authorities to make those choices.

Councils across Scotland are currently seeing the visitor levy as a source of additional revenue, which is not surprising when their budgets are being cut by the SNP Government. The levy represents an additional cost for a sector that is already suffering as a result of Labour's national insurance increase, which is a tax on jobs, the additional cost of short-term let licensing for self-catering providers, rising energy costs and flat demand from customers. In addition, the sector as a whole faces staggering increases in non-domestic rates as a result of the current revaluation.

It makes no sense to add a visitor levy for a sector that is already struggling with all those other costs. Scotland is already seen as an expensive destination, compared with other parts of Europe or other parts of the world, and the visitor levy will make matters worse. The Government is at risk of killing the goose that lays the golden egg, given the importance of tourism to the Scottish economy.

As things stand, some councils are pushing ahead with introducing a visitor levy without even doing a proper economic assessment. In my region, when Perth and Kinross Council ran a consultation, it found that there was overwhelming local opposition to a visitor levy across all sectors, yet, shockingly, the SNP administration, propped up by the Liberal Democrats, is still pressing on. In Stirling, the SNP is committed to bringing in a visitor levy at 3 per cent from next year.

Although we support the bill today, we remain deeply concerned about the impact of a visitor levy on a sector that desperately needs more help from the Government before more jobs are lost and more businesses fold.

I observe, in closing, that what we have seen from the Government is a remarkably cack-handed way of making law. It is only three years since the Government passed a bill on the matter, and here we are back again trying to fix the mess that was made. The Government really should have properly thought through the implications of the legislation before it brought it in. I hope that the lesson has been learned from that. The bill tries to fix that mess, so we will support it.

15:18

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank the organisations and individuals who provided evidence during the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's scrutiny of the bill and

the original visitor levy legislation, whose contributions were central in shaping the committee's deliberations. I also thank the committee clerks for supporting us in reaching the conclusions that we reached in our stage 1 report.

Labour agrees that the bill is absolutely necessary. Visitor levies will be an important tool for public authorities, and the bill seeks to ensure that those levies will operate within a workable and transparent framework. It recognises the diversity of Scotland's visitor economy and the different pressures and opportunities that are faced by local areas. We support full devolution to councils and their having the flexibility to customise the system so that it meets local needs.

We are not here to debate the principle of a visitor levy, which was thoroughly examined during the passage of the original bill. However, we should also not be here to discuss implementation through further primary legislation. One law should have been enough, particularly given this Parliament's already crowded legislative timetable.

The Government argues that the amending bill addresses issues that could not have been predicted, but that does not quite chime with my recollection of the original debate. I can remember not the current minister but the previous minister coming to the Parliament to say, "We couldn't make a decision on this, so we passed the decision to committee." The committee took evidence, realised the difficulties in making that decision and said, "No, thanks, that's for the Government to decide." The committee did not do so without highlighting the difficulties in deciding between a percentage rate and a flat rate; that was made very clear at the time, and we would have expected the Government to do its due diligence and research and to provide the proper leadership, instead of saying that it was the Parliament's fault. The committee and the Parliament gave a clear steer to the Government that it was ministers' decision to take.

The committee was also clear at the time—as it is now—that any levy system must be clear, manageable and proportionate for businesses and local authorities. Smaller operators and those with limited administrative capacity must be confident that compliance will not become an undue burden. Cost is therefore central to the bill's success. It is evident from the committee's report that the Government has not sufficiently clarified its implementation cost estimates or adequately explained discrepancies between the financial memorandum and stakeholder evidence. I welcome the opportunity to work constructively at stage 2 to ensure that we establish a realistic and robust financial framework.

Another key issue is the possibility of multiple levy schemes. The committee previously supported councils having flexibility to develop more than one scheme, while stressing the need to avoid unnecessary complexity. However, it remains uncertain whether a single transaction could fall under more than one scheme and, given the proposed flexibility across localities, that lack of clarity is unhelpful. The committee was right to recommend that that be addressed through amendment at stage 2.

Ivan McKee: I confirm that that will not be the case. That will be resolved.

Mark Griffin: I thank the minister for confirming that, and I look forward to supporting that amendment at stage 2.

We need a visitor levy that works for local communities while allowing Scotland's world-class tourism industry to thrive. On that basis, we will support the bill. However, we must be clear that councils have endured years of underfunding under this Government and that the visitor levy cannot and must not become a substitute for core funding for local authorities.

We will scrutinise the bill carefully to ensure that it delivers genuine flexibility for councils and certainty for tourism businesses. However, I must put on record our frustration at having to revisit this legislation in such a rushed manner because the Government failed to get it right first time. Holding a stage 1 debate a little more than a month before the end of the parliamentary session is not good governance. After 19 years in office, the Government should be capable of producing workable legislation and managing a coherent timetable. Instead, we are correcting avoidable mistakes at the 11th hour.

The committee's work has highlighted the need for clarity, consistency and proper communication as the bill progresses. There is an opportunity to create a model that supports local priorities while sustaining a strong visitor economy. That will need genuine engagement, careful amendment and constructive dialogue with the sector in the weeks ahead.

Scotland deserves legislation that has been thought through and that is properly costed and competently delivered; it does not deserve legislation that needs fixing before it is even implemented.

15:24

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Ivan McKee is too much "team SNP" to dump his predecessor in it, but, if he had a bit more freedom to speak openly, he would admit that mistakes were made in the past and that, if he had been the

minister at that time, the mistake would not have been made.

To give him credit, the minister listened and, despite a very busy parliamentary timetable, has managed to find a vehicle to make the change and to respond to the needs of the sector, which had been raising concerns for a long time. He deserves credit for that.

As we have repeatedly heard from various speakers, there were deep concerns about complexity leading to greater bureaucracy and undermining the scheme itself because the amount of revenue that would be secured would be minuscule due to the additional costs involved. It is therefore right to empower councils to have greater flexibility to choose between having a percentage or a fixed-rate levy, and a number of the other changes set out in the bill are also right. I am sure that the sector will appreciate that while, as Murdo Fraser said, still expressing a degree of resistance to the whole scheme in the first place. We should recognise that the bill is an improvement, and Liberals will therefore support it at stage 1 today and at all other stages.

However, I add my voice to the caution that has been expressed by others. The fact that local authorities have a power does not mean that they have to use it, especially in the really difficult financial circumstances that we all see every day. Local authorities should not just charge ahead and implement the levy because they have the power to do so. For example, as Murdo Fraser rightly pointed out, they should listen to what the Holiday and Residential Parks Association has said about the impact of per-night and per-person costs, particularly for families looking for lower-cost holidays.

I also urge caution about the use of funds, because I have heard some wide interpretations of what counts as the tourism sector. If the scheme is to work and have the confidence of the sector, it must be used directly for tourism purposes or that confidence will be shot. If there is going to be a virtuous benefit back into the sector, the fee must be ring fenced by local authorities, using the consultative mechanisms set out in the previous bill to make that work. It is difficult to introduce new taxes, but if, on day 1, people from some political parties come along with very wide interpretations of how the money can be used, that will undermine the very scheme that we are trying to promote.

To return to the economic circumstances, we already know that many businesses are facing significant increases in business rates and employer national insurance contributions while also dealing with low consumer confidence. I urge local authorities that are considering using the tax to look at the wider economy in their local areas

and to consider carefully. That does not mean that they should never do it, but it does mean that they should look at the economic circumstances now to ensure that they are not further undermining what is, in some cases, a fragile sector.

My final caution is for Parliament. This is a tight bill for a specific purpose, to fix a problem that we have identified. Please do not add amendments to it. Do not add bells and whistles. Let us make sure that we can get the bill through, using an expedited process, so that we can fix a particular problem. I know that there are things that I would like to include in the bill, but, unusually for me, on this occasion I will be cautious and restrained. It is important—particularly because we have a tight schedule towards the end of the parliamentary session—that we do not add bells and whistles, to ensure that we can get the bill through and fix the problem.

15:28

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I am pleased to contribute to today's stage 1 debate on the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill and to speak in support of its general principles, particularly as a member of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. I place on record my thanks to my committee colleagues and to the clerks who took the bill on at what might be called short notice, as the convener hinted.

Although it is a quite technical piece of legislation, the bill is, in a nutshell, about strengthening local democracy, empowering councils and sustaining Scotland's visitor economy in a way that best reflects local priorities. The legislation builds on the recent Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 and responds constructively to the experience, evidence and feedback gathered since the act was passed. We have already heard some commentary on that today.

The central purpose of the bill is to provide councils with greater flexibility in how they design and apply a visitor levy. It introduces the option of charging a fixed amount rather than only a percentage of accommodation costs. That additional choice will equip local authorities with a practical tool that better reflects the diversity of Scotland's communities, tourism patterns and local economies.

A visitor levy offers councils the opportunity to invest directly in the visitor economy. Any revenue that is raised must be spent on facilities and services that are used largely by those visitors, supporting infrastructure, public spaces, transport, cultural attractions and local amenities. That will ensure that tourism growth remains sustainable

and that communities that share their places with visitors will benefit directly from that success.

Importantly, the bill will not require councils to introduce a levy—Willie Rennie has just made that point—but will preserve local discretion. Councils will remain accountable to their residents and must consult communities, businesses and tourism organisations before bringing any scheme forward. That consultative approach will ensure that decisions are grounded in local knowledge and shaped by those who are most affected.

The flexibility that is offered by the bill is particularly welcome. Under the proposed framework, councils may choose between a percentage-based levy and a fixed-rate model, and they may also vary how the levy is applied, with options such as per-person or per-night charges. That will enable schemes to reflect local tourism pressures, economic conditions and seasonal demand. Such adaptability is vital across Scotland's diverse landscapes. We have major cities that welcome millions of visitors each year, such as Edinburgh; rural, island and remote communities, where tourism patterns differ greatly; and areas such as my Coatbridge and Chryston constituency, where we have many great tourist attractions, such as the Time Capsule and the Summerlee museum, which are not always known about or regarded as particular tourist hot spots and do not have many hotels, for example. It is really important that we recognise that a one-size-fits-all approach would not serve Scotland well. The bill will ensure that councils have the tools to design schemes that align with their unique circumstances and can take decisions locally.

The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee—of which I am a member, as I said—recommends that the Parliament agree to the general principles of the bill. The committee supports the introduction of a choice between a percentage levy and a flat-rate model. We recognise the Government's responsiveness to evidence and we welcome the steps to shorten consultation and transition periods where appropriate.

The bill also sits within a broader commitment to empowering local government. It contributes to the new deal for local government and builds on the Verity house agreement, reflecting a shared ambition to strengthen local decision making, support communities and improve public services. Alongside the record investment in the local government settlement, the measure will provide councils with an additional fiscal tool that complements existing funding streams.

International experience further supports the approach. Levies on overnight stays are common across Europe and beyond—I am sure that many

members have experienced that. Many destinations use such levies to reinvest in tourism infrastructure, enhance their visitor services and protect natural and cultural assets, and Scotland's model draws on those lessons while ensuring accountability, transparency and local control.

Stakeholder perspectives also underline the value of flexibility. Industry bodies, including representatives from rural and tourism sectors, have more or less welcomed the move towards fixed-rate options, which they view as being simpler, more predictable and better suited to varied accommodation models. Their contributions have strengthened the bill and will improve its practical application.

Of course, effective implementation will remain essential. On-going monitoring, clear guidance and continued engagement with councils and businesses will ensure that schemes operate smoothly and deliver tangible benefits. The statutory review mechanism that is built into the framework will provide an important safeguard, allowing Parliament to assess how the system is functioning in practice and to respond where necessary.

The bill represents a thoughtful evolution of Scotland's visitor levy framework. It will enhance flexibility, respect local choice, support sustainable tourism and strengthen partnership working. It reflects the lessons learned from earlier implementation and the constructive engagement of stakeholders across the country, and it has gathered cross-party and stakeholder support. For those reasons, I support the general principles of the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill and encourage colleagues across the chamber to do the same.

15:34

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

First, I want to respond to Willie Rennie—ever the father of the house—giving us that guidance on bells and whistles. I have to throw a tantrum and tell him that I like bells and whistles and I want to put lots of things into this vital bill. However, I thank him for his advice.

