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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 25 February 2026

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

Motion of Condolence

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Our first item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20721, in the name of John Swinney, on a motion of condolence for Jeane Freeman. We are honoured to welcome Jeane's partner Susan and members of Jeane's close family and friends to our gallery today.

I was privileged to work with Jeane outwith and in Holyrood. In my spokesperson roles on health and on social security in the previous session, I worked with Jeane on a number of occasions in both of her Cabinet positions. Jeane was always professional, kind and determined. Her commitment to public service was clear.

It was a tremendous shock and sadness to learn of her death. On behalf of all at the Scottish Parliament, I send our deepest condolences to Susan and all of Jeane's family, friends and colleagues. She will be very sadly missed.

14:01

The First Minister (John Swinney): Jeane Freeman was a remarkable colleague, a woman of principle and a woman of courage. She was dedicated in all that she did, selfless in her actions and unfailingly compassionate. Scottish politics and public life in Scotland have lost an outstanding individual who leaves for us all an incredible legacy.

Working alongside her both here in the chamber and in Cabinet, I valued her counsel, her wisdom, her solidarity and her care. Jeane gave her counsel freely and openly to support the common good. She always offered wise thinking when we wrestled with difficult questions. Whenever I faced political challenges, Jeane would offer support. At moments of personal difficulty, Jeane would offer care and kindness.

For those outside of Government, Jeane will always be remembered, first and foremost, for the pivotal role that she played during the Covid pandemic. That was one of the greatest public health crises in history, one of the greatest challenges that our national health service has ever seen and one of the greatest challenges that our society has seen. There was no blueprint or precedent for us to draw on during that period. All of us—politicians, citizens and community leaders—were in uncharted waters. Jeane, as

Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, was one of the people who provided selfless leadership to help us to steer our way through it.

Thankfully, Jeane was the right person for the job. I remember well her leadership, her pragmatism and her determined commitment to evidence-based and, necessarily often, brave decision making. Every single day, with exceptional dedication, grace and selflessness, she threw herself into her work to keep people healthy and safe without a thought for her own health, and to support our health services, in which she took such pride and to which she gave such commitment.

She was the first to accept that she might not have got everything right, but Jeane made a terrific difference to and for us all. Although she will always be remembered for what she did then, it is only one highlight in a long and distinguished career that was built on social justice, care and service to others.

Jeane will always be remembered for the moral values that she brought to all that she did. She said that she learned those moral values from her parents. Her mother worked 12-hour shifts as a sister in a psychiatric hospital. Her father was a trade unionist and served in the Royal Air Force during world war two. He spoke to Jeane of the social contract between a Government and its people and of the inequality that he saw when he came home after the war ended. He taught her the need for fairness and compassion—that everyone in our society deserves equal opportunity.

Jeane took those lessons to heart. They were values that she practised in her politics, in her career and in her life: when she became the first woman to chair the National Union of Students in Scotland; when she trained and worked as a nurse; when she founded Apex Scotland; when she was a member of the Parole Board for Scotland; and when she was a member of the Scottish Police Services Authority board and the NHS national waiting times centre board. Jeane was living the lessons that she learned from her parents: a commitment to social justice and improving people's lives.

In 1996, Jeane received an OBE for her service to the rehabilitation of people with experience of the criminal justice system. Jeane also worked as a senior civil servant and then as special adviser to the then First Minister, Jack McConnell. In that role, she was heavily involved in the purchase of the Golden Jubilee hospital in Clydebank. She could see the benefits of ensuring that that significant asset was better used for the benefit of all in Scotland.

Jeane's political journey demonstrated a willingness to think afresh about the world around

her. She was a founding member of Women for Independence and one of the faces of the yes Scotland campaign. She was a calm voice of authority to persuade others of the benefits of independence. In the 2016 election, Jeane was elected as MSP for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley and became a tireless advocate for her constituency.

Her work as the first ever Minister for Social Security in Scotland was arguably one of the landmark achievements in her life. In that role, she managed the devolution of new powers and the creation of Social Security Scotland. Our social security system is built on dignity, fairness and respect, and that is because of Jeane. Those were her values. They were values that she embodied and put into her politics; they were values that were passed down from her parents; and they were values that were put into the law of Scotland.

I was fortunate enough to see those values practised up close. Jeane contributed so much to the Government, to this Parliament and to the lives of people across Scotland. For Jeane, that contribution was her life's mission, which she carried from her childhood throughout her life and up to the very end, even volunteering to support members of the public at the Beatson cancer centre by assisting with the tea trolley.

Her death was a terrible shock, coming just weeks after her cancer diagnosis. On behalf of the Scottish Government and the people of Scotland, I express my deepest condolences to her partner Susan and her much-loved family, who join us today in the gallery.

I always welcomed Jeane's wisdom, her considered opinions, her advice and her kindness. Like so many others across the chamber and across the country, I express my gratitude for all that Jeane did over the course of her life—for her service, her dedication, her compassion and her humanity. I am grateful for the example that Jeane set for us and the legacy that she leaves behind.

I pay tribute to Jeane Freeman, a woman of principle who lived out her values, shared them with us all and made Scotland a better country as a result. *[Applause.]*

I move,

That the Parliament expresses its shock and sadness following the death of Jeane Freeman; appreciates her long contribution to public life and politics, including as the MSP for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, Minister for Social Security, where she established Social Security Scotland, and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport during the COVID-19 pandemic; recognises the high esteem in which she was held by civic society and colleagues in all parties, and offers its deepest sympathy and condolences to her partner, family and many friends.

14:08

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I associate myself with and commend the First Minister's remarks.

On behalf of myself and the Conservative Party, I send our deepest condolences to Susan and all of Jeane's family, friends and colleagues, and her wider party.

I am touched that Susan asked me to say a few words this afternoon about Jeane. I apologise if these words, in part, repeat some of the remarks that I made in the Parliament shortly after we heard of her passing.

It fell to me to welcome Jeane into Government when she first became a minister, which was a happy duty. I look back on what I said then and notice that Jeane's mother's tribute to her daughter was that she had a voice "that could sell coal". Coal was not what she went on to sell, but she always spoke with tremendous authority and vigour, which was deeply impressive. She brought to the job considerable experience of the outside world, which the Parliament recognised and appreciated.

People will know that I used to do those welcome speeches for ministers, and I must say that I relished the prospect. I enjoy good parliamentary performance and I used to love how Jeane would sit—very still and quiet. She did not allow herself to be noised up. There would be these—probably from me—very theatrical performances from elsewhere in the chamber, with members thinking that they were lambasting her. She would stand up quietly at the end and would always begin by saying, "So...", and then she would eviscerate every argument that those members had made. I quite often looked across just to exchange a twinkle in the eye, because I knew what she had done. She did it with tremendous effect because she was supremely well briefed and very committed to the job that she did—never more so, in my experience, than in the way in which she engaged directly with the women who were affected by transvaginal mesh.

The Transvaginal Mesh Removal (Cost Reimbursement) (Scotland) Bill was Jeane's bill, which Humza Yousaf was to take into legislation at the start of this session of Parliament. It provided for the transport of women to the United States, so that Dr Veronikis in Missouri could surgically remove the mesh that, in many cases, they had been told had already been removed. That opportunity was not extended to women anywhere else in the United Kingdom. It was a bill that Jeane embraced and took forward.

I remember one constituent, Lorna Farrell, who went to the steps that Sylvester Stallone ran up in the "Rocky" movie. She got out of her wheelchair,

free of mesh, staggered up those steps and stood at the top, thanks to Jeane. Jeane made a difference, and there are women all over Scotland, and their families, who will be forever grateful for what she did.

Let me finish with this final reflection. Decades ago, I sat at a private dinner for the then Prime Minister during the height of the Falklands war. I was sitting next to Alec Douglas-Home and asked him what it was like to lead in a crisis. He said:

“Well, the first thing is the duty of others to offer constructive support.”

I try to remember that and I tried to provide that support when the Covid pandemic fell.

He also said something that I never forgot:

“Other politicians may wish they occupied the desk. Other politicians might think it would all have been better if they had been in charge. Other politicians might lambast and say, ‘That was ridiculous,’ but, for the Prime Minister, the First Minister and the woman in the hot seat, they are making life-and-death decisions. Some of them represent a burden they carry with them for the rest of their lives. They do not walk away from it. It is something they feel, because they had to take decisions—very brave decisions—that had fundamental consequences. That is a real sense of duty.”

I say to Susan: Jeane made a difference. She had a sense of duty, and this Parliament—and everyone in it—should be grateful for her work, the job that she did and the legacy that she leaves behind. [*Applause.*]

14:12

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I echo and enthusiastically support the comments of both the First Minister, John Swinney, and Jackson Carlaw. Listening to them made me think that simply thinking of Jeane puts a smile on many of our faces. That is a remarkable way to remember anyone.

Jeane Freeman was a tremendous public servant who dedicated her life to improving other people’s lives across our great country. I put on the record the condolences and best wishes of everyone in the Scottish Labour Party. In particular, I send our love and best wishes to Jeane’s partner, Susan, whom she was absolutely in love with and devoted to, and to all her friends and family. I send love and condolences because she was respected not just by those on the Scottish National Party benches, but by people across the political spectrum and by so many people outwith politics.

Jeane was a formidable public figure. She dedicated her life to public service and to social justice for our great country. She started her career as a student leader and went on to become health secretary during a global pandemic. She worked as a civil servant and as a Government adviser,

serving a former Labour First Minister, Jack McConnell, and she was, of course, a member of the Cabinet. In every role, she brought the same work ethic, the same strong opinions and the same tireless determination to make our country better.

Jeane was a formidable human being and public figure. She was ferociously clever and was fired by a strong sense of justice and an enduring commitment to public service. Scottish politics and public life will be poorer without her.

I have already said this twice in the chamber, but I repeat again that I will always be personally thankful to Jeane Freeman for the steps that she took to get us closer to the truth on the Queen Elizabeth university hospital scandal. That goes for me, and I know that it goes for the whistleblowers and the families, who all appreciate the significant progress that was made in their fight for justice because Jeane Freeman was someone who was willing to listen, learn and act. She was willing to challenge institutions and to question her own.

She will of course be especially missed by her colleagues in the Scottish National Party, and my thoughts are with each and every one of them, but she will be sorely missed by people across the Parliament and the political spectrum. To Susan and to Jeane’s family and friends, I say: Jeane was loved, Jeane was respected, Jeane made a difference and Jeane delivered. You should all be so proud of the life that she lived and the legacy that she leaves, and I hope that you take heart from the fact that we all mourn with you.

14:15

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I start by associating myself with the point that Anas Sarwar opened with—just remembering Jeane brings a smile to my face. That is tempered somewhat by Jackson Carlaw’s observation, as I have been at the receiving end of some of those eviscerations in the chamber, which was a usefully humbling experience for a first-time member.

I first met Jeane Freeman at a cocktail bar, Bluedog, on West George Street in Glasgow, where I was with Susan, Shirley-Anne Somerville and other former colleagues. It was an orange juice for me, although Jeane and Susan were having something much more sophisticated. I wanted to open with that because knowing Jeane at first through Susan was to know the incredible love that they had for each other, and that was a privilege to behold.

As Mike Russell noted in Jeane’s obituary, she started her party-political journey in the young communists. That was a proud tradition, and one that many of the leading feminists of recent decades started in. I mention that because I think

that Jeane Freeman will probably be the last holder of high office in this country to have started out as part of that particular political movement, which means the end of quite a significant chapter in the political history of this country.

For the independence movement, which is how I got to know her, she was an incredible advocate of our cause, as someone who was serious, accomplished and a former senior figure in a Labour Administration. I had the privilege of speaking alongside her at a number of public meetings, including in places such as Bearsden, which were not exactly hotbeds of support for our cause, but where people were absolutely willing to listen to Jeane.

She exuded authority and had extensive knowledge, but I do not think that that was why people were so willing to listen; it was because she was so obviously and deeply passionate. She was not just a policy wonk; she was someone who was driven by a vision for this country of a fairer and more just Scotland. That was a vision that she brought to Parliament. As the First Minister said, it is most obvious in the social security system that we now have—a system that Jeane designed and that was intended to give people dignity and to lift them up, rather than punish them for the circumstances in which they found themselves. She built that system by listening to and trusting the people who most needed its support.

Jeane always saw politics as being about people. She had a clear vision and was of a deep ideological conviction, but that did not mean getting lost in political abstracts. She certainly did not see this Parliament as a place for pontificating. This was a place to get stuff done for the people who we represent. She was unquestionably one of the most able and talented people ever elected to this Parliament.

My thoughts, prayers and love are with Susan and Jeane's whole family. I hope that they can take some comfort today from seeing how widely respected and loved she was and still is across the chamber.

14:18

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Occasions such as this remind us of the common humanity that we all share and the fundamental values that drive us in public service. However, there have been too many such motions in the course of this session of Parliament—too many towering and substantial giants of our politics and our Parliament have been taken from us far too soon, and Jeane's passing in particular is a terrible blow.

I did not find it hard to reach for the words of this tribute. They came freely, because the news of her

passing left me and my party with a profound sense of sadness. Although she was certainly our opponent and adversary, she always conducted herself with grace and purpose. She was a class act. We knew to trust her at her word and to never doubt the depth of the intellect that underpinned all the decisions to which she was party. We crossed swords—of course we did—but, although she never shirked from joining battle, she never lost the state of grace or decency with which she always conducted herself.

I remember one time when, on social media, she refused to be drawn on to the field of battle after I had posted a viral photograph of a cremated omelette that had been served to a patient in an Edinburgh hospital, but she had the matter dealt with quietly and with purpose.

That was in a simpler time before any of us had heard of Wuhan in China or Covid-19. I cannot remember a time in my life when I was more frightened than I was in those early days of the pandemic. We knew that the virus and lockdown were coming, but we did not know what any of it would mean for our nation or our people. Jeane was the first to strip away the artifice of political division and invite me and other health spokespeople into the very heart of Government decision making and thinking behind the response to the coronavirus emergency.

The weight of the responsibility and the ferocious pace of decision making must have been immense for her, but she always found time to respond to every text message, question and suggestion that I sent her, sometimes daily. When my daughter fell sick in the first wave of the pandemic, she asked me for updates every day. That was a measure of her humanity and decency as a person. She worked tirelessly and with a singular sense of purpose throughout the darkest days of that national emergency. She carried us with her and never showed any sign of the terror that gripped so many of us in those early days.

On hearing the news of her passing, I reached for the last exchanges that we shared by text message. It speaks to the affection and respect that I had for her that one of the last messages that I sent her, which followed her decision to step down from the Parliament, reads as follows:

"Genuinely sorry to learn of your news re stepping down. You have always been one of the brightest, nicest and best."

I will keep her reply personal to me, but it was steeped in the warmth and grace that defined her, and I will treasure it.