When the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill was introduced, we on the Conservative benches made it clear that we did not believe that introducing a visitor tax was the right approach for Scotland, and certainly not for fragile rural and island economies. However, once it became clear that that bill would proceed despite our efforts to advise the Parliament otherwise, our focus shifted to making the simple point that, if a levy was going to exist, it must be as flexible and workable as possible for the businesses that would be expected to collect it.

The correspondence that I received from businesses on Mull, Skye and across the Highlands and Islands paints a worrying picture. One long-established island business told me:

"We cannot rely on loyalty to the Scottish brand when families themselves are struggling with the cost of living."

Another business said:

"2025 was the slowest year for bookings we have ever experienced, with large gaps in summer availability for the second year running. That is before any levy has been introduced."

Great work has been by many regional campaigners, all of which I commend. The Skye and Lochalsh business impact survey got many responses, including one that said:

"If the levy tips us over the VAT threshold, we could lose £15,000 to £20,000 a year. That is not marginal—that is business changing."

Clearly, businesses were very worried from the outset.

The Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers, which does an incredible job, has consistently highlighted the risk to small operators, particularly those that are close to the VAT threshold, and the disproportionate administrative burden.

In the Highlands, the issue is not just about hotel chains. There are many farmers who are diversifying, island families with mortgages, and microbusinesses that are already having to cope with ferry disruption, labour shortages and rising costs.

Those of us on the Conservative benches know that if a levy is to function, it must be flexible. First, councils must have the ability to set a flat rate per night. In many rural areas, a modest fixed amount of £1 or £2 would be far more proportionate and predictable than a percentage-based charge that would penalise people booking longer stays or higher-quality accommodation.

Secondly, there must be clarity on who pays. If policy makers believe that the levy should focus on international tourism, the legislation must allow, for example, island residents who are travelling for medical appointments or families who are forced to stay overnight because of cancelled ferries not to be caught by a blunt instrument that would affect them, too.

Thirdly, the administrative burden must be minimal. It is not reasonable to expect busy small businesses to become unpaid tax collectors for the Government without clear systems, clarity on VAT treatment and proper cost recovery.

I remain of the view that the Highlands and Islands are fundamentally different from large cities such as Edinburgh. Our economies are seasonal, fragile and highly dependent on repeat

visitors and community good will. A one-size-fits-all approach does not always work. That is why the proposed legislation is welcome. It improves flexibility and addresses some of the concerns that we have raised from the outset. We never wanted the levy but, if it exists, it must be workable.

Despite my opposition to the visitor levy, I am thankful that the minister listened to the Scottish Conservatives. Murdo Fraser said that we were there to hold Ivan McKee's hand. We held his hand and enabled him to bring the legislation back to Parliament. If the minister needs his hand held with mistakes on other matters, such as non-domestic rates or the budget, he should come to us. We will be there to help him at any point.

Last year, 1,000 people signed my open letter to the minister. All they said that they wanted were certainty, fairness and common sense, and that is what we will continue to ask for. I am glad that the bill is here today.

15:38

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):

A visitor levy is a welcome step forward for our local authorities, and I hope that it can now be implemented in a way that takes account of local factors. That is also the view that many tourist businesses in my constituency have expressed to me.

Tourism is of increasing importance to island communities, and we are, of course, supremely blessed in the Western Isles. To highlight just a few things at random, tourists can choose from the Callanish stones; the plane landing on the beach on Barra; our distilleries; boat trips to St Kilda; HebCelt, the world-famous Hebridean Celtic music festival; the Ceolas festival; and our countless white sandy beaches.

However, managing all of that requires local infrastructure. A visitor levy helps to ensure that that infrastructure is maintained without having to divert vital funds from other priorities.

Providing local authorities with additional flexibility on how a visitor levy is calculated is welcome. By giving councils the option to introduce a fixed rate, we can better ensure that the levy is implemented according to the needs of local authorities across Scotland and not only those in the cities.

A couple of additional island-specific points arose out of the Government's recent consultation on cruise ship levies, and I hope that those issues can now be given consideration at the next stage of the bill.

In the Western Isles, many visitors arrive by cruise ship, or stay in camper vans rather than in

hotels or Airbnbs. I reiterate a proposal from colleagues in Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles, as well as from tourism bodies such as Visit Outer Hebrides. To ensure a balanced approach, consideration should be given to implementing a similar levy on cruise ship visitors and camper vans that come to the islands. I appreciate that, as Mr Rennie pointed out, time is limited in this parliamentary session to allow us to consider everything, but a port-of-entry-style levy, if introduced, would, I believe, strengthen the measures. I would encourage further collaborative working to consider that option.

Small and medium-sized enterprises form the backbone of many rural and island communities. In implementing the levy, we must ensure that the administrative burden is minimised and that SMEs are not inadvertently brought above the VAT threshold. One of the beauties of a port-of-entry-style model in island areas is that it allows us to take advantage of the very limited number of means that most people have of getting there, thereby simplifying the task of levying any charge. I am glad that, rather than ignoring stakeholders, the Scottish Government continues to work with them on such questions.

I am pleased to support the general principles of the bill and see it move forward to stage 2. I look forward to discussing how we might strengthen the bill to ensure that it responds to the suggestions made by businesses and island communities. The legislation can help to provide the infrastructure that ensures that our tourism economy has the means to bring about its own success in future, and it will ensure that the communities that host the industry see all its benefits.

15:41

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

I, too, welcome the bill and, indeed, the dialogue that the Government has had with stakeholders and members across the chamber, because there was a real issue with the previous legislation.

I will continue my glass-half-full approach for a moment or two. It is a good thing for Parliament to consider legislation that is short and focused and has an explicit purpose. I am glad that Parliament does not consider that bills should always be lengthy. Sometimes, a focused bill is the right solution.

That said, the Government needs to think carefully about how it arrived at this position, because the issues were flagged previously. Indeed, when the minister proposed introducing the bill, I said to him that I would welcome it, but that I would also have to say, "I told you so."

On the principle of taxation, the policy memorandum talks about efficiency. The problem

with a percentage-based model is that it is inherently more complicated, both for those on whom it is levied and for those who seek to collect it. We have only to look at VAT to see an example of that. As anyone who has ever had to fill out a VAT return will know, doing so is inherently complicated. The minister might know that from direct experience, as do I.

Stephen Kerr: Daniel Johnson is quite right to say things like, “I told you so,” although we need to consider Labour’s record in response to the progress of the bill through Parliament. Does he agree that a bit of post-legislative scrutiny is a good thing? We have not done much of it in this session of Parliament. Would Mr Johnson agree that this could be the fastest example on record of post-legislative scrutiny, because the Government got it so wrong the first time around?

Daniel Johnson: I agree with that, but I will leave it to members to decide whether that is in a good way or a bad way.

Above all, it is worth remembering a couple of fundamental points. First, when the original bill was going through Parliament, a lot of members highlighted the fact that a tourist levy happens in other countries. We have to remember that VAT will be charged on top of the levy. In many of those other jurisdictions, either VAT has been reduced or no VAT is charged on accommodation. We need to remember the context.

Likewise, Murdo Fraser, who is not in the chamber right now, was right to reflect that we are a relatively high-cost destination. Without wishing to get into too much economic theory, I would also ask whether the visitor accommodation sector in this country is a price setter or a price taker.

We kid ourselves that people will come here if we charge whatever we like. There will be a point at the margins where a particular tourist or visitor will choose not to come here and to go somewhere else instead, and we need to bear that in mind.

We should reflect on the fact that the levy reflects a more fundamental dysfunction in that economic growth and success in an area does not feed through to local councils.

I approve of the variation powers—it is important that the Government can be flexible. I think that the point about third-party charging is right, and a flat fee will definitely be easier to levy and collect.

I also want to reflect on a couple of other points. Alasdair Allan is absolutely right to raise the prevalence of cruise ships and camper vans, which are a big issue for many parts of the country. However, above all else, I agree with a great deal of what Willie Rennie said, which needs to be heeded. We cannot have people trying to add lots of bells and whistles to this process. Let us do a

serious job and pass the bit of legislation that we are being asked to.

Finally, I would like to highlight that we need to look very carefully at the per-person, per-night approach, because it might well fall foul of the efficiency and practicality reasons for supporting the bill, and I ask whether that might not add its own complexity to passing the legislation.

15:46

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I am glad to speak in the debate and share some of what the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee heard during its stage 1 considerations.

Tourism is important to Scotland, but it is undeniable that the added footfall brings strain to our infrastructure. As we have heard in the debate, a visitor levy is used in many places across the world to help mitigate that. A small additional fee, multiplied by thousands of visitors, will make a real material difference to the communities that are most impacted, and to the experience of visitors.

It is important that the levy works for the tourism sector and local authorities. It was evident that a level of flexibility was required that was not set out in the initial legislation. I welcome the Scottish Government’s effective response to calls from stakeholders. Stakeholders spoke very positively about that, and the bill is a good example of stakeholders, the Scottish Government and Parliament working collaboratively.

I am grateful to all those who took the time to engage with our committee on the issue, especially given the shorter-than-usual timeframe. I am aware that some have raised concerns about the short timeframe, and I understand that the forthcoming election curtails the time that we have available, but good scrutiny is still essential.

Stephen Kerr: Evelyn Tweed will be aware that, in Stirling, the SNP proposes the introduction of a levy. It is one of the few places that is sticking firmly to the idea. There was a consultation, which had 75 responses, and very few of them were in favour of the proposal from the SNP in Stirling for a visitor levy. Therefore, why is the SNP pressing on, in the constituency that Evelyn Tweed represents, with a levy that the sector says will damage tourism in Stirling?

Evelyn Tweed: I thank the member for the intervention, but I think that I have already covered that point. *[Interruption.]* Yes, I have. It is up to individual local authorities to make their own decisions, including when it comes to infrastructure issues and what happens in local areas. If that is what the local authority wants to do, I agree with it.

I also note that the concerns that are being addressed by the bill were raised during the passage of the initial legislation, and I am pleased to note that the minister acknowledges that lessons can be learned from that.

Over the course of our evidence taking, we heard some concerns that I hope can be addressed at stage 2. The flexibility that the bill brings to vary the fixed amount of the levy, based on many factors across accommodation types and times of year, was welcomed. However, concerns were raised about the potential impact of the per-person, per-night model. Although COSLA pointed out that that option is used widely outside Scotland and the City of Edinburgh Council highlighted the benefits that it would bring for data collection, others had reservations. Stakeholders have suggested that that would add up for families who are travelling with children and create additional barriers for those on low incomes when travelling in Scotland. The measures would also create potential complications for those working in the sector, in that it might place pressure on staff to verify visitor numbers. Many accommodation providers operate a contactless check-in system, and accommodation in holiday parks is often booked by pitch, rather than by person.

I completely agree with Willie Rennie's comments about where we are with the bill. Time is of the essence; I think that we need to get on with it. The cross-party group on tourism, which I convene, heard that there is a need for an ambitious, robust, long-term strategy. I welcome the work that has been done to remedy the concerns so far and I look forward to a constructive stage 2 process.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to closing speeches.

15:51

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I start by thanking the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee for its excellent work on the legislation. It feels like yesterday when the 2024 act was passed, which was vital for my city of Edinburgh. Our visitor levy scheme will start this year and is a practical and vital tool that will allow our capital to manage the pressures and opportunities that come with being one of the most popular and visited cities in Europe. Edinburgh welcomes millions of visitors every year, and the number of visitors is set only to increase. Visitors are drawn by our festivals, our heritage, our culture and our global reputation, which we are proud of. However, that success comes with real costs.

The City of Edinburgh Council estimates that the visitor levy could raise around £90 million over three years when it is implemented. For us, that

will be transformative. That money could be used to maintain and improve the infrastructure that visitors rely on, including our streets, public transport and parks, and our cultural venues. It could protect our historic environment and help to ensure that the benefits of tourism are felt across the city, not just in the city centre. For example, Leith theatre is lined up to receive £4 million to help it to reopen and £3 million is set to go to the old Royal high school. Our culture sector cannot wait to see money being invested in its projects, but we need to ensure that we get it right.

I say to members who have not been in the Parliament since 1999 that the area has been transformed by tourism and we have a housing emergency. The modest amount of cash that will go to support affordable homes will enable workers who support the tourism sector to live and stay in our city. As many members have said, it is about recognising that tourism, as with any major industry, requires reinvestment. Other European cities have long used visitor levies to balance the needs of residents and visitors alike.

A key issue that has been highlighted by committee members is that, when the 2024 act was passed, there was a need for flexibility in different areas of Scotland that faced different challenges and opportunities in managing tourism, but that was not reflected in the legislation. Alasdair Allan's point about cruise ships was well made, although, of course, there must be a balance, as we do not want to have millions of amendments between now and the end of parliamentary session.

A key point that has been made repeatedly is that it is critical that local authorities have flexibility. Although a percentage tax makes sense for a city such as Edinburgh, other councils want to take a different approach. It would be good to get clarification in the minister's closing speech as to whether the Scottish Government will publish its draft amendments as soon as possible for stage 2, and then for stage 3, which I think he is willing to do. That would enable us to properly scrutinise the amendments and ensure that stakeholders are listened to, so that we can do the parliamentary work that we are here to do.

The minister is willing to consider the concerns that have been raised by the Law Society of Scotland about fairness. For example, people may have to stay in a tourist area that has a levy in place because of hospital appointments or court proceedings. It is absolutely critical that we do not create unintended burdens for people who are already going through stressful situations.

The bill gives local authorities powers to act, and it enables them to do so in a way that suits local businesses. I support the committee's call for

implementation to be monitored. With different approaches taken in different parts of the country, it is important that lessons are learned. I suggest that the Government could think about guidance. One issue that frequently comes up in representations from those who have been consulted is the challenge for small businesses in working their way through the process of a visitor levy. It is critical that there is guidance and monitoring, and that lesson are learned from how the visitor levy is implemented across the country.

Stakeholders have made the point that the use and booking of accommodation has all got much more complicated in the past few years, and that needs to be reflected so that the bill works as intended.

One point that has been made quite a lot of times is about the importance of ensuring that the amendments to the 2024 act will work. We need to strengthen the legislation and we need to keep up with the growth that parts of our country are now experiencing.

I note Ariane Burgess's comments about the Scottish Government's response of

"We are considering these matters".

The sooner we get clarity, the better—not just for members, but for key stakeholders.

I urge colleagues to support the bill. We need to engage constructively with the concerns that have been raised so that we deliver future-focused, successful legislation. The legislation has to work. I suspect that those who are members in the next session will be discussing the matter again, in relation to cruise ships, how the legislation is working or the details—and details in legislation are important. Guidance, monitoring, ensuring that we have made the bill the best that it can be, given the circumstances that we are going through—that is our job. Let us work constructively to do it.

15:57

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): We had a refreshing moment of honesty from the minister in his opening remarks, when he volunteered that the Government had introduced legislation for a sector that it did not fully understand. The fact that we are back here with an amendment bill suggests that what he said is very honest and true.

Ivan McKee: Will the member give way on that point?

Stephen Kerr: He may now wish to say something about that.

Ivan McKee: If the member listens back to what I said, he will find that I said that the sector had said that it did not fully understand the whole range

of activities that happened across the sector. That is what I said.

Stephen Kerr: He is blaming the sector for the fact that the Government did not really understand the sector.

Before any proposed legislation is brought before the Parliament, there ought to be proper understanding of what the measure, the remit and the effect are. That has clearly not been understood in this case.

When the original Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill was brought before the Parliament in 2023, we were unenthused by the idea of a new tax. We are Conservatives, after all: we are not that much in favour of raising taxes, of new taxes or of more regulation. We warned the Government that it was getting key aspects of its legislation completely wrong. We were told that we were being negative. As has happened today, members used the justification that the levy would be a really good source of revenue, as if there was some source of free money available from the private sector that will always be there to take more and more tax from.

We warned then that the percentage-only approach was wrong, but we were told that it was right. The sector was not listened to by anyone in the Parliament other than the Scottish Conservatives. We are back here again, amending primary legislation. Earlier, I facetiously intervened on Daniel Johnson—I do not have any particular animus towards him personally—to point out that here we have legislative scrutiny as it is not intended to be conducted. It is so unnecessary.

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: Yes, I will happily give way.

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful to Mr Kerr for giving way, and I am not being facetious in any way. If we boil it down, one of the critical errors is that the Government did not look at how the mechanisms of charging work in a practical sense or at how collection might work. That is a mistake that the Government has made previously—for example, that was one of the issues with the deposit return scheme. Do you agree with one of my fundamental points, which is that the Government needs to look at the practicalities of the charging mechanisms before it embarks on such a levy?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Stephen Kerr: Absolutely, I agree, but let us be fair—it is a Thursday afternoon. *[Interruption.]* Well, look at the place—it is empty. *[Interruption.]* In all honesty, I do not think that SNP members

can afford to make such a point in our direction. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

Stephen Kerr: I want to be generous to the minister by saying that at least he has had the courage to listen and act now. That is maybe because Ivan McKee is, at heart, a pragmatist. He understands a little about what makes a business work and he has seen through the bill that we previously passed, and noticed its flaws.

We heard the convener of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee speak earlier. The committee's stage 1 report said that the core issue in the bill, which is

"the basis on which the levy can be charged",

was

"not unforeseen."

That is so diplomatic. In other words, it was obvious what the issues were, but they were all raised during the passage of the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill, and ministers were indeed warned.

Murdo Fraser, who is back again, was a salient voice in warning ministers, and he was not alone, because Miles Briggs, Liz Smith and Jamie Halcro Johnston also took part in that. We all tried to make the bill workable. We argued for flexibility and simplicity. We argued that locking Scotland in a rigid percentage-only model would cause real-world problems for businesses on the ground. Those were not ideological objections; they were practical ones, and the evidence has borne that out.

Highland Council undertook a statutory consultation and received more than 4,000 responses. Its assistant chief executive told the committee that the top feedback concerned

"the perceived advantages of a per-night fee rather than a percentage-based levy. We had gone with a 5 per cent levy as part of our consultation."—*[Official Report, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, 27 January 2026; c 5.]*

That was clearly seen as the salient and outstanding problem. This is not abstract theory; it is the voice of the sector. It is saying that structure matters, detail matters and impact matters.

Tim Eagle said that, when asked, the businesses in the region that he represents said that they wanted certainty, fairness and common sense. We have tried to be a voice for exactly that in this Parliament—in relation to this and other measures.

As Daniel Johnson said, before we impose a new tax on a globally competitive sector, we must assess the impact properly, model it rigorously, examine price sensitivity, consider displacement

and look seriously at what happens if visitors simply choose somewhere else. I sit on the Economy and Fair Work Committee, which Daniel Johnson convenes, and we have heard from representatives of the tourism sector that that is a live issue in Scotland. Tourism is not a spreadsheet exercise. It is about jobs, livelihoods, family businesses and fragile rural and island economies, where margins are tight and seasonality is unforgiving.

A levy might look neat in a forecast or as an idea, and it might produce an attractive revenue headline on a spreadsheet but, if it shortens the length of stay, shifts bookings to competing destinations or adds friction in a competitive market, the wider economic cost could outweigh the gain. That is why modelling matters. It is reckless to introduce a new tax without properly understanding behavioural impact. Listening to the SNP members who spoke this afternoon, we would have thought that the whole thing was a surprise to them, particularly given—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, could you please bring your remarks to a close? You are well over your time.

Stephen Kerr: Can I say a couple of words to close?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am asking you to bring your remarks to a close, so please do that now.

Stephen Kerr: I conclude by saying that we will not necessarily follow the advice of Willie Rennie, because we will seek to lodge a controlled, restrained number of amendments to the bill in order to improve it and to make it more pragmatic, which is something that I hope that all members of the Parliament would agree with. The Scottish Conservatives are, unapologetically, the party of business, and we will speak up for the businesses and jobs in our country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Ivan McKee, to close on behalf of the Scottish Government.

16:05

Ivan McKee: Visitors should be welcome across Scotland. We want them to share our unique culture, landscapes and warm hospitality. We also want the attractiveness of our local areas to be maintained well and continually enhanced in a way that supports the visitor economy. By directing the funding through the levy, we intend to enable local authorities to do that. That is why we introduced the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill in 2023. The 2024 act now provides a means for authorities to levy a charge on the sale of overnight accommodation and to generate additional resources to support

and sustain facilities that are used mainly by visitors. Sarah Boyack gave some fine examples of how those resources can be deployed in Edinburgh.

The bill seeks to deliver changes to the 2024 act to ensure that visitor levy schemes can be tailored by local authorities to work in the interests of visitors, residents and the tourism and hospitality sectors. If the bill is passed, the measures will have tangible benefits for years to come. Those changes will support clarity and flexibility in the design and implementation of schemes that meet the needs of local areas.

We have heard emergent plans from local authorities, which have told us that they intend to use the money that is raised from a visitor levy to invest in growing the visitor economy—for example, by boosting events with visitor management and providing valued jobs in the tourism sector for local people; by supporting culture and heritage opportunities; and through tourism infrastructure, such as by developing connectivity to make it easier to travel between islands and destinations.

As I stated in my opening remarks, the bill will help to implement visitor levy schemes that are responsive to local economies and communities, for the benefit of everyone. By providing local authorities with increased flexibility to shape their schemes around local circumstances, the bill will strengthen their ability to support and sustain tourism in their areas. Clear, adaptable and proportionate frameworks can deliver shared benefits for businesses, communities and visitors alike.

Stephen Kerr: Can the minister assure us that he will take the opportunity to go slightly beyond a narrow technical clean-up exercise? Will he be brave and look at any pragmatic suggestions that we might make that would improve the measure?

Ivan McKee: I am always happy to look at pragmatic measures, but we must bear in mind that the consensus across the chamber, which I will come on to talk about, is that we need a focused bill that delivers on the objectives, to ensure that everything is done before the end of the parliamentary session.

I will touch on a few of the comments that members made. The convener of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, Ariane Burgess, raised a number of points. I have already addressed the point about multiple schemes applying to the same transaction. We are listening closely to concerns that have been raised about the per-person-per-night fee, and we will respond shortly.

On implementation periods, to clarify the language, we propose to make changes in that regard, so that moving between schemes or making changes can be done in a way that has the consensus of everybody who is engaged in the process. As I said, that was one of the major topics of discussion in my engagement with industry and local authorities last week.

With regard to regulation-making powers, we are giving the assurance that those are to enable us to deal with specific issues that might arise, and not to make wholesale changes to the bill or its provisions.

A number of members made the point about exemptions. Local authorities already have the power to put in place exemptions—we have already provided local authorities with the mechanism to do exactly that.

On council costs, there is already a provision in section 19 of the 2024 act to allow councils to recover their costs from revenues that are raised by the levy, which gives some comfort in that regard.

I thank the cautious Willie Rennie for his clear and principled position in opposition to bells and whistles—in this instance, at least—although that was challenged by Tim Eagle and others, who are taking a more pro-bell-and-whistle position. It will be interesting to see how that plays out through stages 2 and 3. Indeed, Tim Eagle was also involved in controversy when he chose to have a disagreement with Davy Russell on the important subject of seagulls in an earlier debate, so he is making a bit of a habit of that today.

Willie Rennie made the important point that, although the bill gives powers to local authorities, it does not compel them to do anything. That point was well made.

Some members took the opportunity to support and promote their local tourist attractions. Fulton MacGregor did a wonderful job of promoting many of North Lanarkshire's often overlooked but excellent tourist attractions, and Alasdair Allan highlighted some of the fabulous tourist attractions in Na h-Eileanan an Iar.

Tim Eagle made sensible points about the administrative burden on local businesses. Of course, we recognise that, and it is one of the drivers for the changes that we are introducing through the bill. I always welcome offers of collaboration from across the chamber, wherever they come from, so members should recognise that.

I am grateful to members for their contributions to today's debate, and—

Ariane Burgess: Will the member take an intervention?

Ivan McKee: That is just on cue—I was about to reiterate my thanks to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee.

Ariane Burgess: Sarah Boyack raised a point about the cruise ship levy. It would be good if you could address that. My understanding from the evidence that we took is that such a levy would need a different legal mechanism, as the bill is about overnight accommodation in a place, and that the Government is taking forward measures on that. I would appreciate hearing from you—I mean, from the minister.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Ivan McKee: That is an important point. I know that members would like a cruise ship levy and a point of entry levy to be considered for some parts of the country. We have had a consultation on a cruise ship levy, which will be for the next Government to consider post-election, but it will not be part of the bill. I hope that there is recognition that trying to attach it to the bill would cause real challenges for getting this important legislation through in time.