On behalf of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I wish Susan, Jeane's family and all her friends love, light, laughter and the promise of better days ahead.

14:22

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): I associate myself with all the remarks that have been made so far. I only got to know Jeane when I arrived in the Parliament in 2016. A year later, I ended up on the Social Security Committee as we took the Social Security (Scotland) Bill through the parliamentary process, and I got to know her very well over that year and a half. She often phoned me up and helped me to draft my amendments. What was striking every time was that, if she said that she would do something, it happened. We could trust her word completely.

She also had a very personal touch. I remember that, on a Friday morning, I was walking through Astley Ainslie hospital on my way to a meeting. She had heard that something was going on in my family, and she phoned not to talk about social security but to ask me how I was doing. That is a mark of the person that we remember this afternoon.

The thing that struck me most was the way that she could work with other politicians from other Parliaments. At the time, a number of negotiations were on-going with the United Kingdom Government. It is fair to say that the politics of the then minister in London were probably as far away from Jeane's as they could be. However, I had the privilege of sitting in on a couple of those meetings and watching her not score cheap political points but consider what was best for the people of Scotland, which was a lesson that I learned and that we all need to learn when we do our politics. We can make cheap political points, but what effect does that have on the people of Scotland?

That was also her approach when she devised and took the Social Security (Scotland) Bill through the Parliament. Social Security Scotland is one of the things that she worked on that will continue to be in place. She designed it, drove it and, perhaps most important, worked with the disabled community and with members across the chamber to make it the best that she could.

I, too, pass on my respect and thanks for Jeane. I say to Susan and Jeane's family how sorry we are for their loss. We have lost somebody who really made a difference to individual lives in Scotland. That is surely a legacy worth having.

14:25

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I will open by taking the opportunity to talk about Susan Stewart. I thank Susan for asking you, Presiding Officer, to ask me to speak today—as a former Minister for Parliamentary Business, I know that that is the protocol. It means a lot to me, because Jeane meant a lot to me.

One of the things that I keep trying to remember—we must all remember this—is that, no matter how we all feel, Susan will be feeling this loss more than any of us. My heart goes out to her, because I know the loss that she will be feeling.

Jeane Freeman was a force of nature, an impassioned campaigner and a feisty woman who did not suffer fools, so, of course, I was drawn to her—have you met the women in my life? When Jeane liked you, she liked you. She was hugely loyal. If, for whatever reason, you found yourself on the wrong side of Jeane, the best thing to do was run—run for your life.

I was lucky. I loved Jeane and she loved me. We did not hug one another and tell one another that all the time—it was a very west coast of Scotland working-class love, but we had our moments. It was usually me who had the emotional outburst, but that will come as no surprise to anyone in the chamber.

Jeane had a brick in her office. I often wondered why someone would have a brick in their office. It was a brick from her school—from where she came from—because she had a sense of who she was and where she came from, and that brick represented that. That meant everything to me, because, as some members know, I feel great pride in my home town of Paisley, so I could understand Jeane right away.

Jeane would call me out if she thought that I was wrong, and she would tell me exactly what I had done wrong. Even as recently as last year, she texted me to tell me how stupid I was to do a certain thing. I am not telling anyone today what that certain thing was—people will need to work that out for themselves—but she used her time, even in her retirement, to tell me that. I also remember a recent conversation in which she questioned the logic of our First Minister in no longer having me in the Scottish Government, but, as I said, Jeane was a very good mate.

Sometimes, at the most inappropriate times, I would try to make Jeane laugh, because, when she laughed, her whole face would light up, her eyes would sparkle and we would hear her very throaty laugh.

When Jeane was the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, during Covid, the rest of the world saw the woman we knew. Constituents told me how much Jeane and Nicola meant to them during that very scary time in their lives. That period now seems like a bad dream, much of which we are still dealing with, but people saw what Jeane Freeman was all about.

As many members will be aware, Susan Stewart, Jeane's partner, is football daft. Perfect for me, she is a St Mirren fan and a member of the

tartan army, so we have a lot in common. Jeane—no so much. Even during her tenure as the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Jeane never really got our beautiful game and national pastime. She never understood what all the excitement was about. Susan and I firmly agree with the Bill Shankly quote: “People say that football is a matter of life and death. I say to them that it is a lot more important than that.”

However, during her time away from politics, Jeane started following the great game, mainly with Susan, for Susan. Jeane and Susan attended Euro 2024 in Germany, along with half the country. They followed St Mirren’s recent success in the league cup this season—they both attended the final and semi-final games. Jeane did that for Susan, because that is what Jeane was all about: looking out for other people and making everyone else feel good.

When I heard about Jeane’s illness, I was devastated, but, Jeane being Jeane, she managed to tell me in a very Jeane Freeman way—so much so that she nearly convinced me that she was not as ill as everybody else had told me and that there was a way that she could work things out. That was Jeane being Jeane and thinking about how I felt.

The night before Jeane died, I was in the house, shouting at the television. St Mirren were playing Airdrie, and, although we won, it was a terrible game. At that moment, when the most important thing in my life was that football game, I got a message from Susan saying that Jeane had worsened and that she was permanently at Jeane’s side. She told me that Jeane had come round just as the final whistle had blown and said, “George will be pleased that St Mirren won.” Jeane then demanded that Susan send a picture of her in her hospital bed, clapping because St Mirren had got through to the next round of the cup. That is a classy lady. That woman, even when she was dying, was thinking about someone else: she was thinking about her big, daft pal fae Paisley.

But Jeane Freeman was an extraordinary woman who touched the lives of everyone fortunate enough to know her. She was fierce, loyal, compassionate and utterly devoted to those she loved. From her powerful advocacy during the independence referendum to her leadership through the darkest days of Covid, Jeane showed Scotland what true public service looks like. She was a force of nature who never forgot where she came from, who fought tirelessly for what she believed in, and who made everyone around her better just by being there.

Even in her final hours, Jeane was thinking of others, making sure that Susan knew that she loved her, and making sure that her big, daft pal

fae Paisley was happy. That was Jeane Freeman. That will always be Jeane Freeman. Although our hearts are broken, we are all better people for having known her.

Susan, we cannot begin to understand your loss, but I promise you this: Jeane’s legacy, her spirit, and her fierce love and loyalty will live in every single one of us. She was, and always will be, simply incredible. [*Applause.*]

14:31

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow Southside) (SNP): Not for the first time, but perhaps for different reasons, George Adam has made me cry.

Trying to sum up the strong, smart, funny, incredibly kind woman who was Jeane Freeman in just a few minutes is an almost impossible task. However, I know how much the words already spoken across the chamber will have meant to Susan, to Jeane’s nieces, Nicola and Louise, and to her great nieces, Emily and Georgie, who all join us here today.

Long before I had the privilege—I use that word deliberately—of calling Jeane a friend, I knew her by her fearsome reputation. I was leader of the Opposition in here and she was a special adviser to the then First Minister, Jack McConnell. I vividly remember her once scowling at me in the garden lobby, after I had given her boss a particularly rough time at FMQs. I am sure that I scowled back, but, inside, I was absolutely terrified.

A bit later, I got to know Jeane as the beloved other half of my long-time friend Susan, and it was through their relationship that Jeane and I became such close friends. Of course, it was in the run-up to the independence referendum that I first campaigned with Jeane, and I discovered then just how powerful it was to have Jeane Freeman on your side. Her co-founding of Women for Independence spoke not just to her lifelong feminism, but also to her conviction—which was so obvious in her ministerial roles, too—that voices traditionally sidelined in politics should and must be heard much more loudly.

After her election as an MSP, in 2016, Jeane became one of the most important members of my Government, steering Social Security Scotland into existence and making sure that it was founded on the right values—and then, of course, overseeing the national health service. As George has alluded to, however, it is fair to say that Susan has never allowed me to forget the idiocy—which, I think, is the word that she used—of me including sport in Jeane’s portfolio.

During the five years that we served together in Government, I learned from direct personal experience that Jeane Freeman possessed one of

the sharpest, most astute political brains that I have ever known. As we have already heard, she plied her political trade in the Communist Party before joining Labour and then, of course, the SNP. But Jeane was no machine politician. She had an almost perfect blend of intellectual and emotional intelligence, and she had an instinctive understanding that political ideology means nothing if it does not improve people's lives.

When thinking about how best to encapsulate the Jeane Freeman I knew and loved, three hallmarks of her character stand out. The first is principle. Jeane's starting point on every issue was principle, not expediency or political advantage. That did not mean that she was not pragmatic or that she would not compromise. She was and she did, but it was always from a foundation of principle—that is, a clear-headed view of what, in her estimation, was right and wrong. What would best further the principles of fairness, dignity and inclusion and advance the cause of social justice? That was always her primary motivation.

The second is public service. Throughout her career, in all the roles that she held, Jeane was driven by a deep sense of public service. Most people will not realise this, but, in the last couple of years of her life, Jeane spent a considerable amount of time preparing for and giving evidence to two public inquiries: the Scottish hospitals inquiry and the Covid inquiry. Given the extent to which that work was eating into her retirement, she could have been forgiven for grumbling about it, but she never did. That is because she understood and believed that, for a senior Government minister, the duty of service owed to the public does not end when one demits office.

The third hallmark—and, for me, the most important of all—is friendship. The most common thing that members of the public have said to me today is that our daily presence on their television screens during Covid helped them through that dreadful time. However, the truth is that I could not have done what I did during Covid without Jeane by my side. As health secretary, she had a massive responsibility of her own to carry, but she also helped me to bear mine. Particularly in those dark days of March and April 2020, there were times when, just before stepping on to the podium, I felt overwhelmed by the grimness of the update that I was about to give. In those moments, Jeane would often lightly touch my arm and say something simple, such as, "You can do this." That got me through.

For all Jeane's friends, the suddenness and severity of her diagnosis came as a profound and brutal shock. However, in the days that followed, there was also solace. We got to say to her the things we wanted her to know about her impact on our lives. We got to tell her that we loved her.

Visiting Jeane in hospital over those three short weeks also brought an incredible privilege. It allowed us to bear witness to the depth of the unconditional love that existed between her and Susan, who truly was the light and love of her life.

I say to Susan: love like yours and Jeane's is all too rare, and it does not die. It will be with you always, just as the memory and the legacy of Jeane Freeman, a woman I am so lucky to have had in my life, will be with all of us forever.

Rest in peace, my friend. [*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-20721, in the name of John Swinney, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament expresses its shock and sadness following the death of Jeane Freeman; appreciates her long contribution to public life and politics, including as the MSP for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, Minister for Social Security, where she established Social Security Scotland, and Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport during the COVID-19 pandemic; recognises the high esteem in which she was held by civic society and colleagues in all parties, and offers its deepest sympathy and condolences to her partner, family and many friends.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a short pause before we move on to business this afternoon.

Portfolio Question Time

Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic

14:43

Mossmorran (Workforce Support)

1. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on support provided to the Mossmorran workforce, following the early closure of the ExxonMobil Fife ethylene plant. (S6O-05547)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Last week, I confirmed that we will go beyond our £9 million commitment by extending targeted skills support to workers affected by the closure of the Mossmorran Fife ethylene plant, which was much due to the recommendations and representations that have been made by local members, including Annabelle Ewing, on behalf of the workforce.

Using this year's budget, we will provide training needs assessments, delivered by Fife College, for those facing redundancy.

Annabelle Ewing: I of course very much welcome the Scottish Government's original £9 million support package, plus the newly announced job-search support to be provided in tandem with Fife College. Has the Deputy First Minister yet heard from the United Kingdom Government as to whether it intends to match the Scottish Government's support to help to deliver a just transition for Mossmorran?

Kate Forbes: The short answer is no—I have not had any confirmation from the UK Government that it will, at least, match the Scottish Government's commitment. I have called on the UK Government to do that and wrote again today to urge it to do so. It is particularly critical off the back of the debate last week in which the Parliament joined together to call on the UK Government to provide the additional support to match the Scottish Government's support. I will continue to press the UK Government to match our commitment to the workers at Mossmorran.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Ministers indicate that they are supporting the Mossmorran workforce. I welcome the pledge of £9 million over three years and the job search that has been announced.

Of the £9 million, £3 million is being made available immediately. Will the Deputy First Minister publish a breakdown of how much of the £3 million has been released and what has been

delivered so far for the workforce and the contractors who are affected by the issue?

Kate Forbes: We will keep the Parliament informed about the spending of the funding. In relation to the first announcement, the funding offers immediate help while shaping how we deliver a fair transition for the workforce. It will be informed by the training needs assessments that are delivered by Fife College. We have started our work by talking to Fife College and the workforce to understand what the needs are; our funding will meet that need.

I imagine that we will be able to provide updates to the Parliament, but, at this stage, instead of giving a lump sum, the funding will be demand led and based on what the workforce needs.

Shipbuilding (Financial Support)

2. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what recent assessment it has made of the finance available for commercial shipbuilding projects at Scottish shipyards, including how the competitiveness of this compares with that of other European nations with commercial shipbuilding industries. (S6O-05548)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): We remain firmly committed to securing a sustainable, long-term future for shipbuilding in Scotland, which I know is very important to Mr Sweeney.

We are actively engaging with the United Kingdom Government's National Shipbuilding Office, which is exploring potential strategies for targeted financial interventions that may take place across the wider public sector and in the private finance space, to ensure that shipbuilding companies in Scotland remain competitive on a global scale. We also continue to engage with the UK Government on the review of the national shipbuilding strategy, emphasising Scotland's strengths in shipbuilding and maritime technology.

Paul Sweeney and I were both at an event yesterday that demonstrated how strong the Scottish shipbuilding sector is.

Paul Sweeney: I share the Deputy First Minister's enthusiasm and the impression that was created yesterday by the event at Rosyth dockyard to cut the first steel on the fourth Royal Navy type 31 frigate, HMS Bulldog. Shortly afterwards, the second ship in the class, HMS Active, was rolled out of the new indoor shipbuilding hall in dramatic fashion.

Scotland is now at the forefront of Europe's largest naval shipbuilding programme, but the contrast with the lack of commercial shipbuilding activity is stark. The main reason for that is the lack

of state-backed finance for commercial shipbuilding projects. Germany has used state-backed finance for shipbuilding for at least 30 years. Key instruments include the commercial interest reference rate ship financing programme, administered by the German state investment bank, which offers long-term fixed-rate loans for buyers of German-built ships. Will the Deputy First Minister commission a Government-led effort to build a similar state-backed financing scheme in Scotland that would give confidence to our remaining small commercial shipyards, including Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Ltd?

Kate Forbes: There are two parts to that question. First, I agree with Paul Sweeney that the strength of the workforce and the pipeline of orders that are coming through on the defence side are indicative of how much respect there is globally for the skills of Scottish shipbuilders.