I thank the officials, who have done a power of work over a short period to get the bill to where it is now, and who are very much across all the issues that need to be addressed in stages 2 and 3.

I will continue to work closely throughout the bill process with stakeholders to ensure that the legislation balances the needs of industry and local government and that it supports the effective operation of the local visitor levy schemes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

Scottish Income Tax Rate Resolution 2026-27

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20844, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Scottish income tax rate resolution 2026-27.

16:13

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): As I begin today's debate, I will first draw the Parliament's attention to the procedural connection between the debate and rule 9.16.7 of standing orders, which states that a Scottish rate resolution must be agreed before stage 3 of the budget bill can proceed.

This rate resolution gives the Parliament an opportunity to provide stability in our tax system while delivering vital investment in our public services and giving our young people more opportunities to learn and flourish. Our approach to date has shown that there is not a trade-off between a progressive tax policy and the economy. Since 2007, Scottish gross domestic product per person has grown by 8.7 per cent, compared with 6.7 per cent in the United Kingdom, and, according to the latest forecasts, it is set to continue to grow faster, as are earnings. Unemployment also remains lower in Scotland; indeed, it is forecast to be around 4.2 per cent lower than in the UK over the next five years.

Ernst & Young's annual attractiveness survey continues to show greater growth in foreign direct investment projects in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. Since the introduction of Scottish income tax in 2017-18, more taxpayers have come to Scotland than have left, with net inflows averaging almost 4,200 per year.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): In what might be the only moment of consensus, we agree on the case for a progressive tax system, but how is it progressive to have a higher percentage of workers paying higher tax rates year after year?

Shona Robison: About three quarters—74 per cent—of taxpayers are expected to be unaffected by the higher-rate threshold being maintained at the current level. The question that Craig Hoy has to answer is how it is possible for his party to propose £1 billion of unfunded tax cuts, the money for which would come out of public services, while demanding increases in public spending. That is just not a credible position.

As I explained to Craig Hoy at the Finance and Public Administration Committee, it would take at

least a year to make the changes to social security policy that he is proposing—God forbid that any Parliament would ever agree to them—so, in the world that he wants to create, front-line services would need to be cut before 1 April. That would include cuts to the £250 million that is going to local government, the additional funding for colleges and the additional funding for the national health service. All of that would have to go, because there would be £1 billion less in tax revenue. Those are the facts.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Made-up facts.

Shona Robison: Tory members might not like facts being pointed out to them, but they are facts nonetheless.

The positive economic indicators that I have set out demonstrate the continued resilience of the Scottish economy.

In last year's budget, our tax strategy made specific commitments for the remainder of this parliamentary session. Those commitments were to keep the same number of income tax bands; not make any increases to rates; ensure that the starter and basic rate thresholds rose by at least inflation; and continue the position whereby a majority of taxpayers could expect to pay less than they would in the rest of the UK. We have stuck to those commitments for 2026-27, and the rate resolution delivers that.

We propose increasing the basic and intermediate rate thresholds by 7.4 per cent in 2026-27, which is an investment of more than £50 million in lowering households' tax bills. When considered alongside the policy last year, it means that the basic and intermediate rate thresholds will have risen by about twice the rate of inflation over the past two years.

We are continuing with our balanced approach and propose maintaining the higher, advanced and top rate thresholds at their current levels. It means that we are asking those with broader shoulders to pay a little more so that the public services that people rightly expect can continue to be delivered.

Many families will feel the benefit of the Government's policies cumulatively, rather than just in relation to income tax alone. Such policies include free prescriptions, the abolition of peak rail fares, free higher education and the Scottish child payment, which the Tories no longer seem to support.

When combined, those savings often outweigh the small annual tax differences between those in Scotland and those in the rest of the UK. For example, Scottish households in the lower half of the income distribution are, on average, about

£480 better off per year than they would be under UK tax and social security policies. We have fulfilled our tax strategy objective to provide stability for the remainder of this parliamentary session, and we have delivered our commitment to protect lower-income households.

We hear time and again, from other parties in the chamber, calls for additional spending by the Government. However, the reality is that we cannot will these things into existence. It requires dialogue, difficult choices and the conviction to make that happen, and that is what this Government is doing. It also requires resources. We cannot will the means into being; we have to provide them, and the rate resolution does so.

In the run-up to the budget, we were grateful to those colleagues across the chamber who entered into meaningful engagement with the Government. Our balanced, progressive approach to income tax policy goes some way to allowing us to protect the social contract that provides a range of services not available elsewhere in the UK. The income tax proposals that I have set out today underpin the entire budget settlement that we have been debating in the Parliament and provide the investment that ensures that our public services can be properly funded.

Let me set out the positive changes that will go ahead only if the Parliament votes for the rate resolution and the overall budget. For a start, income tax bills will be lowered for most taxpayers in our society, putting more money in people's pockets to help with the current cost of living pressures. From April 2027, the Scottish child payment will be boosted to £40 a week for families with a baby aged under one, which will provide additional support for those who need it most. There will be a record £17.6 billion for NHS front-line services, supporting the vital work of general practitioners and primary care services, and more than £5 billion will be put towards measures that will reduce Scotland's carbon emissions.

The Government is clear on what its priorities are and what they mean to households across Scotland. That is why I ask members to vote to ratify the proposed changes to Scottish income tax in 2026-27.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of section 11A of the Income Tax Act 2007 (which provides for Income Tax to be charged at Scottish rates on certain non-savings and non-dividend income of a Scottish taxpayer to be charged above the personal allowance), the Scottish rates and limits for the tax year 2026-27 are as follows—

(a) a starter rate of 19%, charged on income up to a limit of £3,967,

(b) the Scottish basic rate is 20%, charged on income above £3,967 and up to a limit of £16,956,

(c) an intermediate rate of 21%, charged on income above £16,956 and up to a limit of £31,092,

(d) a higher rate of 42%, charged on income above £31,092 and up to a limit of £62,430,

(e) an advanced rate of 45%, charged on income above £62,430 and up to a limit of £125,140, and

(f) a top rate of 48%, charged on income above £125,140.

16:21

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary talks of stability. After 19 years of Scottish National Party Government, there is one thing that Scotland's middle earners can be certain of: that they will be squeezed ever more to fill the gaps left by the SNP's runaway spending and misplaced priorities. As the benefits bill blooms, the civil service grows and Government waste accumulates, it is average-earning Scots—nurses, teachers and police officers—who are repeatedly handed the bill. Today is no different; no amount of spin about tax cuts can obscure that fact. The SNP Government's tax strategy does absolutely nothing to grow the Scottish economy. In fact, the Government's own tax advisory group was sidelined while the strategy was being created.

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I will do so in a moment.

The strategy was cynically designed to engineer one headline, but members should consider what it has actually cost to produce that headline. The Government has committed £52 million to deliver a maximum saving for taxpayers of £32 per year. Independent analysts have called it

"the smallest income tax cut in history."

Let us be clear that it is a joke from the SNP: a joke offering from a joke cabinet secretary representing a joke Government. However, that con trick conceals a real stealth tax raid on middle earners. By freezing the higher, advanced and top rate thresholds until 2028-29, the SNP is dragging hundreds of thousands more workers into tax bands that they were never meant to face—rates that were meant for the few but which are now being paid by the many.

In 2018, a band 5 teacher was earning £9,000 below the higher rate tax threshold; today, that same teacher is earning £9,000 above it. Apparently, teachers and nurses are the people with the broadest shoulders in John Swinney's Scotland.

Shona Robison: Craig Hoy is one of the biggest jokers in this Parliament—he is not able to do the sums; £1 billion of tax cuts and extra spending

commitments do not add up. Does he not recognise the fact that teachers and nurses in Scotland are earning more after tax than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK? Those are the facts, because of the funding put in place by this Government to support a deal for our public sector workers. Does he accept that or is he just in denial, with alternative facts?

Craig Hoy: It is interesting that the cabinet secretary admits that the benefits of the Barnett formula give her more money to give teachers high salaries, which the Government then claws back in higher tax. The minister wants to talk about the facts. The simple fact is that those teachers were earning £9,000 below the higher rate threshold in 2018 and now they are £9,000 above it with the Government's stealth taxes.

Taxpayers in Scotland are now paying an estimated £1.8 billion more than taxpayers elsewhere in the UK. Combined with Labour's national insurance increases, the SNP and Labour tax rises are set to cost the average full-time Scottish worker nearly £1,800 a year. The Institute for Fiscal Studies calculates that, by 2028-29, someone in Scotland who earns £50,000 will pay £1,500 more than their equivalent in England—that is not a small amount of money—and that, by the end of this decade, one in three Scottish workers will be paying higher rates of tax.

The economic consequences of that are now undeniable, which is why the budget is not only undesirable but unaffordable, as the IFS has repeatedly warned in increasingly alarmist language. Over the past decade, Scotland's growth has lagged behind that of the rest of the UK by a cumulative £11 billion. The Scottish Fiscal Commission has confirmed that income tax revenues are up to £1 billion lower than they would have been had Scotland matched UK growth rates. CBI Scotland has called the tax divergence between Scotland and the rest of the UK "a handbrake on growth", while Sir Tom Hunter has said:

"I have never heard so much disquiet among business leaders paying yet more and more tax for poorer and poorer outcomes".

Why are taxes in Scotland so high? Under the SNP, the state has grown out of control. Civil service numbers have gone up by 74 per cent since 2007. Last June, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government pledged to cut the public sector workforce by 0.5 per cent, but, by September, we discovered that it had grown by 0.4 per cent. The Government has wasted £6.7 billion of taxpayers' money in this session of Parliament—that is more than £1,200 for every person in Scotland.

That is the cost of the SNP under John Swinney. Social security spending is heading for £10 billion by the end of the decade. Taxes are high because the SNP's spending is reckless, but the Scottish Conservatives offer a real—and costed—alternative. We would cut income tax to 19 per cent for all taxable income up to the higher rate threshold, which would mean a saving of £444 a year for every taxpayer who earns more than £15,000, and we would uprate the higher rate threshold in line with inflation.

Ivan McKee: Craig Hoy said that the Conservatives' alternative was costed, but if he listens back to last Friday's edition of "Any Questions?", which I was on with his colleague Meghan Gallacher, he will discover that she made it clear that the Conservatives had not seen the numbers and that they were just making it up as they went along.

Craig Hoy: The programme may be called "Any Questions?", but I will give him an answer: our proposal is fully costed. We will match our £1 billion in tax cuts by cutting the SNP's ballooning benefits bill and taking an axe to the waste that the minister is incapable of removing from the civil service. We could fund our tax cuts—

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Craig Hoy says that the Tories would close the spending gap by cutting the benefits bill. The last estimates that I saw in studies in *The BMJ* and *The Lancet* showed that there were between 100,000 and 300,000 excess deaths across the UK as a result of UK Tory Government austerity. What does he think the impact would be of his proposed cuts to Scotland's social security system?

Craig Hoy: The IFS has said that the Scottish Government is living in a parallel universe, and I think that Ross Greer is quoting data from a parallel planet. In relation to the Scottish child payment, on the introduction of which there was consensus, one in 10 recipients of that payment have changed the way that they interact with the labour market. Therefore, it is a far more complex issue than Mr Greer makes it out to be.

We would do what Mr McKee seems incapable of doing by cutting the civil service back to 2016 levels. We would reduce quangos by a quarter, and we would fix Scotland's broken benefits system.

Anyone who has watched the Scottish Government's actions could be forgiven for thinking that the Parliament only has tax-raising powers, but that is not the case—it has tax-varying powers. However, under the SNP, the levers are only ever pulled one way—towards ever higher tax. It has never tried to cut tax in any meaningful way; a tax cut of £32 a year is not a meaningful tax

cut. It has never tried to apply the logic of the Laffer curve.

Scots are sick and tired of paying more for the SNP's failed projects and misplaced priorities, but there is a different way—a commonsense, Conservative way. We would lower tax, increase growth, tackle the benefits bill and, in turn, generate the tax receipts that are needed to build a fairer and better Scotland—a Scotland where hard work is rewarded, where excellence returns to our public services and where efficiency is at the heart of Government. However, we will never get that from this failed SNP Government and this failed First Minister. That is why we will vote against the income tax resolution tonight.

16:29

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Rule 9.16.7 of the standing orders dictates that the Parliament must agree to a Scottish rate resolution before stage 3 proceedings for the budget bill can begin. As such, Scottish Labour will support the rate resolution. The late UK budget has made the timetable for this year's Scottish budget challenging and put pressure on our parliamentary procedures. We will not stand in the way of the necessary mechanisms that will ensure that our police officers, nurses and local services continue to be funded at the start of the new financial year in only a few short weeks.

However, over the next few months, we all know what will happen. We know that the SNP's deeply underwhelming budget will not last the year. Independent experts from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Fraser of Allander Institute are unanimous in their view that yet another emergency budget from whoever forms a Government in May is now a racing certainty.

The SNP continues to budget on a wing and a prayer, hoping that something comes along to bail it out once again. These are the hallmarks of 19 years of John Swinney budgets: creative accounting, financial sleight of hand and swingeing cuts to local government.

The SNP has received an additional £10.3 billion for Scotland's budget from the UK Labour Government, and Scots will rightly be asking the SNP where the money has gone. The truth is that the SNP has decimated Scotland's public finances and taken treasured public services such as our NHS to the brink. Our NHS is in crisis, with more people in Dundee waiting more than two years for treatment than in the whole of England. We have ferries that do not sail, roads that do not get dualled and schools that do not get built. It is a record of SNP failure and incompetence. We have a justice system past breaking point, with rising crime and overcrowded jails. We have a rotten

culture of secrecy, in which the SNP circles the wagons to protect its own instead of serving the people whom it is supposed to represent. This SNP budget changes none of that.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Michael Marra raises waiting times in Scotland. For the past seven months, NHS waiting times in Scotland have fallen. Does he have any comment to make on the report that the NHS in England is paying trusts to incentivise them to remove patients from their waiting lists?

Michael Marra: What I can comment on is the conversations that I have had just this week with people in Dundee who are having to take money out of savings and put money on credit cards in order to have hips replaced. The member who claims credit for that is claiming that waiting lists are going down. We also know that we have direct flights from Glasgow to Lithuania, where people are travelling to get basic procedures undertaken. The long waits are ruining people's lives in Scotland. Frankly, it is a record of failure, and Mr Gray might want to face up to that.

As I said, this SNP budget changes none of that. It seeks to fix a few of the mistakes that the SNP has made over the past 20 years, but it will not fix the mess that the SNP has made of our finances and public services. It will not clear out the rot of a complacent Government that has lost touch with the people whom it is meant to serve. The SNP's record is one of failure, incompetence and missed opportunities for the people of Scotland. The SNP will never take the bold and decisive action that is needed to fix what it has broken in our country, and the real opportunity for change will be on 7 May.

16:32

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Scotland has been on a journey. Over the past decade, we have come quite far on that journey when it comes to income tax and progressive taxation more widely. The 2016 election was the first election to this Parliament in which tax was a major topic of debate. Some wanted tax cuts and others wanted small tax increases, but, by and large, most of the proposals were all or nothing: either everyone's income tax would go up, everyone's income tax would go down or the rates would stay the same.

However, the Greens made the case for a different system. We wanted a system in which those on higher incomes contributed more and those on lower incomes paid less. The current system is a result of that argument; it is a result of the early years of discussions between us and SNP colleagues in which we agreed to something quite different from the system that we had inherited from the UK Government.

We now have the most progressive income tax system in the UK. As Craig Hoy said, the result of that is £1.8 billion more to spend each year on public services such as our NHS than would otherwise be the case. Without that money, we would not have been able to deliver policies such as the Scottish child payment or free bus travel for young people. Without that money, we would not have been able to make Scotland the only part of the UK in which child poverty is falling.

Craig Hoy: I thank Mr Greer for quoting my words back at me, but does he accept that, because of the woeful underperformance of the Scottish economy under the SNP, that £1.8 billion drops to less than £1 billion?

Ross Greer: I accept that the fiscal framework results in Scotland having to constantly compare its tax performance and income performance with those of London and south-east England. If the fiscal framework recognised that the economy of London and south-east England is so utterly different from that of everywhere else in the UK, Scotland would be in a very different position. There is a significant need for reform of the fiscal framework.

This year, the Scottish Greens did not propose any further changes to income tax as part of our budget negotiations because we believe that Scotland already has a progressive income tax system. We proposed changes elsewhere and I am glad that we were able to come to agreement with the Government on the introduction of a private jet tax that will properly tax 12,000 incredibly polluting flights into Scotland every year, on a new mansion tax, new bands for council tax and the removal of shooting estates from the small business bonus scheme, where they were masquerading as small businesses to receive tax benefits that they simply do not need.

There will always be a little bit more that we could do on income tax and we must always ensure that we maintain progressiveness in the system, but the focus now, and in the next session of Parliament, should be shifting the burden of taxation from work to wealth. The single biggest failure in the 27 years of this Parliament has been the failure to reform council tax. We have come so far on income tax and have been able to do an incredible amount for our constituents with the money that we have raised, but Scotland's other major tax—and one that is paid by the vast majority of households—has been left untouched and is still the system that we inherited in 1991, when there was a quick and dirty compromise to replace the hated poll tax.

There is much more to do in the next session of Parliament and that must be underpinned by a far greater degree of honesty in our debates on tax

and spending. It is not credible for parties to come to the Parliament demanding that the Government spends hundreds of millions of pounds more while also demanding that it cuts income tax or other forms of devolved taxation.

My final point is about the need for us actually to spend less time debating Parliament's tax powers because we have given far more control over tax to local government. Local government knows far better than a national Parliament what the economic, social and environmental needs of communities are. Clearly, we cannot devolve income tax, but there is a desperate need to reform local taxation in this country and to give our colleagues in local government the powers that they need. In the debate before this one, we heard about issues such as the cruise ship levy that would massively benefit communities such as Inverclyde, which I represent, or Orkney. I hope that, in the next session of Parliament, we can defend our progressive record on income tax but move to the far more urgently needed work that is required to fairly tax wealth in this country.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Before I call Willie Rennie, I am aware of several conversations going on in the chamber. Let us be courteous to one another.

16:37

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I had a rather disturbing dream last night and it involved Craig Hoy. He listed every single Liberal Democrat achievement during the budget process, starting off with the community fund and going on to colleges, hospices, young entrepreneurs and money for the islands. He went on about business rates and colleges—I may have said colleges already—and covered all those things. Then I woke up. Now, I have just been subjected to a lecture from Craig Hoy, who supported Liz Truss's budget just a few years ago.

There is an important lesson. I remember when John Swinney was standing in as finance secretary and told us that the tax increase to be introduced that year would be an emergency one. I remember asking him at the time whether the tax would go back down again when we were through the emergency. The answer was a bit vague and noncommittal and the result was that that tax rise has been embedded since then and is not an emergency tax any more.

I have supported tax rises in the past. Back at the time of the 2016 election, we supported using, for the first time, the tax powers that Parliament had at the time. However, we opposed the subsequent tax rises proposed by this Government because we think that we have to be incredibly careful with trust regarding tax.

Craig Hoy: Will Mr Rennie accept an intervention?

Willie Rennie: Not just now.

During the Humza Yousaf period, and also at the tail end of the Nicola Sturgeon Government, we saw the Government losing control so that it looked as if taxes were going up at every single opportunity. Every time the Government spoke, new taxes were on the horizon, and Humza Yousaf spoke about even more tax rises being over the horizon if he had his way.

That is where I have a difference of opinion with the Government, because I think that we need to be incredibly careful. Of course there is behavioural change as a result of tax policy, but what matters even more is the trust that people have in Governments and what is going to happen next, and the rhetoric. If people think that the Government has lost control on taxation, they will make choices that will not benefit our economy when they have life choices to make about where to live, where to work, whether to work, whether to retire or whether to go part-time—in other words, behavioural changes.

I am not arguing for a reckless tax cut, as the Tories would, because we have to be very controlled and predictable and we have to give people confidence. However, I urge the Government to be incredibly careful when it makes any change whatsoever, because we do not want to go back to the days when people completely lost trust in what the Government was doing.

There is also a lesson to be learned from the Auditor General. Although the Government is now blaming the fiscal framework, which was negotiated and hailed by John Swinney, the result of the tax increase, which was supposed to be getting on for £1.8 billion, is only £600-odd million net, because of the fiscal framework and our lower earnings and lower employment growth in Scotland. The impact of the tax rise is therefore not as substantial as the Government hoped, so we have to be equally careful when we propose any tax changes.

As Michael Marra said, the tax resolution has to pass in order for us to move on to stage 3. We will support it today, but I urge the Government to look at the tax differentials between Scotland and the rest of the UK, to consider the behavioural change that has already happened as a result of the changes and to be incredibly careful.

The Presiding Officer: I call the minister to wind up.

16:42

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I thank members for their contributions to the debate. I will speak to some of those shortly.

Parliament is being asked to vote on a key policy that underpins the budget and will raise the revenue that is needed to fund public services and provide financial support to families across Scotland. Last year, we made commitments to provide stability and certainty on income tax for taxpayers and the business community in order to support our growing economy in Scotland, and the budget proposal delivers on that commitment.

In all our income tax decisions, we carefully balance the need to raise revenue with the impact on individuals, households and the wider economy. The Scottish Fiscal Commission estimates that income tax will bring in £21.5 billion for the Scottish budget in 2026-27. Scottish Government analysis indicates that the changes will mean that more than 55 per cent of Scots—everyone earning less than around £33,500—are set to pay less income tax in 2026-27 than they would pay elsewhere in the UK.

We continue to use every lever at our disposal to grow the economy, which creates opportunity for people across Scotland and increases our tax revenues. It is for other parties that propose uncosted tax cuts to explain how they would be afforded without running down the vital public services that many of the lowest paid in our society rely on.

We have always been clear on the need for cross-party engagement on tax and spending. The productive discussions that we have with colleagues and the agreements that we gain from them ahead of the budget reflect the fact that credible alternatives are always welcomed by this Government. The proposed budget will help and support families with the cost of living and provide a tax cut for some of the lowest-paid individuals while continuing to invest in meaningful public services that are used by families across Scotland.

I turn to members' contributions. We again heard Craig Hoy's and his party's position that they want to see another £1 billion or £1.5 billion—I cannot remember—on top of the £1.5 billion that we are already delivering in efficiencies. However, they have no idea where that would come from; they are just throwing numbers out there in the hope—

Craig Hoy: That is not true.

Ivan McKee: Well, I look forward to seeing their detailed proposals on where those savings would come from.

Craig Hoy: What about your proposals?

Ivan McKee: Our proposals have already been published, and they are very clear. Whatever the Conservatives propose would be in addition to that. Of course, the reality is that that would mean significant cuts to public services across the country. Craig Hoy made the comments that the Conservatives always make about Scotland's economy, so I want to put him right on some of the facts.

Last year and the year before—Craig Hoy's party was in power at Westminster for part of that period—Scotland's economy grew faster than the economy in the rest of the UK. The unemployment rate is consistently lower in Scotland and, according to the latest figures, the gap is widening. Unemployment is at 3.8 per cent in Scotland versus 5.2 per cent in the rest of the UK. Scotland has consistently had the best-performing foreign direct investment for 10 years, and we are doing better than anywhere else in the UK, outside London, on that.

As the cabinet secretary mentioned, we watch the impact of those changes closely, which answers Willie Rennie's question. After the tax changes, we have been seeing the inward migration of taxpayers to Scotland, which has been continuing for quite a number of years.

The trend is clear. People recognise that if they earn more they pay more tax in Scotland, but the range of benefits that they get for that more than outweighs the tax differential. They want to take part in the economic opportunities that are available in Scotland's growing economy, compared with those in the rest of the UK, and they are very welcome to come and do so.

Willie Rennie said that we never cut taxes but, in the previous budget, Scotland was the only place to have a 19 per cent tax rate. We increased the thresholds by significantly more than inflation for the lower tax bands. That is in contrast to the UK Government, which froze the bands across the piece.