Secondly, on the point about financing, there are certainly options for us to consider, through the enterprise agencies and the Scottish National Investment Bank. On shipbuilding in particular, there is an opportunity to work closely with the UK Government's National Shipbuilding Office to ensure that the Scottish shipbuilding industry benefits from the national and international opportunities of its shipbuilding strategy. We will continue to engage with the NSO, and I am more than happy to keep Mr Sweeney updated on the progress that we make.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Does the Deputy First Minister agree that it is vital that, in supporting the shipbuilding industry in Scotland, the Scottish Government works to deliver economic and social best value, given the history and the heritage of the industry and the industrial capability and capacity that it represents?

Kate Forbes: We absolutely recognise the economic and the social impact of the industry. Stuart McMillan, too, has recognised its social impact through the strength with which he has represented Inverclyde and the Ferguson Marine shipyard. I was delighted to meet the GMB representative Alex Logan, along with the First Minister, in the past few days, off the back of an invitation from Stuart McMillan, to understand just how critical it is that we retain those skills.

Food and Drink Sector (Exports)

3. **Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the economic contribution of the Scottish food and drink sector to Scotland's international exports. (S6O-05549)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): Scotland's £19 billion food

and drink sector remains vital to our economy, with its products making up around 30 per cent of total United Kingdom food and drink exports.

Despite challenging trading conditions, 2025 data from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs shows that whisky and salmon exports remain strong, being worth £5.4 billion and £828 million, respectively, which reflects the sector's exceptional businesses. We will continue to back their growth in new and existing markets through our six-point export plan and our £15 million investment in Scotland's industry-led food and drink strategy. Those are just two examples of how we are supporting the sector to ensure that it has a prosperous future.

Bill Kidd: Despite the recent figures that show that Scotland dramatically outperforms England on food and drink exports—in fact, we export more than six times as much per person—Scotland continues to face unnecessary barriers as a result of Westminster decisions, including on Brexit and trade deals that do not reflect Scotland's economic priorities, not to mention the Labour Party's crippling tax on Scotch whisky. What impact could a fresh start with independence have in allowing our world-class food and drink sector to reach its full potential?

Richard Lochhead: Clearly, if we were an independent state, we would have full control over our own trade strategy, and we could decide how to work with our European partners as part of our relationship with the European Union, as well as being able to make trade deals right around the world. I am sure that one objective that an independent Scotland would have would be to forge a much closer relationship with the EU, especially given issues such as the current geopolitical situation. That would give us an ideal route for supporting the further export of Scotland's food and drink products and the rest of our exports.

Orbex (Scottish National Investment Bank Investment)

4. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, following Orbex entering administration, what the likelihood is of the public purse receiving a return on the money invested in the company by the Scottish National Investment Bank. (S6O-05550)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Orbex entering administration is extremely disappointing, particularly for its workforce and the local community. As the constituency representative, Richard Lochhead has been engaging with me and the company, and I had a conversation just last week on the progress that is being made.

The process is now being led by the administrator, and the position on any return to creditors, including the Scottish National Investment Bank, will become clear in due course. I am currently having weekly meetings with the administrator.

Carol Mochan: It has been reported that £29 million was invested in Orbex via SNIB, all of which could potentially be lost. That follows the cancellation of the spaceport project in Prestwick in my region last year. A lot of public funds and a lot of jobs have been lost. How does the Government plan to support the space sector in the long term so that we do not see yet more projects going under, particularly in my region?

Kate Forbes: I share Carol Mochan's aspirations for the space sector, which we believe is a key priority for Scotland. It was identified as a key priority in the national strategy for economic transformation and in the innovation strategy. A lot of the support for the space sector has come out of those strategies.

We are world leading in small satellite manufacturing, with Glasgow building more satellites than any other place in Europe. It is important that we continue to speak to the strengths of the space sector, while recognising the challenges that Carol Mochan has rightly identified.

On the point about investment, it is worth acknowledging that risk is inherent in the operational and independent investment decisions that the SNIB makes. However, part of the opportunity in a growth sector such as space is to provide patient capital and to take on risk where the market will not. That is what will drive faster growth in sectors such as the space sector.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Banking Hubs

6. Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any benefits brought by the banking hub model that is operated by Post Office Ltd and funded by Cash Access UK. (S6O-05552)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): Regulation of financial services is reserved and, as such, the Scottish Government has no powers to undertake any assessment of the Financial Conduct Authority's access to cash regime, including the effectiveness of banking hubs. However, we engage regularly with the FCA, LINK, the Post Office and Cash Access UK on subjects such as access to cash, and we have raised Scotland-specific concerns and impacts following the introduction of the FCA's

new rules. The FCA is undertaking a post-implementation review of the regime in 2026, so we will have further opportunities to engage directly with it during that process.

Jamie Hepburn: The news that Kilsyth is to receive a banking hub is very welcome, as it has lost all its retail banks. However, Cumbernauld, which has also lost a number of retail banks, will not similarly benefit, largely due to the criteria of the current scheme being quite narrowly focused on access to cash. Does the minister agree that, in reviewing the scheme, there is an opportunity to take account of the wider range of benefits that can be brought by a banking hub model, including, for example, access to face-to-face appointments with banking personnel?

Richard Lochhead: We all recognise the importance of face-to-face banking services in our local high streets, and I welcome the fact that at least one community in the member's constituency will benefit from that. I remind members that any organisation or individual can ask LINK for a reassessment under the criteria if any decision has not gone its way in the past.

Scottish Government officials are working closely with the FCA. A forum on access to cash took place in October, just a few months ago, which gave us the opportunity to raise Scotland-specific concerns about some of the criteria and the impacts of the current regime directly with all the various players, including the FCA, LINK and Cash Access UK.

I agree with the member that there is still a lot of work to do to look at post-implementation of that regime and to make sure that Scotland's needs are taken into account. In the meantime, we will continue that engagement with the FCA.

Tourism Industry

7. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting the tourism industry. (S6O-05553)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): Tourism contributes more than £4 billion to our economy each year, and we continue to support the sector to thrive. In the draft budget, we allocated VisitScotland almost £40 million a year until 2029. That includes £1 million over the next two financial years to continue growing direct international connectivity, for example.

I can give some examples of what is happening in tourism at the moment. We have worked to improve connectivity from key markets, securing many new routes and adding substantial new capacity, with almost 27,000 new seats on aircraft, which is good news. More overseas visitors visited Scotland in the first half of 2025 than visited

anywhere in the United Kingdom outside of London and the south-east. In addition, the budget includes £4 million per year for the next three years for the rural tourism infrastructure fund.

Murdo Fraser: It is no exaggeration to say that the tourism sector is in a state of crisis. Barely a day goes by without seeing news in the media about a once-thriving business closing or a hotel, bar, restaurant or cafe shutting its doors due to rising energy and employment costs. Of course, the latest blow is the revaluation of non-domestic rates, which we continually hear will force closures right across the country.

We have seen some relief in the budget, but that will go nowhere towards addressing the concerns that many in the sector have. In Northern Ireland, the Sinn Féin finance minister has announced a pause to the revaluation because of the crisis there. Why will the Scottish Government not do the same?

Richard Lochhead: I have a regular dialogue with the tourism industry in Scotland, and I understand that, in many cases, bookings are looking healthy for the coming summer, so I do not want Murdo Fraser to talk down Scottish tourism. I also understand that it is now officially Scotland's biggest employer, and many new investments are being announced in the tourism sector, notwithstanding the very real pressures that the member has raised—in particular, energy costs, employment costs and VAT, which is one of the biggest subjects of a petition that is circulating in many hotels and pubs in Scotland. Those issues are reserved to the United Kingdom Government; they are not the responsibility of the Scottish Government.

On rates revaluation, which has been a regular subject in exchanges, the revaluation transitional relief that has been announced will protect those who are most affected by revaluation and will cap increases in gross liabilities until the next revaluation in 2029. The revaluation transitional relief that has been announced will save taxpayers an estimated £108 million over the next three years, ensuring that the gross bills of around 60,000 properties are lower in 2026-27 than they would otherwise have been. The Scottish Government has also announced that we will pass on to hospitality and pubs the consequential of what was announced south of the border. A number of other rates assistance measures are in the pipeline.

Those are very real issues, but the big issues that the member mentioned are reserved for the UK Government, and we need it to play its role. The petition that is circulating at the moment is about VAT, which is a big hit on the viability of businesses.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): Yesterday, at a rural leadership meeting, we heard from a hotelier on the west coast. They are doing extremely well, with bookings all year round, but after the increase in business rates, hardly anything is left by way of profit, and it is barely worth continuing. Businesses will close. Is it not the case, as I have just discovered in the past few days, that the estimates on which the Government relies for the amount of money that it will raise from its current proposals contain no allowance whatsoever for the closure of businesses on any significant scale? If that approach is wrong, and businesses close, surely the budget will end up with less money being brought in than would be if the business rates were set at a fair and affordable level. Is that not only wrong but financially reckless and counterproductive?

Richard Lochhead: Fergus Ewing will be aware that there is a review of business rates in the sectors that have been referred to, which is independently chaired and will take place over the next months and years. In the meantime, the Scottish Government has introduced transitional relief in our budget. We offer 15 per cent relief for properties that are liable for the basic or intermediate property rates in those sectors, capped at £110,000 per business per year. The Government is taking action to cap the increases that the member referred to, which is why I urge all members from all parties—or no party—to support the budget.

Economic Strategy

8. **Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland stating there is a “lack of a clear, long-term economic strategy for Scotland”. (S6O-05554)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): The Government has published a long-term economic strategy, setting out our 10-year mission to build a fairer, greener and growing economy. Our green industrial strategy also ensures that Scotland will secure maximum economic benefit from opportunities that are created by the global transition to net zero.

We are delivering on that strategy. For example, for the past 10 years, Scotland's economy has outperformed all parts of the United Kingdom except London in attracting inward investment, and we continue to attract investment to drive our future growth. I was delighted that, last week, Lenovo, the world's biggest producer of personal computers, announced that it had chosen to base its new artificial intelligence technology centre in Edinburgh, against European competition. That is just one of many examples of companies around the world—and, indeed, our own business

community—showing confidence in the future of the Scottish economy.

Pam Gosal: It is shocking that only 6 per cent of accountants in the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland said that they were confident in the state of Scotland's economy following last month's budget and 78 per cent said that they were not. The largest area of concern was the need for long-term economic and tax strategies, which the budget fails to provide. Why is the Scottish Government punishing talent and businesses with high taxes?

Richard Lochhead: As the member will be aware, 55 per cent of Scottish taxpayers are now expected to pay less income tax in 2026-27 than they would have if they lived south of the border. The level of unemployment in Scotland is lower than it is in the rest of the United Kingdom. We have seen higher growth in gross domestic product during the years since the Government came into power, and a higher level of productivity. I have already given an example of our success in attracting inward investment to the country.

However, it is a tough and fragile time for many businesses and for our economy, which relates to the previous question in relation to employment costs, energy costs and VAT in tourism and some related sectors. That is affecting Scottish businesses as much as it is affecting businesses in the rest of the UK, and that is why we need the UK Government to play its role as well.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Scotland's economy is being hammered by a UK Government that is out of touch with Scotland's needs. Rising employer national insurance contributions, the lack of support for Scotland's industries and the energy profits levy are costing jobs and investment and are putting the security of a just transition and Scotland's future at risk. Does the minister agree that strategic delivery for Scotland's economy requires an end to the reckless economic decisions that have been taken south of the border?

Richard Lochhead: Yes, and I hope that those in the Labour Party and the UK Government are listening, because Labour's poll standing reflects the fact that it is not looking after the Scottish economy.

As the member rightly said, at present, macroeconomic, fiscal, migration and other levers, in particular in relation to the oil and gas industry in her constituency, all lie with the UK Government, and the policy levers lie with the UK Government as well. If we had more powers in the Scottish Parliament, and if we were an independent state with full economic levers allowing us to work with the global community, we would be able to deliver

a far more prosperous economy and a far more prosperous Scotland.

Finance and Local Government

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next portfolio is finance and local government. Question 1 was not lodged.

Point of Entry Levy Consultation

2. **Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will publish responses to its consultation on a potential point of entry levy. (S6O-05556)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The responses to the consultation on a cruise ship levy, which included a scoping question on a potential point of entry levy, will be published next week alongside the analysis report. heating. [*Ivan McKee has corrected this contribution. See end of report.*]

Liam McArthur: I welcome the minister's response. He will be aware that, in Orkney Islands Council and among stakeholders in the tourism sector, as well as in the other main island groups, there is a belief that the only way of making a visitor levy workable in an island context is through a point of entry levy. I look forward to seeing the results of the consultation that will be published next week.

I regret that there has been more of a delay than either of us would have wished, but can you say any more about the intent of any future Government to deliver on the responses in relation to such a levy?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Ivan McKee: When we publish the information next week, the member will see the output from that consultation. I recognise the high levels of interest in the matter from island councils.

Clearly, what happens after publication will depend on the format of the next Government and how it chooses to take the matter forward. The current Government is very interested in continuing discussions to see what potential there is to give that power to local authorities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer : Question 3 comes from Rachael Hamilton, who joins us remotely.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): [*Inaudible.*—budget 2026-27—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Hamilton, could you repeat your question? We missed the first few words.

Budget 2026-27 (Women in Enterprise)

3. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how much it has allocated in its draft budget 2026-27 to support women in enterprise, including in the Scottish Borders. (S6O-05557)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government is committed to advancing women's entrepreneurship across Scotland, including in the Scottish Borders. In the draft Scottish budget 2026-27, the entrepreneurship and innovation budget has again increased, which reflects the priority that we place on supporting entrepreneurs.

Supporting women to start and scale up businesses is central to our broader enterprise strategy, and we aim to ensure that women benefit directly from our wider entrepreneurship and business support programmes, including the recently announced £2 million ecosystem fund.

In addition, we are currently piloting the pathways pre-start activity in the south of Scotland, which has been backed by £3 million of investment through South of Scotland Enterprise since 2024.

Rachael Hamilton: Freedom of information data from the Scottish Government agency South of Scotland Enterprise, covering the financial years from 2021-22 to 2025-26, shows that just five loans worth £481,500 were awarded to female-led organisations, compared with 22 loans totalling more than £5.48 million to non-female-led organisations. Given that data, does the finance secretary believe that women who are setting up businesses in rural areas such as the Scottish Borders are being supported equitably?

Shona Robison: I am disappointed to hear those figures. I will certainly look into the reasons for those decisions. Obviously, South of Scotland Enterprise makes decisions at arm's length from the Government, but I am concerned to hear that so few loans have been given to female-led organisations.

As I said in my initial answer, work is going on with the pathways pre-start activity, which is specifically designed to support underrepresented entrepreneurs, including women, with awards of up to £75,000.

I will write to Rachael Hamilton once I have managed to look into the figures that she has shared.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 has been withdrawn. I call Maggie Chapman, who joins us remotely.