We are serious about raising more revenue, because we understand the impact that it has. We are focused on continuing to grow Scotland's economy at a faster rate than the rest of the UK.

Members should be clear about what not voting for the rates resolution would mean in practice. It would restrict the ability of revenues that are collected from income tax to help businesses and the people we all serve across the country because it would stall Parliament in moving forward with the budget. Considering the importance of the revenue that is collected, we hope that all members will vote positively for the motion, so that Scotland remains a great place to live, work, study and do business in.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. The question is, that motion S6M-20844, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Scottish income tax rate resolution 2026-27, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

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

16:47

Meeting suspended.

16:49

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-20844, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Scottish income tax rate resolution 2026-27, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app did not connect. I would have voted yes.

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

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Likewise, my app would not work. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Wishart. 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)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Ind)
 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) (Ind)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (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)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 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)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 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)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (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)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (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)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (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

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20844, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Scottish income tax rate resolution 2026-27, is: For 93, Against 29, Abstentions 1.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purposes of section 11A of the Income Tax Act 2007 (which provides for Income Tax to be charged at Scottish rates on certain non-savings and non-dividend income of a Scottish taxpayer to be charged above the personal allowance), the Scottish rates and limits for the tax year 2026-27 are as follows—

(a) a starter rate of 19%, charged on income up to a limit of £3,967,

(b) the Scottish basic rate is 20%, charged on income above £3,967 and up to a limit of £16,956,

(c) an intermediate rate of 21%, charged on income above £16,956 and up to a limit of £31,092,

(d) a higher rate of 42%, charged on income above £31,092 and up to a limit of £62,430,

(e) an advanced rate of 45%, charged on income above £62,430 and up to a limit of £125,140, and

(f) a top rate of 48%, charged on income above £125,140.

Ecocide (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

16:51

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-20748, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Ecocide (Scotland) Bill.

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy (Gillian Martin):

The Ecocide (Scotland) Bill is a member's bill. Parliament supported the bill's progress at stage 1. I acknowledge the challenges that the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee faces in completing its work on the bill and on other matters in its work programme before the end of the session. I have, at all times, sought to do what I can to give the committee what it has requested of the Government in all areas of scrutiny, including in relation to the bill.

In response to a request from the convener, I lodged amendments to the bill early—last Tuesday, in fact—and I have written to the committee twice since the stage 1 debate with the detail that it requested. It would not be appropriate for the Government to frustrate Parliament's will, expressed in the vote after the stage 1 debate, by failing to introduce a financial resolution. The timetabling of future stages of the bill is, rightly, a matter for the Parliamentary Bureau, not the Government.

I turn to the content of the financial memorandum. I believe that any costs that will arise from the bill can be absorbed within existing budgets. There will be some costs in adapting to a new offence, but that is in the context of existing investigatory and enforcement activity to protect the environment from harm. I remain confident that there is a route to address the legitimate concerns about the provisions in the bill that the committee has raised ahead of stage 2. We have already made good progress with many of the issues.

I move,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Ecocide (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

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

Scottish Fiscal Commission (Chair)

16:53

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-20842, in the name of Shona Robison, on the reappointment of the chair of the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees with the recommendation of the Scottish Government and the Finance and Public Administration Committee that Professor Graeme Roy be reappointed as Chair of the Scottish Fiscal Commission.—
[Shona Robison]

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

Motion without Notice

16:53

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

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): I suspect that we should mark this date on the calendar, given its unusual nature.

I move,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.54 pm.

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:54

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-20814, in the name of Ivan McKee, on the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Visitor Levy (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20748, in the name of Shona Robison, on a financial resolution for the Ecocide (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Ecocide (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3A of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-20842, in the name of Shona Robison, on the reappointment of the chair of the Scottish Fiscal Commission, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees with the recommendation of the Scottish Government and the Finance and Public Administration Committee that Professor Graeme Roy be reappointed as Chair of the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Women Against State Pension Inequality

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20614, in the name of Bill Kidd, on justice for women against state pension inequality. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament condemns the latest decision by the UK Government regarding, and its continued refusal to compensate, the more than 3.5 million women affected by the acknowledged failures of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to inform them of state pension age increases, despite the UK Government being made to reconsider its original refusal as a result of the recommendations of the Parliamentary Ombudsman, which called for compensation of between £1,000 and £2,950 for each of those affected; echoes the comments of the Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI) group, which said that the latest decision demonstrated "utter contempt" for those affected in the Glasgow Anniesland constituency and across the country, and notes the calls for the immediate reversal of what it sees as this shameful, immoral and inhumane decision.

16:56

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I begin by paying tribute to all the women who have campaigned tirelessly to right this terrible wrong. If it had not been for their tenacity, their determination and their deep sense of injustice, we would never have got this far, so to every WASPI woman, I say, "Thank you very much".

The motion before us could not be clearer. Today, we condemn the United Kingdom Government's continued refusal to compensate the more than 3.5 million women across the UK who are affected by the acknowledged failures of the Department for Work and Pensions to properly inform them of increases to their state pension age. We condemn the fact that that indefensible refusal blatantly ignores the advice of the Government's advisers, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, which recommended compensation of between £1,000 and £2,950 for every woman who has been so badly let down. We champion the voice of the WASPI women in their campaign. The latest decision demonstrates utter contempt for the women affected, and today, we demand the immediate reversal of what can only be described as a shameful, immoral and inhumane decision by the UK Government.

To understand the anger, we must remember the history. The UK Government's Pensions Act 1995 increased the state pension age for women from 60 to 65. That in itself was a significant change, but the real injustice lies in how it was handled. Women were not properly or personally

notified. Many had planned a retirement around receiving their pension at the age of 60, resulting in untold financial hardship.

In 2011, further increases to the state pension age were brought in faster than the then UK Government had promised, meaning that some women had to wait disproportionately longer for their pension. For example, a one-year difference in birth year could result in a three-year difference to the state pension age.

In 2021 and 2024, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman concluded that the Department for Work and Pensions had repeatedly failed to act and was guilty of maladministration. Yet, despite that clear ruling, despite the recommendation for compensation and despite the UK Government being forced to review its earlier refusal, the decision in January was to award nothing—nothing.

Across the UK, 3.6 million women have been affected, including almost 336,000 women in Scotland. Many have faced severe financial hardship and have depleted their savings, taken on debt, worked longer in ill health, or been forced into poverty. In Scotland, 23 per cent of single female pensioners live in relative poverty, with two thirds of pension credit claimants being women. The gender pension gap stands at nearly 40 per cent, with the gap growing to £100,000 by retirement age. By their late 50s, women's pension wealth is just 62 per cent of men's. Those are not just statistics; they are real lives—those are injustices.

The other week, I had the privilege of meeting at the Scottish Parliament many of those who are campaigning for justice. My local WASPI 2018 campaign group is one of the groups that has been tireless in its calls for justice and it is one of the most active groups in the UK. I take a moment to put on record my heartfelt thanks to and respect for its extraordinary organiser, Marion McMillan, and her good friend from the south side of Glasgow, Christine McMillan—they are no relation to each other—for their relentless work. Dressed in their purple pinstriped blouses and proudly perched boaters, they reminded me, as I stood outside the Parliament building with them, of the suffragettes and the courage, dignity and quiet strength of those who came before them. They reminded us all of the many struggles that women have endured and the victories that they have hard won. They reminded us that discrimination against women did not end in 1918 or in 1928; it certainly did not end in 1995, and nor has it ended today. When I spoke to them, many women told me that Labour's decision was the final straw. They said that they would not trust the UK Government again, and some said that they would not trust Labour again. Frustration has turned to anger, and

anger has turned to something deeper: a loss of trust.

Governments must be trusted to make the right decisions, to listen and to act when wrongdoing is identified. On this issue, the UK Government has failed that test. We need a Government that we can trust to make the right decisions for the people and a Government that listens to the people. If Scotland had the powers that independence would bring, we could make those decisions and right those wrongs. We would not be waiting for Westminster to show compassion, or watching an ombudsman's recommendations gather dust. We should have the tools to act, and to act justly.

The women I met in their purple pinstripes deserve better; they deserve a Government that they can trust, that honours its obligations and that does not treat them with contempt. Justice for WASPI women is not a footnote; it is a test of fairness and integrity and, I believe, a test of where power should lie.

Let us stand with those women; let us condemn this shameful decision and work to see it changed; and let us continue to argue for a Scotland that has the power to right such wrongs—a Scotland where justice is not delayed, denied or dismissed, but delivered.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

17:03

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I say from the outset that I have never spoken in a WASPI debate before or had any involvement, but I have seen, listened to and heard the voice of many campaigners over the years, particularly when I was on Moray Council from 2017 until 2021.

I have been reading some of the history of the debate. I will not go over old ground, as many of the facts and details have been well established through numerous debates, legal disputes and reviews. If I understand it correctly, the decision to begin the process of equalising the state pension age for men and women dates back to 1995, which Bill Kidd alluded to. That is more than 30 years ago. That decision has been supported by every UK Government since then and, I believe, was originally supported by the Scottish National Party. The motion calls on the UK Government to pay out a compensation package, which would likely come with an estimated cost of around £10.3 billion, as I understand it.

Back in 2022, when Sir Keir Starmer was leader of the Opposition, he called for fair and fast compensation for WASPI women, but now that he is Prime Minister, that is no longer the case.

Arguably, Labour could have been upfront about that choice in 2024; instead, the matter was dragged out for more than a year before Labour confirmed that it had no intention of paying compensation.

Based on all that I have read, I have the greatest respect, understanding and sympathy for WASPI women, and I am not prepared to stand here and insult them by saying that my party would have taken a different position: we also did not introduce compensation during our time in government.

I will touch on the powers of the Scottish Parliament and something that Bill Kidd said at the end of his speech. I think that he was seeking independence in order to pay compensation. My understanding is that that sections 24, 26 and 28 of the Scotland Act 2016 give the Scottish Parliament a variety of powers that SNP ministers could have used to support the WASPI women if they had chosen to do so. I understand that the former Department for Work and Pensions minister, Guy Opperman, told the SNP in 2018 that, if the SNP took its own decisions in the Scottish Parliament to compensate, the UK Government would

“not object to that in any way.”—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 8 February 2018; Vol 635, c 1697.]

I do not think that hiding behind a rule that something is reserved is fair in this Parliament.

The decision to equalise and increase the state pension age for men and women was clearly not an easy decision to make, but it was a necessary one for the future of the state pension.

The Scottish Conservatives will continue to stand up for pensioners, ensuring that the important protections, such as the triple lock, remain in place, and continuing to call out the Labour Government on its decision to remove the winter fuel payment.

17:05

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): That might have been the first time that Tim Eagle has spoken in a WASPI debate. For his sake, I would suggest that he might want to make it the last time that he speaks in a WASPI debate.

I thank my friend Bill Kidd for lodging the motion that we are debating this evening. I also thank the WASPI campaign and Age Scotland for their briefings in advance of the debate.

I want to speak this evening in a spirit of solidarity with WASPI campaigners and to address the injustice that they face. The more than 336,000 women in Scotland, and, indeed, the more than 3.5 million women across the UK, who are affected by the failures of the Department for Work and

Pensions deserve more than warm words and procedural delay. They deserve fairness, they deserve dignity and they deserve compensation for the hardship that they have endured.

We should remind ourselves that the concerns about injustice are borne out by the clear, careful and unequivocal findings of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. Maladministration occurred and women were not properly informed of changes to their state pension age. As the WASPI campaign briefing reminds us, the ombudsman found that DWP officials were aware that numerous women who were affected by the changes were unaware that they were coming—and, I might add, modest compensation was recommended.

The UK Government has chosen to ignore those recommendations, however—recommendations that were made independently of any form of political or external interference. In doing so, it ignores the lived reality of countless numbers of women who have faced financial insecurity, anxiety and, in too many cases, real hardship. Let us remind ourselves that too many of the women who were affected are no longer with us and have no prospect of justice at all.

WASPI campaigners have fought tirelessly for years, many of them from my constituency. Many of them have been in touch with me, and I want to offer a small sample of what just some of them have told me.