Budget Consultation Processes (Impact on Third Sector Organisations)

5. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment the finance secretary has made of the impact of lengthy national budget consultation processes on the financial sustainability of third sector organisations in north-east Scotland. (S6O-05559)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government greatly values the vital role of the third sector across Scotland, and we recognise the real pressures that it is facing, given the financial context.

We are committed to doing what we can to improve the sustainability of the third sector. The late timing of the United Kingdom Government budget has had a knock-on effect on the timing of our budget, but significant work has been undertaken since the publication of our draft budget to ensure that as many third sector organisations as possible are notified of funding decisions for the forthcoming financial year.

Maggie Chapman: In Dundee, Dundee Contemporary Arts, the Dundee Rep, Dundee International Women's Centre, Harris Education and Recreation Association and many others are at risk of losing funding or closing projects. In Aberdeen, the anti-poverty fairer Aberdeen fund could be slashed, music lessons and libraries in schools cut, and support for unpaid carers removed.

Organisations are already reducing staff hours, not renewing contracts or closing life-changing and life-saving services because of delays to funding information. Given that our communities rely on local government and third sector services to survive, what reassurances can the cabinet secretary give to workers, communities and organisations that the delays that cost people their jobs, livelihoods and services will not be repeated in future years?

Shona Robison: I said to Maggie Chapman that the lateness of the UK Government budget has meant that there are challenges. However, she will be aware that, through the fairer funding pilots, we are trying to ensure that there is certainty over multiple years. As I also said in my initial answer, we are trying to get as many of the grant letters as possible out the door, to give people that certainty.

If Maggie Chapman wants to write to me with the specifics of those organisations—some of which might rely on local funding rather than national funding—I would be happy to look into the details that she has provided.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Many charities that are facing rising costs and falling donations need much more security and stability to enable them to plan and develop. I welcome the introduction of the new fairer funding pilot, which will provide additional multiyear funding in the form of 45 grants to organisations in Scotland. That is an important first step in more widely mainstreaming multiyear funding agreements across the third sector. Will the cabinet secretary say more about how that funding will support organisations, particularly in planning for the future and making the most of their resources?

Shona Robison: Increasing multiyear funding opportunities is the backbone of the fairer funding principles. The recent announcements of multiyear funding for the delivering equally safe fund, disabled people's organisations and advice services have increased the total funding by a further £29.4 million. Where it is possible to do so, providing multiyear funding increases the stability of the third sector. I am pleased that the early evaluation of the pilot indicates the positive difference that two-year funding certainty has had on the stability of the organisations, on their ability to plan further into the future and on staff recruitment and retention.

Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 (Child Disability Payment Exemption)

6. **Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind):** To ask the Scottish Government whether regulations rectifying the oversight whereby children in receipt of the Scottish child disability payment were not receiving an exemption under the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 will be introduced before the end of the current parliamentary session. (S6O-05560)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 Amendment Regulations 2026 were laid in the Scottish Parliament on 9 January 2026. The regulations expand the list of qualifying benefits to include all forms of disability assistance that are provided under the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, a broader range of United Kingdom disability and war-related benefits and equivalent payments that are received under European Union/European Economic Area, Switzerland, Gibraltar, Northern Ireland or UK-Ireland social security arrangements where the recipient is resident in the UK.

Jeremy Balfour: I thank the minister for that clarification and for all the work that he and his team have done to get the regulations on board. The regulations will make a massive difference to many families with disabled children. It is good to see that at least one promise has been followed through by this Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am not entirely sure that there was a question in there, but I am sure that you will find something to say, minister.

Ivan McKee: Jeremy Balfour's comments are a testament to what can be done when there is a constructive working relationship across the Parliament to deliver for the people of Scotland. This Government is keen to engage with all members where we can work together to improve the lives of those whom we serve.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Ind): The regulations are a good example of how the extra costs that disabled people face can be addressed through initiatives that Governments bring in. Does the minister agree that there is therefore a need to look across Government portfolios to reduce the extra costs that disabled people face, including in relation to things such as the visitor levy?

Ivan McKee: We took those steps on the visitor levy because we believed that that was the right thing to do, for the reasons that Pam Duncan-Glancy highlighted. I am sure that whatever Government is next in power will be keen to continue considering opportunities in its work to address the additional costs that disabled people face.

Local Authority Funding Settlements

7. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that local authorities receive fair and sustainable funding settlements. (S6O-05561)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The total local government finance settlement has increased by £5.4 billion, or 52 per cent, between 2016-17 and 2026-27. That is a real-terms increase of almost 10 per cent, despite austerity measures from the United Kingdom Government.

Sustainability requires reform and innovation across the public sector to deliver joined-up and preventative services, as set out in the public service reform strategy. The Scottish Government will continue to work in partnership to address the challenges that councils are facing and ensure that we are operating the sustainable, high-quality public services that communities expect and deserve.

Katy Clark: In the past decade, North Ayrshire Council has made cuts of more than £90 million to local services. Last week, residents were notified that the local health and social care partnership is consulting on cuts to social care, with one option being to restrict social care to people who are assessed as being at critical risk. Will the cabinet secretary intervene to provide fair and sustainable funding for North Ayrshire Council so that social

care and other local services are protected from further cuts?

Shona Robison: I mentioned in my initial response the increase in the local government settlement over the years. This year's settlement is £15.7 billion. Importantly, within the general revenue grant, there is £253 million of flexible resources. The national health service has received a significant real-terms increase as well. That is not to say that there are not challenges within health and social care partnerships—there absolutely are, because of demographic changes and the pressures on local services. That is why those real-terms increases are important.

Going forward, the solution will require transforming local services, including in our health and social care partnerships. I am happy to correspond with Katy Clark on the specifics if she would find that useful.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The cabinet secretary has stated that the settlement is fair and sustainable, but Clackmannanshire Council, which is in my region, projects a budget gap of £7.34 million for 2026-27. As councils across Scotland are forced to consider double-digit council tax rises for a second consecutive year, will the cabinet secretary stand by the Government's claim that there is no need for substantial council tax rises to balance local government budgets?

Shona Robison: The main call from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which is the representative body of local government, was for full local discretion over council tax. COSLA leaders, including the Tory COSLA leader, were adamant that they wanted to have full local discretion over council tax. That discretion means that there will be differences in local decision making. For example, Glasgow City Council is increasing council tax by 5.9 per cent, while Tory-controlled Moray Council is increasing it by 10 per cent. There will be variation across Scotland, but that is what local democracy is all about.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary advise members what specific increases in funding Labour has proposed for local government in the 2026-27 budget, and where it has said that the money will come from? What will be the impact on services of the £17.127 million in public-private partnership payments in 2026-27 that Labour saddled North Ayrshire Council with, and the burden of £6.8 million in employer national insurance contributions, which together equate to a third of all moneys raised in council tax this year?

Shona Robison: Kenny Gibson is quite right to point to the burdens on local government of the private finance initiative legacy contracts and of

the higher employer national insurance contribution costs.

The Labour Party had no specific asks and made no proposals on local government during the budget negotiations, but that is nothing new.

Learn to Swim Programme

8. **Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how much funding it has allocated to local authorities for the delivery of the learn to swim programme in its budget 2026-27. (S6O-05562)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): We are providing £20 million to ensure that all children and young people in Scotland can take part in sporting activities, harnessing the energy and excitement of the upcoming 2026 summer of sport. That includes the universal learn to swim offer for every child in Scotland, which will continue beyond this year. A national project group has been established to support implementation, provide oversight and enable learning and consistency across partners. Local authorities will be able to draw down from the costed implementation plan, in line with their local context.

Neil Bibby: The cabinet secretary will be aware that I support and welcome any measures that will give our children the opportunity to learn to swim, which is a life-saving skill, but it is vital that councils are fully funded so that that is fully delivered. Will the cabinet secretary say how much of the £20 million funding she expects to be used for the universal learn to swim offer? Will the amount that the Scottish Government allocates help with the full roll-out? Is that based on every local authority being allocated funding for delivery, including facility, teaching and transport costs? Has there been recent engagement with local government on the deliverability and affordability of the Government's proposed learn to swim programme?

Shona Robison: As I said in my initial answer, work is on-going on the modelling, which will indicate the timeframe for full implementation. The programme will be fully funded by the envelope that is provided, and officials are in the process of working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the details of that. It is important that that is done in partnership, and those discussions are on-going.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Although I echo Neil Bibby's welcoming of the initiative to ensure that all children get access to swimming, that access is not equitable at the moment, with many pools closing. In the cabinet secretary's deliberations about how to deliver equitable access to swimming, was any work done

to show whether we should use the money in school curriculum time, so as to fish where the fish are, to use an old phrase?

Shona Robison: It is hard to tell whether that was a welcome, but the implementation plan supports the roll-out of the national primary school swimming framework. That partnership involving local government and Scottish Swimming aims to ensure that every primary school child has the opportunity to learn to swim. We should all welcome that, without finding reasons to moan about it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on finance and local government.

Protecting Children from Harm

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Jenny Gilruth on protecting children from harm. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:26

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Safeguarding Scotland's children from harm is one of the Scottish Government's utmost responsibilities. Since my previous parliamentary statement in December, I have spent further time engaging directly with survivors of child sexual abuse. Their testimonies are shocking in the extreme. They tell the story of a system that far too often does not believe young people. Those stories, each of which is unique, are bound by a common thread of power being used to abuse, coerce and control. Survivors have rightly called for meaningful change. They want decisive action to uncover, disrupt and, ultimately, prevent these horrendous crimes from ever happening in the first instance.

The Scottish child abuse inquiry has taken extensive evidence and has published a number of reports on the abhorrent historical abuse of children. I strongly welcome Lady Smith's work in phase 10, and the confirmation that the inquiry will be able to hear and act on evidence relating to grooming and group-based child sexual abuse where that falls within the inquiry's terms of reference. That work remains vitally important, and I commend the inquiry for its approach.

I welcome the updates that were provided to the Education, Children and Young People Committee this morning on the completion of the first phase of Police Scotland's review work and the on-going delivery of the national review. Some commentary has suggested that the findings of the national review will be available only once the review is fully complete. I want to be clear with Parliament and survivors today that that is not the case. Phase 1 of the national review will report to ministers by this summer.

The work of the national review is imperative in providing assurance that improvements will be made at the local level. It will also be instructive, given the challenges of reporting and recording of child sexual abuse at the local level. I reiterate that, if any harm or risk to a young person is identified at any point during the national review, that will immediately be escalated through the appropriate channels, including to Police Scotland, as required.

I remind Parliament that our local authorities already have statutory responsibilities to identify, report and take action to protect any child who is at risk of harm. As a society, we all have a responsibility to protect our children. However, as I made clear in December, there is limited evidence at the current time on the nature and extent of group-based child sexual abuse in Scotland. It is therefore imperative that that evidence base is established at pace to clarify next steps and to lessen prolonged suffering for the victims of these crimes.

I know that members and survivors of child sexual abuse want to see accountability and improvements as quickly as possible, and that sense of urgency is shared by Government.

In December, I made it clear that the Government would keep the decision on whether to establish an inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse under review. I committed to return to the Parliament in February with a more substantive update. Accordingly, I have considered the issue carefully, looked at the available evidence—which continues to evolve—and, importantly, listened to the voices of survivors and experts.

To that end, I can confirm to the Parliament today that I intend to establish a statutory public inquiry, under the Inquiries Act 2005. The inquiry will consider directly Scotland's response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation. I have asked Professor Alexis Jay to lead the inquiry, and I am pleased to confirm that she has agreed to do so.

Professor Jay has unrivalled experience of chairing both statutory and non-statutory inquiries that relate to child sexual abuse and exploitation. She will have the authority to identify and take forward any additional or accelerated areas of work as she considers necessary within the scope of finalised terms of reference, which will now be developed with her input. She will draw on her experience of leading the independent inquiry in Rotherham and the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales, as well as her vast experience in other areas of child protection, which includes over 30 years of professional experience in social work.

In order to maintain the strict independence of this work and the inquiry, Professor Jay will immediately cease her role providing advice to the national review. While the inquiry's terms of reference are being developed, Professor Jay will remain chair of the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, and those arrangements will be reviewed.

However, I am of the view that the announcement of an independent public inquiry is

critical to maintaining public confidence in the work that I announced in December and to encouraging openness and participation from victims and survivors. This inquiry will be distinct from the Scottish child abuse inquiry: it will focus specifically on group-based child abuse and exploitation, whereas the Scottish child abuse inquiry, despite looking at those issues, has a far broader remit. The new inquiry will focus on the potential prevalence of group-based abuse now and in the more recent past, whether it has been brought forward by survivors or in relation to the findings from the national review or Police Scotland's review of case files.

The Scottish child abuse inquiry will remain critical. As I have previously made clear to the Parliament, the existing inquiry has taken, and continues to take, evidence in relation to group-based harm and sexual exploitation of children in care, wherever the abuse took place. In due course, it will also make recommendations about our system of protection for children in care, based on all the evidence that it has heard.

This morning, alongside the Deputy First Minister, I met Lady Smith to inform her of the decision to announce the new inquiry. I have confirmed that the new inquiry will not duplicate the on-going valuable work of the Scottish child abuse inquiry in this area.

Taking the decision to establish an inquiry now enables us to make progress in parallel with the on-going national review and the Police Scotland review of cases. Establishing the inquiry will also provide additional assurance to survivors that there will be independent scrutiny of the national review's findings. Although I, Professor Jay and the inspectorates have confidence in the robustness of those processes, which are very much operationally independent, that additional layer of independence will provide survivors with further assurance and confidence.

For many survivors, distrust is rooted in lived experience of past failures to protect children from organisations, address allegations or take concerns seriously. There is a perception that institutions act defensively in order to protect organisational reputations rather than prioritise truth seeking or accountability. That has been a consistent theme in my discussions with survivors. All too often, when victims spoke up, institutions already knew, and institutions that had the powers to act—and importantly, the powers to help—did not act to prevent abuse from occurring. Therefore, the inquiry will have the fullest investigatory powers that it requires. Along with the appointment of Professor Alexis Jay as chair, I hope that that provides survivors and the public with confidence in the process and its necessary independence.

In December, survivor engagement was a key theme in my update to the Parliament. Getting that right is imperative. Therefore, I am pleased to confirm to the Parliament that John O'Brien, who led the truth project in England and Wales, has agreed to lead the development and delivery of a truth project in Scotland. To support our work, John O'Brien will bring a wealth of experience and expertise in delivering a successful project that has already supported thousands of survivors in England and Wales. Last week, I met Mr O'Brien to better understand the approach that he built to support the independent inquiry on child sexual abuse in England and Wales.

Our approach in Scotland will seek to mirror that work. We will ensure that we hear from survivors and allow them the opportunity to share their experiences, which will inform policy change. Importantly, we will provide access to support. The national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group will also consider how it can engage survivors in its work.

Given the scale and costs to the public purse of public inquiries, the Government has not taken this step lightly. Nonetheless, I consider the establishment of a public inquiry to now be essential. Although it will be for the chair to consider such matters, I know from our discussions thus far that Professor Jay wants the inquiry to be carried out at pace.

The Government is determined to act decisively to protect children from the horrendous harm of child sexual abuse and exploitation. The work of the national review and Police Scotland's on-going review of cases of group-based abuse will ensure that any improvements that must be made to practice or action to bring perpetrators to justice are made as quickly as possible.

The truth project will ensure that the voice of survivors is central to our collective efforts, so that every action is informed by their experiences and brings about the changes that they have told me must be made. John O'Brien's involvement and his particular expertise and experience of delivering a successful project to support the one that we will establish in Scotland will be essential. The statutory inquiry that will be chaired by Professor Alexis Jay will contribute to an even more comprehensive response.

It is imperative that all organisations with responsibilities for safeguarding use their powers to ensure that our children are protected. We know that that has not always been the case in the past and that, as a result, children and young people have been let down and lives have been ruined.

The announcement of an independent public inquiry will not cure all that has come before, but it is a statement of intent from the Government that

we will leave no stone unturned in the pursuit of justice for survivors of child sexual abuse. Indeed, those brave survivors should expect nothing less.

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

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

Finally. We have been calling for a public inquiry on grooming gangs since my colleague, Liam Kerr, lodged an amendment in that regard in September last year. I note that the statement refers to the Government sharing the sense of urgency, but, to be clear, we are at this point only because of the relentless campaigning by victims groups and the continual questions that my Conservative colleagues have asked.

We have known for some time that victims have highlighted cross-border trafficking, and it is scandalous that they were not listened to before now. Every day that we have waited for an inquiry, another victim has gone without the justice that they deserve.

When pushed, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs asked Meghan Gallacher to make the case for a public inquiry and questioned what added value it would bring. I wonder what has happened to change the Government's mind in that regard.

It is essential that the inquiry is independent, its terms of reference must be defined without further delay, and all institutions must be held accountable.

Cabinet secretary, your colleagues have misled the Parliament on the matter, so we must have absolute faith in the process and the inquiry's findings. What are the inquiry's parameters? Is anything off limits? What does the Government expect the timeframe to be for the report to be published for scrutiny? Will you provide MSPs with any additional evidence that has led to this U-turn? The inquiry will consider historical matters, but what immediate targeted support will be provided to police, social work and specialist child protection services to ensure for victims that there are no more cover-ups?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Jenny Gilruth: Roz McCall touched on a number of points, and I will try to cover each in turn.

Ms McCall talked specifically about having faith in the process. Throughout my engagement with

survivors, I have been keen to ensure that all these issues are not politicised. Across the board, we need to be careful not to use individual cases in the chamber, for example. Instead, we must consider the evidence base, which is exactly what I have been doing throughout this process, in order to arrive at informed decisions.

In December, I gave an update to the Parliament on the work of the inspectorates. On Ms McCall's point about timescales and the terms of reference, that work will be pivotal in informing Alexis Jay's understanding of the terms of reference. She will be the inquiry's independent chair, so it is not for me, as the cabinet secretary, to stipulate what the terms of reference should be.

The point about independence has also consistently been put to me by survivors. I am sure that Roz McCall has also heard that through her engagement with survivors, many of whom lack faith in some of those organisations, for well understood reasons. Bringing a level of independence to the process is, therefore, hugely important.

Roz McCall mentioned that this represented a U-turn from Government. However, I do not necessarily accept that point. The wording of my statement in December was very clear that the Government was not, at that point, ruling out further inquiries in this space. I also said that I would come back to Parliament in February with a more substantive update. I have done that today and I have committed to a further inquiry, which I am glad to hear that Conservative members will support.

I will make a final point in relation to policing, which is that additional funding has been provided to Police Scotland through the budget. We will, of course, come to stage 3 of the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill later this afternoon, and I very much hope that the Conservatives find themselves able to vote for a budget that will provide additional income to Police Scotland to allow it to respond to some of the real challenges that we see in relation to child sexual abuse.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the national press for the advance sight of this announcement; it would have been preferable if we had heard it in the chamber first.

Scottish Labour fully supports the establishment of an inquiry into the full extent of group-based child exploitation in order to get to the truth behind the problem. I thank the cabinet secretary for her updates and I am grateful for all the work that has been done by Professor Alexis Jay.

It seems that we do not have any early indications of what data there is to date, which the inquiry will scrutinise. The first phase was to report

in the summer, but we now have an expedited timetable, which is welcome. However, I want to be clear about what has informed the decision to bring it forward. What do we know now that we did not know then? Has substantial information emerged since then? Has there been any preliminary estimation of the extent of grooming gang crime in Scotland? Given that there has been only one meeting of the review, I wonder whether, and how, substantial information has come to light. I think that the cabinet secretary has to share that information. If she is not able to share it today, I have to ask: what exactly will the inquiry be looking at, until it gets the evidence? Does it mean that the inquiry cannot get off the ground until victims come forward and give that data?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I ask the cabinet secretary to respond, I will take up the first issue that Ms McNeill raised. It is, of course, the case that one should not read in the media about an announcement of such significance before the information has been made known to this Parliament. It is extremely disappointing and, indeed, disrespectful to this Parliament and its elected representatives that that appears to have been the case in this instance.

Jenny Gilruth: I will take Pauline McNeill's points in turn, beginning with her question about expedited timescales. To confirm, the announcement that I have made today on an independent inquiry is not going to offset the timescales that are already set out by the inspectorate: those are set in relation to the work that will report in the summer. That will help to inform the terms of reference that Alexis Jay will then seek to develop, as an independent chair.

Pauline McNeill also mentioned that there has been one meeting of the review. I know that Alexis Jay was in front of the Education, Children and Young People Committee this morning. In her evidence, she stated that she has been meeting the inspectorates nearly every week and that she has been impressed by the co-operation and quality of work, which is being carried out at pace. The work started in November and the inspectorates have appropriately engaged with Alexis Jay on her knowledge of the subject matter. According to the evidence that was heard in Parliament earlier today, therefore, there have been a number of different engagements in relation to the work of the inspectorates. My view is that that work will complement the work of the independent inquiry, but it is for the independent chair to arrive at the terms of reference, working with Government in that regard.

There is an issue here in relation to independence, which goes back to the point that I made to Roz McCall. It is about survivors having faith in the process, and providing an independent

inquiry will allow survivors to have that faith, which is hugely important. I have been keen to engage and reflect on some of those engagements, including with Ms Constance at the cross-party group very recently. We need to ensure that survivors have faith in the process.

I also announced today further work in relation to the truth project, which John O'Brien will lead on. That will also bring a new approach to survivor engagement and will, I believe, strengthen our approach in Scotland. It has worked very well in other parts of the United Kingdom, and I am very pleased that John O'Brien has agreed to lead that piece of work with us. It will complement the work of the independent inquiry and, more broadly, the work of the inspectorates, which will continue in parallel to the inquiry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members wish to ask questions, so we need succinct questions and answers to match.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): At this morning's Education, Children and Young People Committee meeting, I asked His Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary in Scotland how long decisions around the review and the reading of case files and datasets would take. He said that that would take another year or so. In her statement, the cabinet secretary said that she has been considering the issue carefully and looking at the available evidence, which continues to evolve. She has not answered the question of what new evidence has become available or what, beyond the Scottish Conservatives' calls for the inquiry, the Government has based this decision on. Will she tell the Parliament today what additional information she now has?

Jenny Gilruth: It is fair to say that the evidence base on the issue continues to evolve. I have set out some of our work on the requirements for this to be an independent inquiry, which is hugely important. I have spent a great deal of time listening to survivors, which has also formed part of our thinking with regard to the inquiry. It is imperative that survivors have faith in the work of the inspectorates and the work of the independent inquiry.

The broader work that I mentioned, which is to be led by John O'Brien, will sit alongside the inquiry. That unique piece of work will be hugely important for providing information and listening to survivors. As cabinet secretary, I have set up engagements for MSPs on a cross-party basis throughout this process. We held one such engagement in a parliamentary committee room in January with all the inspectorates and Alexis Jay. We will hold another in March, and I am keen to ask John O'Brien to attend it in order to ensure that MSPs across the political divide are kept up to

date, although I recognise that we are approaching dissolution.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am delighted to hear about the establishment of the truth project and the inquiry. Will the cabinet secretary provide further detail about how the truth project and the inquiry will interact and work alongside each other to ensure that survivors' voices feed into the inquiry, which you have rightly said is a priority?

Jenny Gilruth: As I said, the remit of the truth project will be developed, and part of that will involve consideration of its interaction with the inquiry. Members who attended this morning's Education, Children and Young People Committee meeting heard more from Alexis Jay on the detail of the truth project. It is not necessary for a truth project to run alongside a statutory inquiry, but, as I know from John O'Brien, if they do so, that can provide valuable information from survivors. The establishment of a Scottish truth project will allow survivors the opportunity to share their experiences, inform policy changes and, importantly, access support.

I am mindful that, when we talk about such issues in the chamber, it can be retraumatising for victims, so we need to be careful about the way in which we conduct ourselves and talk about such issues. That is why the truth project, which John O'Brien will lead, is so important. Mr O'Brien was secretary to the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales. He also led the development of the truth project, which ran alongside it. We will learn from his extensive experience to the benefit of survivors in Scotland.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Inquiries are often held after an event. However, the cabinet secretary said in her statement that this inquiry will focus on the potential prevalence of group-based abuse now and in the more recent past. How will the inquiry manage reports of abuse that is happening now? Our lack of understanding of the extent of the problem feeds into whether the abuse is historical or whether it is happening now in Scotland.

Jenny Gilruth: Claire Baker raises a hugely important point. To my mind, we will have to identify and respond to those issues through the terms of reference that we will develop with Professor Alexis Jay. We have heard media reports about a variety of issues in recent times. I am loth to raise any individual cases in the chamber—I would not do that as cabinet secretary. However, it is important that we have an understanding of the evidence base.

As I said in my statement, as the Education, Children and Young People Committee heard this morning, and as continues to be the case, the

evidence base on this issue is disjointed in some areas, and the ways in which organisations record some of this type of behaviour and criminality is not consistent across the board. The work of the inspectorates is fundamental in that regard, but, in response to Claire Baker's point, the terms of reference are also key. As I set out in my statement, the Scottish child abuse inquiry also has a locus with regard to historical cases, so we need to develop terms of reference that respect the Scottish child abuse inquiry and do not in any way overlap with its responsibilities. We will continue to work with Alexis Jay on that. I hope that that gives assurance on the points that Claire Baker has rightly raised.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The national review that is being carried out by the inspectorates is vital—particularly its third phase, which is on improvement. Will the cabinet secretary assure me that that work will continue alongside the inquiry and that, if changes in practices or processes are identified as necessary, they will be made?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much agree with Jackie Dunbar. The inspectorate-led review is critical. In the phase 1 assessment, the inspectorates are scrutinising the data and the evidence from all local authorities on the threat and risk of group-based abuse and exploitation. Phase 2, which is about assurance, will use those findings to carry out targeted scrutiny to identify strengths and weaknesses in local prevention, identification and response arrangements. Phase 3 will identify improvement needs, including those requiring national action. Additionally, a national report and improvement programme will be provided to the Government to support better outcomes for children and young people.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The cabinet secretary may be aware of the conviction of an offender last week for threatening and abusive behaviour against one of our parliamentary colleagues—actions that were directly related to far-right campaigning on this issue. Some members of the Parliament have used social media to stir up hostility against others on the issue. That action has consequences. Does the cabinet secretary agree that we all have a responsibility to stand up to extremist rhetoric and to treat the issue with the seriousness that it deserves, instead of fanning the flames of conspiracy and division?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Harvie for the general sentiment of his question in relation to us all having a responsibility to stand up to extremist rhetoric. Yes—I very much agree with that. I believe that the way in which we conduct ourselves in the chamber sends a strong message to children and young people, and to the public, who we are all elected to

represent in this place. I very much agree with the sentiment behind Mr Harvie's question.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I welcome the establishment of the inquiry, and I wish Professor Alexis Jay well. As the cabinet secretary acknowledged, all too often when young people have spoken up about their experience of abuse, they have been failed by institutions that are responsible for their care.

The bairns' hoose model, which is being rolled out across Scotland, is designed to support children when they disclose hurt or harm. Alongside the inquiry work, and dealing with the present concerns, can the cabinet secretary confirm whether the Government will invest more in that model to protect children, prevent sexual abuse and ensure that specialist support is available to every child who needs it?

Jenny Gilruth: On Monday, I was in London at an interministerial group meeting, where I learned a bit more about the United Kingdom Government's approach. Mr McArthur will be pleased to hear that our UK Government colleagues are coming to Scotland to learn more about the bairns' hoose model and all the work that we have undertaken in that space.

On the bairns' hoose model, there are now seven projects across the country that are funded by the Scottish Government, and there is funding in the budget that we will be considering later—I am sure that Mr McArthur and his colleagues will be voting for and supporting that. Under the bairns' hoose model, education works with health and justice on a cross-portfolio basis to provide support to survivors of child sexual abuse. It is hugely important that we listen to the voices of young people.

One point that I have not yet mentioned relates to the truth project and how we will take account of the voices of young people. John O'Brien will be providing further advice on that.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): It is welcome that Professor Alexis Jay, with her considerable experience and expertise from leading the inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales, will chair the inquiry that was announced today. The inquiry that was held was thorough, and I note that it took seven years. Can the cabinet secretary provide clarity on timescales for the forthcoming inquiry? I can see that survivors, as well as the public, would prefer to have findings in a considerably shorter timeframe.

Jenny Gilruth: I very much agree with the sentiment behind Ms Harper's question. The timescales for an independent statutory inquiry rightly require dialogue with the independent chair, which has to take into account the draft terms of

reference and the Inquiries Act 2005. From my discussions thus far, I know that Professor Jay wants to ensure that the inquiry is timely and carried out at pace, while having the flexibility to investigate any areas that may come up through the inquiry process. The scope of the inquiry is important in helping to set parameters; it should not be wider than necessary or open ended, as that can have consequences both for the time taken and for the costs of conducting the inquiry more broadly.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

The Scottish Conservatives have been calling for an inquiry for months, but there has been no urgency from the Government—none whatsoever. It was confirmed in November 2025 that we did not know the true scale and nature of grooming gangs. I even asked a question on it, and it has taken the Government four months to come to the chamber today to announce an inquiry. What concerns me more is that the cabinet secretary seems unable to tell Parliament what further information has come to light for the Government to change its mind.

The inquiry needs to be fearless and fully transparent and, most important, it needs to have victims at its heart. The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee considered a petition that called for a national whistleblowing officer to be established. Will the Scottish Government now consider that, to give whistleblowers the confidence to come forward and stand up for victims, so that victims get the justice that they deserve?