One constituent, who was born in 1956, told me that, despite having lived at same address for over 24 years, she had no notification of the changes. She told me of feeling aggrieved, saying that, after she had paid into the system since she was 18 years of age with only a few years of childcare break, her pension entitlement was removed. Another constituent, who was born in 1957, told me she has been working and paying into the system since she was 16. She is self-employed and cares for her brother, who has severe epilepsy. She received only two years' notice of the change and rightly feels that that was not sufficient notice to make up for the loss of six years' pension entitlement. Another constituent, born in 1953 and a widow, spoke of the difficulties that she has faced despite already having downsized, and of facing challenges with paying utility bills and cost of living challenges.

Those are real lived experiences of women from my constituency, and their anger today is justified. They were led to believe that justice might finally be forthcoming, only to see hope withdrawn at the last moment.

As Age Scotland has made clear, the gender pension gap, which stands at 39 per cent, already leaves women approaching retirement with

significantly less security than men. To compound that inequality with administrative failure and then to refuse any form of redress, despite that being recommended, is quite simply indefensible.

Before the most recent general election, countless senior figures in the Labour Party rushed to stand beside WASPI women. Tweets were sent, photographs were taken and promises were implied. Yet, once power beckoned, those same voices fell silent. WASPI women were abandoned.

I believe that it is time for Anas Sarwar to account for his actions in endorsing and championing a Labour Government—despite his new-found protestations about the Prime Minister. He and all those other senior Labour parliamentarians who promised to stand by WASPI women should apologise for abandoning them.

The injustice that WASPI women have faced must be recognised and remedied, and that hardship must be addressed. The women who worked, contributed and played by the rules should not be forgotten; they should be compensated, as the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has said they must.

17:10

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland)

(Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute remotely to tonight's debate and I congratulate Bill Kidd on securing chamber time for this important issue. I am privileged to represent the north-east region, which is home to Linda Carmichael, the WASPI Scotland chair. I am grateful to Linda and the other WASPI delegates who travelled to Parliament earlier this month to speak to MSPs about their campaign for pension equality.

I put on record my support and solidarity with the women against state pension inequality campaign, and I thank the campaign and organisations such as Age Scotland for their briefings ahead of tonight's debate.

These women had always expected to retire at 60 and made plans on that basis. I should add that the women made those plans against the backdrop of austerity, which made it harder for young mothers to access childcare and return to the workplace. As we have heard from the dedicated WASPI campaigners, the changes and maladministration meant that, in some cases, women could no longer care for their grandchildren or other family members, so it is incredibly disappointing that, following a fresh review, the UK Government has announced that there will be no financial compensation for WASPI women. I disagree with that decision. I do not think that it is

right, and I will continue to call on the Government to think again.

Campaigners and affected women are justifiably angry about the decision. The change to state pension age has impacted around 336,000 women in Scotland. The current UK Government position is undoubtedly unfair, and we will not accept it. However, like other members, I do not believe that it is enough to criticise successive UK Governments when the Scottish Government could act to provide compensation to the WASPI women if it so wished. It has used those powers before and it can choose to do so again, but it does not want to act. As with so many issues, rather than utilising devolution to its fullest extent, the SNP has used the injustice faced by the WASPI women as a political football, preferring to exploit distress and indignation rather than use its powers in government to resolve it.

That is not a politics that I can support. That is why I added my support for the motion lodged by Katy Clark MSP, a long-time advocate for the WASPI campaign. That is why I have publicly called out the mistakes of the UK Government and did not hesitate to support Bill Kidd's motion. Furthermore, that is why I will not stop speaking out in support of the WASPI women until they—and we—win, because an injustice to them is an injustice to all of us.

17:13

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I am grateful to my friend and colleague, Bill Kidd, for bringing this debate to the chamber, and to the WASPI women who continue to campaign. Behind all the acronyms and parliamentary process sits the simple truth that these are real people—real women in our communities—who were let down by the UK Government.

I spoke during Kenny Gibson's previous members' business debate on this subject, so I was going to apologise if I repeated myself, but, after listening to some of the Opposition contributions today, I think that I will have to repeat myself. Tim Eagle said that the Scottish Government should provide the compensation, but the UK Government needs to take some responsibility for what it has done to the WASPI women. It is absolute nonsense for members to come here and make that academic argument at this stage.

The WASPI women are not asking for special treatment. They are not even arguing that the law should never have changed. They are asking for something far more basic. They are asking for fairness and redress, because the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman found maladministration in the failure of the Department

for Work and Pensions to properly communicate the changes to the women's state pension age. The ombudsman looked at the evidence and concluded that many of the women born in the 1950s were left with little time to plan for the future.

This is not some abstract policy debate; this is about a woman in Paisley who worked for decades in her community and who made plans around her retirement age, only to be told far too late that the goalposts had moved. I have said this before: these are our mums—well, not in my case, because some of them are only 10 years older than me—our grandmothers and other members of our family. These are real lives. These are real people who live in our communities. This is about a worker who did everything right, who paid in, who believed that the system would keep faith with them and who then had to choose between heating and eating while waiting for a pension that would end up never coming.

In December 2024, the DWP apologised and accepted the maladministration, but refused to set up the compensation scheme. Then, when the WASPI women took legal action, the Labour UK Government settled, committed to reconsider the decision properly and even paid more than half of the WASPI women's legal costs. However, in January this year, the Labour UK Government refused again. It came out with the same flawed arguments, the same cold comfort and the same old messages that had been given to thousands of women before. It said, "We know the system failed, but you are on your own". What we have here is a U-turn on a U-turn, back to the original position.

The WASPI women were told to wait for the review and that the case would be considered afresh, but instead we got a rerun. For the women affected, that is not just disappointing—it is crushing. Every delay is not a line in a ministerial statement; it is another month of anxiety, another month of lost income and another month of feeling invisible.

My position on the matter is clear: I stand with the WASPI women, because justice delayed is justice denied. Today, I say this to the UK Government and to those in Opposition parties in this Parliament. Stop making excuses, stop hiding behind selective arguments and stop using recycled arguments. Do the right thing, accept that an injustice has been identified, provide fair compensation and restore a measure of dignity to women who have already been asked to pay far too high a price for the UK Government's failure.

The UK Labour Government and Labour MPs, many of whom were elected on the back of supporting WASPI women, need to take responsibility and do the right thing.

17:17

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am grateful to my colleague Bill Kidd for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

The Labour UK Government's decision not to compensate the WASPI women is as appalling as it is hypocritical. Prior to being in government, Labour politicians stood beside those women for every photo op and called for compensation, only to desert them once in power. With an election on the horizon, some are arguing that they are still on the side of WASPI women, but the WASPI women are not daft and will not be fooled this time. They know that warm words will not pay the bills.

The decision denies as many as 3.6 million women the rightful compensation that they deserve. In my constituency, 4,700 women in East Dunbartonshire and more than 6,000 in West Dunbartonshire have been affected by changes to the state pension age. Behind those figures are real women with deep and complex lives—women who have worked tirelessly, who, during their working life, were paid less than men, did not have maternity rights and might have had smaller private pensions, and who often took on most of the caring responsibilities for the family. Due to Government failings, those women find themselves facing financial uncertainty at a time when they should be able to enjoy the next stage of their life.

Since 2015, 405,770 WASPI women have died. That figure should haunt those on the Labour and Tory benches—nearly half a million women have died without even getting the rightful compensation that they deserved. That is truly shameful and a real injustice.

It is beyond doubt that the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsmen was clear that these women should be compensated, but the Labour Government has ignored that decision. It is a historic injustice. The DWP's own research showed that it failed to get the message across and chose to do absolutely nothing about it.

The Labour Government has said that compensation would not be a fair use of money, but the WASPI women said it best, stating recently:

"If your MP said, 'paying compensation wouldn't be fair or proportionate', neither was it fair not to give adequate warning to the women affected."

In the name of equality, the process has once again left women facing inequality. Alongside my SNP colleagues, I have stood beside these women for years, and I was pleased to see them—including one of my constituents—in the Parliament the other week to reiterate my support. The women were promised, in good faith, that a

Labour UK Government would right that wrong, but we have instead seen U-turn after U-turn from the Labour Government. Make no mistake—the Labour Party, the Tories and Reform are no friends of the WASPI women. Only the SNP has been consistent in its support for the WASPI women, and I will continue to speak up about the issue.

For years, these women have remained resolute in their beliefs and have never given up, and I know that they will not give up now. However, time is, unfortunately, not on their side. They are understandably tired. They are tired of false promises, tired of U-turns, tired of being ignored, tired of being treated with contempt and tired of being told that they are wrong—but they are not wrong. They deserve fair and fast compensation now. That is a fact.

No more delays. No more lies. I stand here today with my SNP colleagues to urge the Labour UK Government to rethink this awful decision. Labour must reverse this shameful decision now. It is time for the WASPI women to be treated with the respect that they deserve. That is a moral duty.

17:21

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to Bill Kidd for his motion and for giving me the opportunity to contribute this evening. I do so in anger, in solidarity and in absolute determination to see justice done for WASPI women. For years, my party, the Scottish Greens, and I have stood in this chamber and outside it with women campaigning against state pension inequality. I have stood with them at rallies, at the cross-party group meetings and at packed public meetings across the north-east. I have met campaigners from Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, from Dundee and Angus—women who did everything that was asked of them, who worked, who cared, who paid in and who were then blindsided by a state that simply failed to tell them that the rules had changed.

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman found maladministration. The Department for Work and Pensions failed to properly communicate the increase in the state pension age. That finding was never contested. The ombudsman recommended compensation of between £1,000 and £2,950 for each of the 3.6 million women affected. Yet, despite being forced to reconsider its original refusal, the UK Labour Government has chosen to double down. It has chosen to ignore the ombudsman, to ignore the 336,000 women here in Scotland and to show what WASPI women campaigners have rightly described as utter contempt.

Let us be clear about the scale of that injustice. In Scotland alone, almost 336,000 women were

affected. Many received as little as one year's notice of up to a six-year increase in their state pension age. Compare that to men, who had six years' notice of a one-year rise. That is not equality or fairness; it is a failure of Government. Around 3.6 million women across the UK were affected, and the WASPI campaign estimates that at least 400,000 of them have died during the course of that long campaign. They died waiting and being denied justice.

That injustice did not happen in isolation. By their late 50s, women's pension wealth is equivalent to just 62 per cent of men's: there is a 38 per cent gender pension gap. Some 23 per cent of single women pensioners in Scotland live in relative poverty. Two thirds of pension credit claimants are women. Women are more likely to have had interrupted careers because they were caring for children, parents and disabled partners. In Scotland, 19 per cent of women aged 45 to 75 and over provide regular unpaid care. Many of those women were already financially vulnerable before the state pension age changed. The failure to notify them properly compounded that vulnerability and pushed many into real hardship.

I have spoken to women in the north-east—including Linda Carmichael—who have had to take on insecure work in their 60s, who burned through modest savings, who relied on food banks, who postponed retirement plans, and who felt humiliated and betrayed. These are not abstract statistics; they are our constituents—women who built our communities.

The UK Labour Government says that public finances are under pressure, but it is wholly unfair to argue that there is no case for compensation when the independent ombudsman has found that there was maladministration. Compensation will not be a windfall or a bonus; it is redress for a wrong.

Labour promised change. On WASPI, it has delivered continuity with the worst instincts of its predecessors. It has chosen to balance the books on the backs of women who were born in the 1950s. That decision is shameful, immoral and inhumane.

Justice delayed has already been justice denied for too many. The UK Government must reverse its decision, implement the ombudsman's recommendations and provide fair compensation. WASPI women have shown real resilience and dignity; they should not have to show endless patience, too. I stand with them, and I will not stop demanding justice.

17:25

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I thank Bill Kidd for securing this

members' business debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of his motion, which calls on the UK Government to reconsider its latest decision on compensation for women affected by state pension age changes. The issue is one of fairness, responsibility and respect for millions of women whose working lives were shaped by expectations created by Government policy.

More than 3.5 million women who were born in the 1950s experienced significant changes to their retirement plans following increases to the state pension age. The changes were not, in themselves, the core problem; rather, it was the failure of the Department for Work and Pensions to communicate the changes properly, in good time and in a clear and accessible way.

That failure was confirmed by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman after a lengthy and detailed investigation. As we have heard, the ombudsman found that maladministration had occurred and that it had resulted in real injustice. Many women received notification of the changes far too late to adjust their plans. As a result, they faced years of financial uncertainty, difficulties in securing employment, increased caring responsibilities and significant emotional strain. The ombudsman concluded that compensation of between £1,000 and £2,950 per person was appropriate to reflect the scale and seriousness of the impact.