Jenny Gilruth: I hope that Meghan Gallacher welcomes the announcement today. I agree with her sentiment that any inquiry needs to be fearless and transparent and to have victims at its heart—that is exactly the approach that I have taken throughout the process.

The member mentioned the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, which was considering a petition on the matter this morning. I confirm that I have written directly to that committee, and I hope that the move from the Government in this area will be welcomed by the committee and the petitioner.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The specialist investigatory and intelligence role of Police Scotland is crucial to bringing perpetrators to account. Can the cabinet secretary provide an assurance that the officers who are conducting the review have the necessary experience, training and resources to undertake this highly complex and specialist piece of work?

Jenny Gilruth: As Audrey Nicoll knows, Police Scotland has a well-established specialist capability in that area, including officers and staff who are specifically trained in child protection,

sexual abuse investigations and trauma-informed engagement.

The Government recognises the scale and the sensitivity of the work, which is why, in the budget, we have provided £2.7 million of additional funding to Police Scotland to ensure that dedicated resources are available for it to undertake the specialist review. That funding is specifically intended to support the capacity and the expertise required for work that is so complex and important.

Police Scotland has strong foundations for taking a national approach to this most serious of issues, including through the national child abuse investigation unit.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind):

Tomorrow afternoon, we will debate the Finance and Public Administration Committee's report on the cost of and time taken by public inquiries. We have had public inquiries that have cost £50 million and £100 million; one took nine years. It is not good enough for the cabinet secretary to say that this inquiry will be done "at pace". Surely there has to be a timeline and a cost—because the money that goes into the inquiry is taken away from the police, social workers and the national health service.

Jenny Gilruth: I recognise the challenge in the points that Mr Mason raises. He will recognise, too, the limitations that are put on the Government by the Inquiries Act 2005 in relation to costs and stipulating timescales. However, to give assurance, I have discussed those matters with Alexis Jay, who is keen to move at pace. Of course, those things will be discussed and agreed to accordingly in the terms of reference.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement. I apologise to the member I was unable to call—I have to protect the time for the afternoon's business that was agreed to by the Parliament.

Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill: Stage 3

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): As members will be aware, the Presiding Officer is required under standing orders to decide whether or not, in her view, any provision of a bill relates to a protected subject matter—that is, whether it modifies the electoral system and franchise for Scottish parliamentary elections. In the Presiding Officer's view, no provision of the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill relates to a protected subject matter; therefore, the bill does not require a supermajority to be passed at stage 3.

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20860, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill at stage 3. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government to open the debate.

15:59

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): I am pleased to open the stage 3 debate on the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill. Before turning to the substance of the debate, I want to thank those whose work has brought us to this point: the Finance and Public Administration Committee and all the parliamentary committees that have applied rigorous scrutiny to the budget; the Scottish Fiscal Commission, which provides the independent forecasts that underpin our decisions; and the officials across the Scottish Government whose dedication ensures that a publication of such a scale can be delivered. I am also grateful to the First Minister and Cabinet colleagues for their support throughout, and to those Opposition members who have engaged constructively throughout the process.

Turning to the substance of the debate, I want to begin where all meaningful public work must begin—with the people whose lives are shaped by what happens in this chamber. Every decision that we take shapes the lives of people across Scotland—their daily experiences, the services that they rely on and the opportunities that they hope for.

As Parliament is aware, the fiscal and economic context remains highly challenging. Even in the past three years alone—the period for which I have served as Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government—we have faced sustained inflation, higher interest rates, pressure on household incomes and increasing costs for public services. Despite that, we have focused on practical action

to support people, to strengthen our economy and to build resilience.

We can see the results of that approach in Scotland's economic performance. For 10 consecutive years, Scotland has been the leading place in the United Kingdom, outside London, for inward investment, and independent assessments have confirmed that the Scottish Government has a high investment grade credit rating.

Our income tax policy for 2026–27 will continue to protect the majority of taxpayers while supporting the investment that is needed in our public services and the social contract. We are maintaining our commitment to shield those on lower incomes: more than half of taxpayers are expected to pay less in Scotland than they would elsewhere in the UK.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): This year, 66,000 additional Scots will be dragged into the Scottish National Party's higher tax regime. Are they high earners?

Shona Robison: Around three quarters—74 per cent—of taxpayers are expected to be unaffected by our maintaining the higher rate threshold at the same level. The resources that are raised as a result of our taxation policy go into public services. That would be put at risk by the £1 billion of unfunded, unaffordable tax cuts that the Tories want to inflict on Scotland.

The social contract is very important, and we have continued to protect the core elements of it that the people of Scotland rely on every day—the foundations that help to support wellbeing, opportunity and connection across Scotland. We have kept prescriptions free; we have maintained free tuition; we have continued to expand free school meals; we have protected free bus travel for under-22s and over-60s; and we have provided free baby boxes to give every child the best start in life. Those commitments help to make daily life a little steadier and a little fairer, and they reflect the values that we share as a nation.

Many members take pride in Scotland's progress on child poverty, and I share that pride. During my time as Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, and in the years since, we have continued to see real improvements as we work towards the 2030 child poverty targets that were unanimously endorsed by this Parliament. In 2026–27, the Scottish child payment will rise with inflation, supporting the families of around 330,000 children. From 2027–28, we will increase the payment for families with a baby under one to £40 per week.

The impacts of targeted benefits spending are borne out by the evidence that we see. Relative child poverty is at its lowest level since 2014–15, and absolute child poverty at its lowest annual rate

in 30 years. In 2023-24, both were nine percentage points lower than the UK average. As a result, 90,000 fewer children in Scotland are in poverty than would otherwise be the case. That investment in our children is investment that is worth making.

However, progress is not measured only in statistics. Across Scotland, local partnerships are making a real difference. The Dundee fairer futures partnership is one example of that. It brings key services together in trusted community spaces and takes a targeted approach to supporting the families who need it most. I saw that at first hand during a visit that I made some time ago to the Brooksbank Centre in Linlathen, in my constituency, where the partnership model has delivered more than £2 million in employment and income maximisation support. Since then, the approach has been expanded into Douglas and Stobswell, and families consistently highlight how convenient and accessible it is. As one parent said,

“they’re able to do it all in one place ... it’s great that it’s on my doorstep.”

The budget strengthens that wider support. This summer, all primary school pupils will have access to free swimming lessons as part of our wider summer of sport, and, by August 2027, every primary and special school will have a breakfast club.

The budget backs Scotland’s economy, with targeted investment in skills, infrastructure and business growth. For housing, it delivers a record-breaking settlement of £926 million for affordable housing supply—the strongest support for affordable housing in decades. On non-domestic rates, reliefs are forecast to provide more than £870 million of support in 2026-27, including the small business bonus scheme and retail, hospitality and leisure reliefs, which will give certainty during a period of cost pressure. Transitional relief will continue to support those who face the largest increases following revaluation.

That approach sits within a wider economic package. We are investing more than £31 million to drive innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurship, sustaining £326 million for our enterprise agencies and committing more than £215 million to city and regional growth deals, alongside support for regional partnerships and community wealth building.

On climate, the budget recognises the significant and serious impacts of the climate emergency and the cost of inaction. The budget delivers practical action through more than £5 billion of climate-positive investment in 2026-27. That includes £316 million for sustainable travel and low-carbon transport and £47.5 million to

support a just transition in the industrial sector, including £15.6 million of capital for the Grangemouth industrial cluster strategy. We are restoring Scotland’s natural environment by maintaining the nature restoration fund at last year’s level, with £26 million to halt biodiversity loss and ensure that Scotland becomes nature positive by 2030.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind):

For two years, the Nairn bypass has been ready to go into the procurement stage for its completion. However, it will not go into procurement until 2029. Given that the capital budget is the highest ever—£7,600 million—can the cabinet secretary understand that people in Nairn and the Highlands in general feel that they are the forgotten tribe in Scotland?

Shona Robison: That is far from the case. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport has kept the Parliament updated about all those important projects, and our commitment to them remains as solid as ever.

Fergus Ewing is right to highlight the capital budget, but, of course, it has decreased over the course of this session of Parliament because of the cuts to the capital budget by the United Kingdom Government. Therefore, we must ensure that that capital is invested in all the priorities, including the affordable housing supply programme, in which there is a £900 million investment, which I would have thought Fergus Ewing would welcome.

Public services are essential to Scotland’s wellbeing, and the budget supports their continued improvement and reform. The budget provides a record £22.5 billion for our national health service, supporting improvements in waiting times and general practitioner access, and expanding high street walk-in centres. I was pleased to see that Lochee was part of the First Minister’s announcement yesterday. The development there will provide real benefit to people across Dundee as part of a £36 million roll-out offering same-day, no-appointment GP care.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Shona Robison: Of course—I am sure that Mr Marra will welcome that investment.

Michael Marra: The cabinet secretary says that people from across Dundee can access the centre, but is it not the case that only patients who are already registered with the Lochee practice will be able to do so?

Shona Robison: Walk-in centres will provide additional capacity for a range of people across all the locations in which they operate. It is strange that Michael Marra cannot bring himself to

welcome that investment in an area that he is supposed to care about.

For local government, we are delivering £15.7 billion, including the additional £20 million of funding that was announced at stage 1, which can be used towards funding the real living wage for the adult and child care sectors.

For colleges, we are providing a 10 per cent uplift—a £70 million increase—in resource and capital funding, alongside investment to help adult learners to gain new skills and qualifications. Transformation will be central to ensuring that the sector remains sustainable.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We thank the Deputy First Minister for her commitment on colleges, which is welcomed by the sector, but that sector is looking for a long-term plan, to make sure of its continuation in future years. I know that we cannot tell what the next Parliament will do, but is it her intention that that commitment will be part of a much longer-term plan?

Shona Robison: Yes. I think that I have made that clear, but I am happy to put that on the record again.

We remain steadfast in our commitment to preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls, which is why we have provided a 5 per cent uplift to the delivering equally safe fund. That is nearly £1.1 million extra per year.

We continue to improve public transport. Last year, Scotland became the only part of the UK to remove peak rail fares—the biggest reform in decades. This year, we will freeze ScotRail fares for 2026-27 and remove peak fares on northern isles ferry services for islanders, encouraging greater use of sustainable transport.

Throughout the budget process, I have worked to build consensus across the Parliament, engaging constructively with members who have been willing to do likewise. That collaboration has helped to deliver improvements in neurodevelopmental assessment and care for children and young people, further investment in our hospice sector to support pay parity via the agenda for change, support for communities that are affected by the Mossmorran closure, and funding for changing places toilets. I can confirm that we will also continue to provide around £1 million of funding for the Aberlour children's charity in 2026-27, offering on-going support for the important community-based intensive perinatal support service. I am grateful to all who engaged in good faith, and I welcome the confirmation from the Scottish Liberal Democrats and Jeremy Balfour that they will support the budget.

Even among those parties that have indicated that they will not support the budget, there are

members who have argued strongly for specific measures that we have delivered. It would be unusual for members to secure outcomes that they have actively championed but then choose not to support the legislation and the funding that make those possible.

In 1999, when I was first elected, this Parliament had very limited fiscal powers. Since then, there has been further devolution, and Scotland now has a substantial share of its own revenue, which delivers key elements of our social security system. However, significant constraints remain, and many critical levers continue to sit with Westminster. As both the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Scottish Fiscal Commission have recently highlighted, funding growth is set to slow significantly in the years ahead, and Scotland remains heavily dependent on UK Government decisions. That is a challenge for this Parliament as a whole, not just for one party.

Through the 2023 fiscal framework review, I was able to agree some welcome improvements with the UK Treasury. That represented meaningful progress; however, I have always been clear that it cannot be the end of the journey. Given that a further review is beginning, the next Parliament will have the opportunity and the responsibility to argue for a more ambitious and flexible settlement. Of course, the simple truth is that only with the full fiscal powers of independence will we be able to realise our true potential as a nation.

It has been an honour and a privilege to serve in the Parliament for more than 27 years, including in various Government roles since 2007. I have held a number of ministerial roles over the years, but the finance brief has been the most rewarding by far, because that is where the tools sit to enable delivery, drive change and support real transformation across Government and society as a whole. I wish my successor in the role well, and I urge them to be bold and ambitious as they take forward the vital task of transforming our public services.

With that, I am proud to move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) (No. 5) Bill be passed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I call Craig Hoy to open on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, for up to nine minutes.

16:14

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I wish the cabinet secretary well as she prepares to leave the Parliament. I hope that she will not be leaving her successor a note to say that there is no money left. Perhaps she could leave a note that suggests that

her successor does not follow suit by raising taxes on ordinary hard-working Scots. *[Interruption.]* Mr Swinney is already getting wound up.

Tonight, the Conservative Party will be the only party whose MSPs vote against what is a bad SNP budget. We are the only party with the backbone and the conviction to tell the Scottish ministers to go back to the drawing board and draw up a budget that will give a fair deal to Scottish taxpayers, Scottish public services and businesses such as Scotland's struggling pubs.

Set against the on-going cost of living crisis, the budget will add to many people's biggest bill—their tax bill. It also increases tax on businesses, with no action to stop the looming and catastrophic business rates revaluation. The Scottish Conservatives have set out an alternative to the failed left-wing approach that is now shared by all those across the other benches at Holyrood. We would lower bills for hard-working Scottish families and businesses and, in turn, grow the Scottish economy. We would end the doom loop of ever-higher taxes that pay for the SNP's ever-ballooning benefits bill.

However, that is not the approach taken by the cabinet secretary or John Swinney's Government. Let us use the final budget debate in the current session of Parliament to look in some detail at some of the central failures in the budget. The minister thought that she was being clever when she unveiled the centrepiece of John Swinney's pre-election budget—a £32-a-year income tax cut. That was a fiscal stunt that was derided by analysts and commentators as the lowest tax cut in history—a pound-shop policy from a pound-shop Government.

Behind the smoke and mirrors lies a far harsher reality for many Scottish households. By freezing upper-rate thresholds, the Government continues to push more average and middle-income earners into higher rates of tax. By the end of the decade, the SNP Government's tax regime will look like the modern-day equivalent of state-sponsored highway robbery, but at least Dick Turpin had the sense to wear a mask.

Shona Robison says that she likes facts, so let me give her some real tax facts, not the phony SNP spin that she relies on. In 2016-17, only 12 per cent of workers in Scotland were paying the higher rate of tax or above. By the end of the current decade, that will have risen to a staggering 40 per cent. This year alone, 66,000 Scots have been dragged into the higher rate tax band under the SNP. Before the minister repeats her tired old trope about those with the broadest shoulders, let us ask ourselves who those people really are. They include nurses, teachers, car mechanics, council administrators, heavy goods vehicle

drivers and social workers. They are all now classed as high earners in the SNP's Scotland.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Given the issues with tax during the period that Craig Hoy is speaking about, is it a good time for him to apologise for the fact that the Conservative Government, which he supported, trebled the national debt to nearly £3 trillion and brought in the highest tax burden since the second world war? Only the actions of the Scottish Government have reduced that burden in Scotland.

Craig Hoy: As the SNP's depute leader, Mr Brown must have been so busy looking at the party's accounts that he missed Covid and the war in Ukraine, which led to a significant increase in everybody's energy bills.

It is not only me who is pointing out the folly of the SNP Government's budget. The Fraser of Allander Institute's Mairi Spowage says that the shift in the tax base amounts to

“a fundamental change in our understanding of who counts as a higher rate taxpayer and what proportion of the income distribution should be paying higher rates of tax.”—*[Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee, 20 January 2026; c 46.]*

During the coming year, the total additional burden of the SNP's tax regime will be nearly £1.8 billion, but only £969 million will accrue to the Scottish budget. That is the true cost of the SNP's on-going failure to grow the Scottish economy.

Based on tax outcomes alone, we will not be voting for the budget, but there are many other reasons not to vote for it. The projections for benefits spending are eye-watering and are creating a cycle of dependency that can no longer be credibly described as an investment in Scotland's future. Not only is it undesirable to adopt the soft-touch approach that the SNP takes to the adult disability payment and to disincentivising work through the Scottish child payment—the Scottish Government's data reveals that one in 10 recipients have changed the way that they interact through the workforce because of it—but it is also fundamentally unsustainable, as a number of independent reports have flagged again this week.

Professor David Heald, who is one of the Scottish Government's tax advisers, has warned of

“an erosion of the rest of the Scottish budget”—*[Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee, 20 January 2026; c 54.]*

as a result of the mounting benefits bill, which already accounts for £1 in every £7 that is spent by the SNP Government and which will rise to £10 billion by the end of the decade. As a result of the

SNP's ballooning benefits bill, there is less in the budget for rural affairs and the enterprise agencies, and in future years there will be less for Scotland's local authorities and health boards. Ministers must be honest that spending more on benefits means tax rises or severe cuts to core services—or, ultimately, a toxic combination of both.

For the record, I note that we would cut tax and cut the benefits bill, and our plans are costed and deliverable, unlike many of the measures in the budget that we are debating today. Our approach would create a virtuous circle, giving people and businesses more of their own money to spend and invest as they choose. Tackling welfare will give more people the chance to work, breaking the culture of dependency that has been cynically fostered by this SNP Government.

I turn to other areas of the budget. On college spending—

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I do not have time.

The First Minister (John Swinney): Give way!

The Deputy Presiding Officer: First Minister, please.

Craig Hoy: On college spending, Shona Robison claims to have delivered a major boost to the sector, which is already facing significant cash pressures, but she is misleading Parliament once again. She claims that there is a £70 million uplift, but she knows that funding for the Dunfermline learning campus has been set aside and that the real increase is only £40 million. *[Interruption.]* At the same time, the cabinet secretary cannot escape another fact—that the sector endured a 20 per cent real-terms funding cut at the hands of the SNP Government over the five years to 2025-26. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

The First Minister rose—

Craig Hoy: I will give way to Mr Swinney, but will he comment on the fact that Audit Scotland declared that the situation that colleges faced under the SNP as a result of those cuts was stark?

The First Minister: I point out to Mr Hoy that he is falling into the usual trick of the Conservatives, which is to come here and demand tax cuts that would reduce public expenditure and then demand more public expenditure for one particular sector. That just illustrates the total economic illiteracy of the Conservative Party.

Craig Hoy: Given that independent analysts have said that this budget is in a parallel universe—*[Interruption.]*

The First Minister: Please answer the question.

Craig Hoy: I will happily give way—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Hoy, please resume your seat. I will not have all these goings-on across the benches. We will listen to the speaker who is on his feet with some courtesy.

Craig Hoy: No wonder Mr Swinney wants to shout his opponents down. He knows that we are backed by independent analysts who are saying that this is a bad budget for Scotland.

Shona Robison has robbed Scotland's colleges blind for the past half-decade, but she now claims to be riding to their rescue and expects them to be grateful when she returns some of the cash that the SNP has stolen in recent years.

The Government is being equally economical with the facts on health spending. The IFS warns that the overall health and social care budget for day-to-day spending is set to increase by just 0.2 per cent in real terms in the coming year. However, after planned transfers to councils for social care wage increases, funding for other health and social care services is set to fall by 0.6 per cent in real terms.

Ultimately, the Scottish Government says that it can take the budget to the country, but I believe that people will see through the smoke and mirrors. The harsh reality is that the budget will pass because of the spineless complacency of other parties in this place. Even now, it is not too late for them to see sense, to take their heads out of the sand and to side with the Scottish Conservatives in supporting decisive action to tackle the SNP's bloated benefits bill, to cut tax and to properly fund productive public services. However, they will not do so because, on the fundamental challenges that Scotland faces, it is increasingly clear that Labour, the Lib Dems and now Reform are in opposition to this SNP Government in name only. On 7 May, that fact will not be lost on ordinary, hard-working Scots, who will have to pick up the bill for yet another bad SNP budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): It would be helpful if we did not have the running commentary from members on the front benches as people are speaking.

16:24

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Given that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government rightly ended her speech in valedictory terms, it is right that I also compliment her on a quarter century of service to our country and to our city of Dundee. I think that anyone would recognise the considerable personal

sacrifices that are involved in the service by a politician of such tenure. She has my sincere best wishes for whatever comes next for her. [Applause.]

I anticipate that the clapping will end with the nice stuff. The good parts of this budget show a knackered SNP Government that is desperately trying to fix a few of its own mistakes. In that regard, it is back to form. The Government is trying to turn a corner on itself and the harm that is has wrought on Scotland's public services and finances. However, let us be clear that the budget contains none of the transformative change that Scotland needs after two decades of the SNP.

It has been obvious to anyone with even a passing interest in the matter that the budget was always going to be agreed to. The SNP's pretend brinkmanship has been exposed for what it always was, which is the same old SNP spin. Scottish Labour will not stand in the way of police officers, nurses and local services continuing to be funded at the start of the new financial year in just five weeks' time. However, we know that this budget of half measures will not last the year. Independent experts from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Fraser of Allander Institute have said so. The former said that areas of the budget are "increasingly detached from reality".

This budget is more of the same financial chaos from the SNP. There were three consecutive years of emergency budgets in this parliamentary session alone, and another emergency budget is now a racing certainty for whoever forms the next Government in May. There was a spending review, but within days of its publication, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government told the Finance and Public Administration Committee that she did not expect it to last. There is no grip on the finances and no grasp of the peril into which the SNP is plunging Scotland.

Let us consider local government, which is at the sharp end of the SNP's cuts. In a move straight out of John Swinney's playbook of the past two decades, it has been mercilessly hammered yet again by this SNP Government. Year after year, the SNP in Edinburgh knifes local government and leaves local councillors to take the flak for the savage cuts that they are forced to mete out on communities. As we speak, councils are meeting to set their budgets for the coming year. Yet again, they are being forced into making eye-watering council tax rises, all because the SNP Government in Edinburgh refuses to give councils their fair share. Many councils now find themselves struggling to deliver even the most basic statutory services.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Is it Mr Marra's argument that we are giving too much

to the national health service? Should that funding be switched to local government?

Michael Marra: Local government needs a sustainable budget that can be taken over the long term. As Mr Mason knows well, the spending review will lead to £500 million in cuts over the spending review period. Even the SNP's councillors—including Ricky Bell, the resources spokesperson for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities—are biting back.

The SNP has never been a party to ignore the chance to have financial sleight of hand. In this budget, it has tried to get away with claiming that it is uplifting the real living wage for social care workers while neglecting to say that money has been allocated only for the discretionary element and not for the statutory amount, leaving overstretched local authorities to pick up the pieces.

Shona Robison: Will Michael Marra give way on that point?

Michael Marra: I am afraid that I do not have time.

The U-turn on that play was as welcome as it was inevitable, but it begs the question as to why SNP special advisers thought that they could get away with it in the first place.

However, it gets worse. The spending review told us that, if the SNP gets back into Government in May, it will slash local government budgets by nearly £500 million. It is hard to fathom where councils will be able to make such swingeing cuts. To allow councils to balance their books, perhaps the cabinet secretary can suggest how many teachers will need to lose their jobs, how many swimming pools and libraries will need to close and how many vulnerable people will not get the care that they need as a result of her plans. What the SNP has willingly done to local government is symptomatic of its approach to government, which is to always find someone else to blame.

On non-domestic rates, data that was published yesterday by the Scottish Fiscal Commission shows that the additional measures that the cabinet secretary announced to bring reliefs for licensed hospitality and music venues up to 40 per cent will cost £9 million. In a budget of £60 billion, that is a drop in the ocean. Since July 2024, the Scottish Government has received an additional £10.3 billion from the UK Labour Government. The SNP always had the funds to deliver 40 per cent relief, so why on earth did it not do so in the first place? It was willing to let vital hospitality businesses across Scotland go to the wall rather than giving them the reliefs that they needed to survive.

There is also still no answer from the SNP on the looming challenge of revaluation, which will cause the rateable values of many businesses to double or even triple.

Fergus Ewing: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: Yes, sir.

Shona Robison: I thought that the member did not have time.

Fergus Ewing: Does Mr Marra agree that the Scottish Government is so muddle-headed in its thinking, particularly in failing to account for businesses closing as a result of high tax burdens, that it may end up receiving even less money than it would have received if it had granted the postponement that we all argued for?

Michael Marra: I agree with that.

I apologise to the cabinet secretary—I had more time than I thought.

On that basis, Scottish Labour supports an immediate pause of the revaluation. We believe that a fundamental overhaul of the non-domestic rates system is required in order to better support our businesses, which are the life-blood of our high streets and communities.

The SNP's mishandling of non-domestic rates sums up its approach of half measures and gimmicks rather than hard work to face up to the difficult decisions that Scotland faces. It is invested in the status quo and managed decline in defending a record of failure. It will never take the bold action that is needed to fix what it has broken in our country, and it is long past time for change.

16:31

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary not just for the constructive relations that we have had over the past couple of years in her current portfolio but, as Michael Marra said, for serving Scotland in public office for a quarter of a century. Throughout the period that we have worked together, I have always found the cabinet secretary to be someone willing to listen, even on those issues where I have been at my most challenging. I have found that, where there have been opportunities for co-operation, we have been able to make that work to the benefit of the people of Scotland—some of which I will be proud to talk about in this debate.

I talked at stage 1 about some of the priorities with which the Greens went into the budget negotiations. I do not want to repeat all that now—perhaps I will return to a bit of it later, if there is time—because I want to focus in the final budget debate of this session of Parliament on the overall

state of our public finances. We all acknowledge that Scotland's public finances are no longer sustainable. The question is why, and what do we do about that?

On the why, we need to reflect on the reality of 15 years of Conservative austerity. The Labour Party has not entirely ended that, but I acknowledge that there has been a difference since it won the UK Parliament election in 2024. However, decisions such as increasing employer national insurance contributions give us the feeling that, for every two steps forward, we have to take a step back.

It is not just that. Demand for social care has been growing. Yes, our social security system is placing financial pressure on our public finances, but that is a result of choices that we should be proud of. We should be proud to own the decisions that we have made on social security in this Parliament. Yes, there has been a financial implication—I will come to that in a minute—but the most important outcome of the system is that Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom where child poverty is falling. This is the only part of the UK where we are materially transforming the lives of some of our most vulnerable families. That is a result of the decisions that we have made.

Furthermore, Scotland is also the only part of the UK where you can get free university tuition, where young people can travel on the bus for free and where we have free personal care. Those are choices that we should be rightly proud of.

John Swinney: Will Mr Greer comment on what appears to me to be the arrant hypocrisy of Conservative Party members, who voted for legislation on the establishment of Social Security Scotland and its underpinning by the values of dignity, fairness and respect, but then spend all their time in this chamber attacking social security expenditure and some of the most vulnerable in our society?

Ross Greer: The First Minister has highlighted the descent of the Conservative Party over the past decade. Just a few years ago, it had moved a bit closer to everyone else's position in recognising the need to do right by the most vulnerable families in our community. However, now, the mask has slipped and the nasty party is back. The spectre of Reform robbing it of two thirds of its vote has sent it right back to the worst of George Osborne's economics and these attacks on the most vulnerable.

The Conservatives say that tough choices need to be made—that is how they phrase it. However, every tough choice that they suggest is not tough for them and, by and large, it is not tough for the people who vote for them. The people whom it is tough for are the most vulnerable families in our

society—the people whom they want to rob of what is often literally life-saving support.

Craig Hoy did not like this when I brought it up in the previous budget debate, but studies in *The BMJ* and *The Lancet* have shown between 150,000 and 350,000 excess deaths across the UK as a direct result of the austerity that the previous Conservative UK Government unleashed.

Craig Hoy: Will Ross Greer take an intervention?

Ross Greer: I would be delighted to hear from Mr Hoy on whether he is somehow rejecting peer-reviewed studies in *The BMJ* and *The Lancet*, and, if so, on the basis of which qualifications.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: I point Mr Greer to an SNP Government study that says that one in 10 recipients of the Scottish child payment is changing the way that they interface with the labour market, turning down additional hours or rejecting a pay increase. Would it not be better if those people took the additional hours or the pay increase and freed up the money to use for other people who might be living in poverty?

Ross Greer: Mr Hoy helpfully highlights another area of Conservative hypocrisy. On the one hand, the Conservatives say that people who are in receipt of social security benefits should be more focused on work or take on more work and, on the other hand, the Conservatives have objected to every rise in the minimum wage for years. The reason why people in the social security system are having to make difficult choices about whether to take on more work is because the UK is such a low-wage economy as a result of choices that the previous Conservative Government made. *[Interruption.]* The Conservatives need to own that decision.

I would not expect the parents of children who are struggling to make an active choice to put their family in a worse financial situation because the only employment opportunities that are available to them provide such low wages, in part as a result of deliberate decisions that the Conservative Party has taken. If the Conservatives believe that work is the route out of poverty, they should support efforts to ensure that no employer is allowed to pay poverty wages. The reality is that two thirds of children in this country who are in poverty are in working households. That is the problem that we need to solve.