I do not in any way think that such debates are about playing political football. The Labour Party, which is now in government in the UK, stood with WASPI women before the election and said that it would make changes, but it reneged on that promise the minute that it came into office. That must be called out—it is a matter of trust—and every Labour Party member in the chamber and across Scotland should call it out. I know that some Labour members do. For example, my colleague Richard Leonard has been consistent in calling out the decision. He will be missed by the Labour Party when he stands down.

For many women, the consequences of the failures have been life altering. Some women postponed their retirement and remained in physically demanding work for longer than they had expected. Others struggled to re-enter the labour market after years spent caring for family members. Many faced declining health, reduced savings and increased reliance on benefits. They could not reasonably have anticipated or planned for those outcomes, given the lack of timely information.

The WASPI campaign has consistently and constructively raised those concerns, ensuring that the voices of affected women are heard. That

campaign's advocacy has been grounded in evidence, persistence and dignity. The strength of feeling that has been expressed by campaigners reflects not only frustration at the lack of resolution but a desire for recognition of the difficulties that they endured.

This is about accountability. When public bodies make mistakes, it is essential that those mistakes are acknowledged and addressed. The ombudsman exists to provide independent scrutiny, and its conclusions deserve to be treated with respect. Accepting responsibility, learning lessons and offering redress when harm occurs strengthen public trust in the Government and public institutions.

Scotland has consistently sought to uphold the principles of fairness and social justice. Many of the women affected live in our communities, contribute to our economy and support their families. They are our mothers, our sisters, our daughters, our grans, our aunts, our friends and our colleagues. They deserve to know that their concerns are being raised clearly and firmly in this Parliament. Our support sends an important message that their experiences matter and that their voices are respected.

That is why I wanted to speak today. I want the women affected in Coatbridge and Chryston to know that I will raise their voice and stand up for them on this issue.

This debate provides us, as a Parliament, with an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to fairness, accountability and compassion. By calling on the UK Government to reverse its decision, we stand alongside those who are seeking recognition of the hardship that they endured and acknowledge the findings of an independent authority that was established to safeguard citizens and their rights. Let us demonstrate that the Scottish Parliament will continue to advocate for fairness, and let us support the motion.

17:30

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Bill Kidd for securing this important debate. I also thank WASPI and Age Scotland for their briefings.

Over the years, I have been privileged to meet so many determined 1950s-born women from across Scotland who have campaigned for the pension that they deserve and that, cruelly, is out of reach because of maladministration and lack of notice about age changes to their state pension. I have met many of those inspiring women through the cross-party group on WASPI or at home in Shetland: I continue to stand with you all. Many thousands of the 336,000 women across Scotland

affected by the change have been left in financial hardship. I want to be clear that, as others have said, this is about injustice to real people. It is shameful that we are in the position of having this debate after successive Governments have failed to act.

Before the 2024 general election, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's investigation found that there was maladministration in informing the women who were affected about the first changes that happened, in 1995. There was also a recommendation of compensation of between £1,000 and £2,950 for each of those affected.

The Conservative Party left our economy in a shambles and waited out making a decision until after the 2024 election, cynically leaving it to the incoming Labour Government to handle the matter. As has been the overarching theme of the UK Labour Government, it has U-turned on its pre-election position that it would remedy the situation. The entire process has been shambolic, with a flagrant disregard of the independent PHSO's findings and recommendation.

Picking and choosing the findings and recommendations of an organisation whose remit is to investigate complaints about UK Government departments and other public bodies is unacceptable. Asking wronged pensioners to pay the price of Government mismanagement is disgraceful. In the current cost of living crisis, two thirds of pension credit claimants are women and around 23 per cent of single, female Scottish pensioners live in relative poverty. We know that public finances are under acute pressure, but it is not fair for the UK Government to suggest that there is no case for compensation.

According to the WASPI campaign briefing,

"The PHSO said that financial circumstances are not an excuse for not paying compensation. Compensation payments could be phased over a number of years e.g. the life of a Parliament"

and that

"Alleged financial mismanagement by previous administrations is not an excuse and the Treasury has saved £181bn by increasing women's State Pension age".

Had women had the facts presented to them at the time, they would have made different choices and decisions. They were living busy lives with families, friends and careers. More should have been done to provide the facts to the cohort of affected women. Now, those same women are being punished—for lack of a better word—for making decisions that made sense for them at the time and with the information that they had. Let us ask how many women gave up their jobs to look after parents. How much money did that save the state in social care costs?

There is a distinct lack of fairness in all of this. The goalposts were moved without women being informed of it. We can debate whether that would ever have happened if we were talking about another group in society, but a combination of misogyny and ageism has resulted in 1950s-born women being overlooked by the grey suits in Whitehall. It is little wonder that older women often say that they feel invisible in our society.

The irony is not lost on me that the WASPI cohort is from the generation that campaigned for women's rights. We should not forget that the rights that women have today are in no small way due to the women who were born in the 1950s. Maternity pay and leave were not available to women who had their children in the 1960s and early 1970s.

The UK Government should act on the recommendations from the ombudsman's findings now—not for party politics, but because it is the right thing to do.

17:34

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I thank my colleague Bill Kidd for securing the debate. Since my contribution is at this late stage in the debate, there will be some repetition in it.

As has been said, according to data from the House of Commons library, it is estimated that between 331,000 and 336,000 women in Scotland have been affected by what women against state pension inequality are campaigning about. Women who were born in the 1950s—as were three of my sisters, although I am old enough not to have been caught up in this—had their state pension age raised without adequate notification. Compounding the injustice, more than 4,000 WASPI women in Scotland have died since 2020 without receiving anything. Although former UK Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Liz Kendall apologised for the 28-month delay—that is a delay of more than two years—in sending letters warning of the pension age change, she said that there was no evidence of "direct financial loss". Well, it depends how you define "direct".

Women had planned their finances on the basis that they would receive their state pension at 60, as I did—I paid off my mortgage. That was especially true of women who were divorced, widowed or single, who had only their own income. They discovered, out of the blue, that they had better change their plans. It is not that they objected to their pension age being equalised with that of men; it is the way that it was done that they objected to. It was done without notice and not incrementally—there was simply a cliff edge.

In its final report in March 2024, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman concluded that the DWP committed maladministration by failing to adequately communicate changes to the women's state pension age, found that that caused injustice, including distress, and lost opportunities to plan, which I mentioned, and recommended that compensation of between £1,000 and £2,950 be paid to the women affected. That is not a lot of money if a pension of several years has simply disappeared, but it was compensation only for the delay, not for pension loss. Now Labour will not pay even that small amount.

I give Anas Sarwar his due. Once upon a time, along with Labour colleagues, he said that the UK Government should pay up, but, as we know, what Labour says in here—what Anas Sarwar says—is dismissed by the UK leader. That reminds me of the words of Johann Lamont, who resigned as Labour leader in 2014, with immediate effect. She accused the UK party of treating Scotland like “a branch office” and said that she had “had enough”.

Anas Sarwar has obviously not had enough. He and Jackie Baillie have been publicly humiliated, but apparently not enough to make them follow in Johann Lamont's footsteps. Put back in their box by Labour headquarters, lid firmly nailed down, they have betrayed the WASPI women. The images of them and Sir Keir Starmer standing shoulder to shoulder with WASPI women cannot be erased. The abandonment of the WASPI women by Labour and, before that, the Tories, after years of false promises, is a disgrace. I say to the WASPI women: don't give up; fight for another U-turn.

17:37

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Dunfermline) (SNP): I, too, thank Bill Kidd for bringing the debate to the chamber, because it is important that the Parliament has yet another debate on the betrayal of the WASPI women.

I have been a member of this Parliament for some time now, and I have witnessed many poor decisions by successive UK Governments. However, I have rarely seen such an unforgivable on-going dereliction of a Government's basic obligation to its citizens as I have seen in the betrayal of the WASPI women. Despite the very clear view that was previously expressed—across the chamber, pretty much—yet again, we are having to call on the UK Government to account for an issue that it refuses to address.

We must reflect on the sheer magnitude of the injustice that has been meted out to the WASPI women, of whom there are more than 300,000 in Scotland. They find themselves short-changed

and let down in the most unforgivable way. As Bill Kidd said, it is no wonder that frustration is turning to anger.

I want to pick up on something that Beatrice Wishart mentioned in her remarks. If what has happened to the 3.6 million WASPI women across the UK who have been impacted by the UK Government's decisions had happened to men, might the issue have been the subject of more scrutiny in the House of Commons or more commentary in the male-dominated UK media? That is a hypothetical question, but it is an important one to consider as we continue to discuss women's place in our society.

Recently, the First Minister and I took time to sit down with WASPI women who attended the Parliament, and I must say that their testimony was harrowing to hear. As colleagues have mentioned, many hard-working women have been suffering utterly devastating emotional and financial distress at a time in their lives when they expected to enjoy their well-deserved retirement.

From listening to his speech, I presume that Tim Eagle did not make it along to that event, which is unfortunate, because he might have learned something from it. He would have learned the basic lesson that this is not a debate about the equalisation of the pension age. That is a different debate, and it is not the injustice that the WASPI women's campaign is fighting for. If he is looking for facts on the WASPI campaign, I very gently say to him that he should not rely on a Tory ex-DWP minister for suggestions as to where solutions might lie. I am afraid that he demonstrates his lack of knowledge on reserved and devolved powers, as well as his lack of understanding of the WASPI cause.

I am genuinely disappointed that Mercedes Villalba went down the same track with a lack of understanding about devolved issues, but I give her respect for being the one and only Labour contributor to the debate. I respect her position on the issue, which is a principled one.

Maggie Chapman: Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is deeply problematic for some of our unionist colleagues to suggest that the Scottish Government should just pick up the bill for this matter, given that we have done so for other things? Where we have done that, it has been a policy choice. This is about maladministration. It is a very different situation and the UK Government should pay up.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: There is an irony that the Scottish Government is often criticised for how much it spends on social security, yet some colleagues seem to be suggesting that, on this issue, we should spend more on social security. There is a lack of a joined-up argument. It is

important to recognise that this is a very different situation, because we are talking about WASPI women of pensionable age. We really need to understand the devolution settlement, as well as the point about the UK Government fixing its own mistakes.

As I look around the chamber, I see that, as always, my SNP colleagues are behind me in supporting the WASPI women. We have had one Labour contributor to the debate, there are no Labour Party spokespeople taking part and I have no idea what the position of the Scottish Labour leader is on WASPI women. However, we must recognise that the Scottish Labour leader does not stand for WASPI women and that he does not stand for Scotland. His lack of comment on the WASPI cause will be there for WASPI women to judge in the May elections.

As we look forward to what can be done to help WASPI women, we must reflect on the fact that the WASPI campaign is based on the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's report. When the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions announced that the UK Government would, once again, look at the report, there was a small glimmer of hope. However, that hope faded once again, which is a genuine insult to the WASPI women, who have bravely campaigned for justice for so long. No doubt many Labour MPs, MSPs and candidates have had their pictures taken with WASPI women for many a year. The women can now see what happens when Labour gets into power, and they will judge Labour accordingly.

The Scottish Government has consistently supported the WASPI campaign, and we will continue to call on the UK Government to provide appropriate compensation to affected women. As Bill Kidd and Jamie Hepburn have said, women already face an unfair, unequal and uphill battle, whether with the gender pay gap or the inequality in pension savings, which other colleagues have mentioned. The last thing that any woman needs is a UK Government that adds to the challenges that they face.

I have once again written to the Minister for Pensions to express my deep disappointment at last month's decision. I urged him to reconsider the UK Government's position, and I outlined the Scottish Government's continued support for WASPI women. Our support will continue, because the urgency of the situation is plain to see—well, it is certainly plain to see from my perspective.

The shameful truth, as colleagues have mentioned, is that too many women have already died waiting for these wrongs to be put right. That is an unacceptable position, yet it goes on. It has gone on for far too long, and the motion sets out clearly that the time for change is now, that WASPI women must be compensated, that justice must be done and that the WASPI women deserve nothing less.

Meeting closed at 17:44.

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