I would have more respect for the Conservatives' position on the social security system—although I certainly would not agree with it—if it was combined with a serious effort to eradicate poverty pay in this country. However,

they are quite happy with poverty pay in this country, so I will not be taking any lessons from them on the social security system. The Conservatives are pushing all of us to make what they describe as tough choices. Those are not tough choices for them or, by and large, their supporters, but they say that there is simply no option other than to make huge cuts to the services that we provide to the most vulnerable people in our society. *[Interruption.]*

Just a few weeks ago, a Scottish Government publication pointed out that the top 2 per cent of people in this country have more wealth than half the population combined. If we are talking about tough choices, we need to think about who they are tough for. Who do we expect to shoulder the burden of getting our finances back on a sustainable footing? This is one of the richest countries in the history of the world. I, for one, and certainly the Greens will be rejecting the Conservatives' attempt to create a doom loop that says that the only thing that we can do to make our finances sustainable is to punish the most vulnerable in our society. *[Interruption.]*

We should all be proud of the decisions that this Parliament has taken collectively over the past decade to lift children out of poverty and transform their lives. We now must accept that, to make that sustainable, we need to get serious about wealth redistribution in this country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I give another gentle reminder that reaction to what is said is one thing, but I do not need a running commentary on what is being said in real time.

16:38

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): We all know that politics can be pretty unforgiving, and I imagine that those who have the benefit of having a Government ministerial office will know that more than most of us. I wish the cabinet secretary the very best when she leaves Parliament. Equally, as we have seen a little today, politics can sometimes be needlessly theatrical, but, at the end of the day, politics is a serious business and sometimes we just have to roll up our sleeves and get the business done.

I know from speeches today and two weeks ago that some colleagues might not reach the same conclusions about the budget as I will, and I respect them for laying out their reasons—some of them passionate, some ideological and others quite misguided. However, I hope that, in turn, they will genuinely respect the 300 million reasons why I might take a different view on the budget this evening.

At our party spring conference in Edinburgh this weekend past, I was really grateful and humbled

to meet people who came along from many charities and third sector organisations. *[Interruption.]*

I see Mr Hoy chuckling away—they came to his party conference as well.

I was grateful to meet and spend some time with them. They were from organisations such as Marie Curie, which helps people who live with cancer; the National Autistic Society, which supports young people who have it tough in life; and Hospice UK, which is fighting for our carers. They are real people in the real world—people who live with the annual budget cycles that we have to contend with—and most of them never know what is in store for them, year on year, financially.

It is because of those real-world conversations that I have had in the past two weeks that I feel entirely vindicated in having sat down to negotiate with the Government. I was right to do so. I have had many issues with the SNP Government over the years. I have spent half of my political life criticising it on issues such as the ferries fiasco, access to local healthcare and the early prisoner release policy. I absolutely do not share its vision on independence, but I will make no apologies, because I will never pass up the opportunity to sit down with the Government of the day, of whichever party, to fight for the things that matter to me.

Our small businesses face uncertainty, particularly around business rates. Our social care sector is in deep crisis. Our hospices are living hand to mouth year after year and, as other members have mentioned, so are our colleges; for example, the West College Scotland campus in Greenock has closed its doors due to its crumbling buildings. None of that can be fixed in the confines of an annual budget cycle, but that does not mean that we should not try.

I am not blind to the fact that Scotland's long-term fiscal outlook is pretty grim—most independent analysts tell us that. Whichever party takes the reins of the Government in May will have very difficult choices to make. The Scottish Government could have a fiscal deficit of up to £5 billion by the end of this decade—as the Auditor General for Scotland tells us, as the Scottish Fiscal Commission tells us and as the Fraser of Allander Institute tells us. Those are people and organisations that I value and whose opinions I respect.

My view has always been that we cannot meet the fiscal shortfall solely through higher taxation, because the extra taxes that are raised in Scotland do not always fully translate into extra real-terms cash for public services. I asked Audit Scotland, which wrote a paper on the subject, for its opinion. Members on the Labour front bench and members

such as Liz Smith and Murdo Fraser often rightly make those points in the chamber. Equally, the Accounts Commission points to a £1 billion black hole in local government finances. I do not deny any of those issues, but none of them can be fixed in the confines of a single-year budget. My view is that creating more better-paid jobs—it really is as simple as that—is the only way that we can climb our way out of the fiscal black hole.

I do not believe, and I never have, that slash-and-burn politics will fix our finances. To those members who say that we should cut the welfare bill, for example, I simply ask: whose benefits do you want to cut?

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Will Jamie Greene give way?

Jamie Greene: I will, in a second.

Which members of my family who currently get the adult disability payment will no longer get it once those benefits have been cut? Which refugees in Glasgow do you want to make homeless? Who will you send home to face torture or death because they are gay? Which children in towns such as mine—Greenock—do you want to push back into poverty?

Government is about choices, sometimes difficult ones, and I have disagreed with many of this Government's choices over the years. However, if we have the opportunity or leverage to push the Government further, we should use it. I took that opportunity and I am not ashamed of it, because, ultimately, it does not matter how much we crow from the sidelines; what matters in politics is getting stuff done.

I spoke to UKHospitality—I know that there is deep unhappiness about what has happened with revaluations—which put out a statement after the draft budget. The chief executive said that the budget deal to secure extra business rates relief was

“a good example of how the Scottish Parliament can make a positive difference to businesses, when political parties work together.”

I agree with that, because we do not work together enough in the Parliament.

When I leave the Parliament at the end of March and go back to the real world, I will meet our college leaders, young entrepreneurs, pub owners, hospice workers and staff at Aberlour. I know that they need more help, but I also know that I will have done everything that I can to squeeze every penny out of this Government within the limitations that being in Opposition affords me. Why would I not do so?

Yes, being in Opposition means sometimes getting angry with the Government, but it also

means taking any opportunity that you have to get stuff done. I took mine, and I hope that other members respect my motives for doing so. Some might even come to regret that they did not do the same.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the open debate. We are already behind schedule, so I will keep members firmly to their speaking time allocation.

16:44

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I am pleased to speak today not as the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. Nevertheless, this is the last time that a number of my committee colleagues—John Mason, Michelle Thomson and Liz Smith—as well as the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, and possibly I and others, depending on the election results, will speak in such a debate, so I must admit to feeling more than a modicum of sadness.

But to business. As we all know, this year's draft Scottish budget was much delayed due to the dithering of the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, who not only announced her budget weeks later than she did in 2024 but did so only after weeks of leaks to the media about what it might contain. The nudges, hints and winks, as well as a full-blown press conference, meant that the Scottish Government faced numerous potential funding scenarios. Therefore, I pay tribute to the hard work of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, the Minister for Public Finance and their officials in preparing a budget that the majority of MSPs will support today.

Things looked quite different before Christmas. The SNP does not have a majority, so ministers braced themselves for expensive and hard-to-meet demands from the Scottish Greens and Liberal Democrats. However, sometimes, help can come from the most unexpected quarter. Step forward hero of the hour, one Michael Marra, who had the decency to let us know, even before the draft budget was published, with its content unseen, that Labour would decisively abstain, ensuring that the budget would pass. I know that SNP members are keen to congratulate our man in Dundee for his tacit support.

Of course, at a stroke, Green and Lib Dem MSPs lost their bargaining power with the Scottish ministers. However, to their credit and Ms Robison's, they continued to engage, and both parties were able to secure concessions from the Scottish Government, as did independent MSP Jeremy Balfour.

It could have been so different for Labour, but, due to an apparent communication glitch, poor

Michael Marra was left forlornly waiting for a call that never came, although my understanding is that he was to contact the cabinet secretary, not the other way round. We will never know.

The reality is that, at UK level, we have what *The Economist* called only last week a "zombie" Labour Government, which is failing to govern in the interests of anyone outside the Starmer clique and is terrified of its back benchers. In only 18 months, the UK Government has performed 15 major U-turns on subjects ranging from winter fuel payments and the removal of the two-child cap—support for which led to the suspension of seven Labour MPs—to the daft BritCard and the campaign by women against state pension inequality, on which there was a triple U-turn. Growth across the UK is too meagre to deliver the services that people need and want.

UK Labour's paralysis is mirrored in its branch office in Scotland, which is terrified to upset any vested interests as it battles to hold on to third place in the polls. That is the logic behind its seemingly bizarre decision to abstain on the budget.

As for the Tories, if the SNP had invented the light bulb, they would have denounced it as a dangerous anti-candle device, such is their mindless opposition, which was, again, signalled before the draft budget was even published. Once more, we expect to see their back benchers call for additional money to be spent here, there and everywhere, with no effort made whatsoever to detail how they would fund their demands or where the money for the £1 billion in tax cuts they seek would come from. Why is it £1 billion every year? Have the Tories not heard of inflation? The fact that the figure is such a round number shows that it has been plucked lazily from thin air.

As for the fiscally illiterate and desperate plan to hand back the underspend without any explanation of how the back-of-a-fag-packet idea will be delivered, I note that, even though the policy was announced only last week, Mr Hoy somehow failed to mention it in his nine-minute speech. With the latest opinion poll predicting that there will be only seven Tory MSPs after May's election, the Tories' strategy, such as it is, is entirely self-defeating.

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

Kenneth Gibson: Oh, Mr Hoy is going to enlighten us.

Craig Hoy: Does Mr Gibson believe that the Scottish benefits bill is sustainable?

Kenneth Gibson: The Scottish benefits bill is sustainable as long as the Scottish Government continues to balance its budget, which it will do for as long as my party remains in office.

What does the budget deliver for the people of Scotland? It delivers Scotland's priorities—that is what. It provides record real-terms investment in housing, the NHS, transport, culture and social justice. It provides a 10 per cent increase in college funding. For policing, resource funding is up by 4 per cent and capital funding is up by 23 per cent. There is 13.2 per cent more funding for the concessionary fares scheme, and there is more than 34.3 per cent more funding for ferries and piers. That augurs well for Ardrossan harbour's redevelopment, once its purchase has been secured.

On tackling child poverty, not only is the Scottish child payment—which has no equivalent elsewhere in the UK—increasing to £28.20 per week for the parents of each eligible child and £40 per week for eligible babies, but breakfast clubs will be delivered to all primary school children.

Employability support worth £90 million will help people back into work, and estimated revenues from non-domestic rates will be 6 per cent lower in real terms than they were before the pandemic, with £870 million provided in reliefs. Unfortunately, Mr Ewing is not in the chamber.

What of local authorities? The Scottish Fiscal Commission confirmed a modest real-terms increase. I am sure that members would like to see it boosted further; I certainly would. However, the cabinet secretary confirmed earlier this afternoon that Labour made no specific requests for additional local government funding, nor did it say from where any additional money would be found. Indeed, Labour should apologise to local authorities across Scotland for the billions of pounds of debt that has been foisted on them through the imposition of public-private partnership payments. In North Ayrshire alone, those amount to £17.127 million in 2026-27, as part of the astronomical £455 million of repayments towards four schools that were built 20 years ago for a capital cost of £83 million. That is before I talk about the £6.8 million in employer national insurance contributions that were imposed on the council by UK Labour.

The Deputy Presiding Officer : You need to conclude.

Kenneth Gibson: Together with PPP payments, that equates to a third of all moneys raised this year in North Ayrshire in council tax. The resource uplift in the budget is barely 1 per cent.

Hard choices had to be made—and having the courage to make such choices separates those who support the budget from those who sit on their hands or who provide knee-jerk opposition. I urge all members to support the budget.

16:51

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I wish the cabinet secretary all the best in the future and, although I will not miss Mr Gibson's SNP statements in the chamber, I will most certainly miss his convenership of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, in which he has been outstanding, and for which he is well recognised right around the chamber. It is through that convenership that Mr Gibson has regularly challenged us to debate effectively in the committee. It is on that basis, in my last contribution to a budget debate, that I will proceed in considering some of the issues that we have to address in the chamber, with specific reference to the budget that is before us.

Notwithstanding all the complexities that exist in the timing of different fiscal events, I do not personally feel that there is sufficient time for enough detailed parliamentary scrutiny of budgets or, therefore, for efficient scrutiny. I note the recent decision of the parliamentary authorities to announce that, for all new and returning MSPs, there will be special training on budgets. I welcome that. However, the very fact that that is having to happen speaks volumes about where the problem lies.

I will make the following three points. First—and this definitely applies to this budget—there is not sufficient detail about Scottish Government policy priorities in relation to how well they deliver their outcomes. I am not talking about the four grand aims of this Government, which are promoting economic growth, tackling child poverty, addressing climate change and delivering high-quality and sustainable public services, but rather the specific policies that underpin each of those. Where is the accompanying Scottish Government evidence that is supposed to persuade us that the policy choices that it is making in this budget are those that will deliver the best outcomes, given the limited resources that are available? As a consequence of that, and especially given the tight fiscal constraints, which policies have had to be deprioritised, and why?

Those are points that have frustrated the Finance and Public Administration Committee for quite some time. For example, the Scottish Government has been challenged so often to argue why its more generous approach to public spending on welfare yields better overall results all round for Scotland's economy.

Ivan McKee: Will Liz Smith take an intervention?

Liz Smith: I will in a minute.

The Government comes up all the time with the fact that it is an investment, but it never tells us what the return on that investment is, nor does it tell us where the money is coming from. Perhaps

Mr McKee, who told us that there was going to be an extra £1 billion, which has changed to £1.5 billion, will tell me something new.

Ivan McKee: What I will tell the member is that the support that we put in to help people with in-work benefits is perhaps one of the reasons why Scotland's unemployment rate of 3.8 per cent is significantly below the UK rate of 5.2 per cent.

Liz Smith: Mr McKee knows full well that the economic inactivity rate is a serious issue. It has come up in just about every meeting that I can remember of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. In giving evidence to the committee, the First Minister once said that it was Scotland's most difficult economic challenge—I think that I am right on that, and I can look back at the *Official Report*. That is because we have to get people back into work so that productivity can increase and we get a better return on the tax base.

My second point is that there is a concern among many analysts, including the Auditor General, that there is no credible long-term plan to address the significant challenges arising from the bloated welfare budget and the increasing demands on health and social care. The Scottish Government always appears to be in favour of short-term fixes rather than addressing the long-term problem.

My third point is about the tension between central and local government. They always seem to be at each other's throats because of the huge pressure on front-line services, the delivery of which does not have the relevant money behind it.

During the stage 1 debate, I cited examples of the inconsistencies within the Scottish Government's policy priorities for economic growth. Like so many others, I do not understand why certain policies were selected as a priority when economic data shows that they are undermining the overall approach. What am I talking about? As the briefing on the recent spending review makes clear, in the graph that is headed "Real terms changes in portfolio spending", which covers 2025-26 to 2028-29, education and skills, finance and local government, and the economy are all facing real-term downturns in spending over the next four years. That hardly demonstrates a Scottish Government that is committed to growth in the economy.

I will finish on an absolutely instrumental point, which I made in the stage 1 debate and in the committee debate: we have to ensure much better scrutiny of the budget. I—and my colleagues on the Finance and Public Administration Committee—believe that it is time that the Scottish Parliament had a finance bill process. I hope that

the next Government—whatever colour it might be—will agree to that. If we do not have that, decisions will continue to be made without the necessary evidence to back them up.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I give colleagues fair warning that I will cut off microphones at six minutes—you have been warned.

16:56

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): The budget is about delivering for the people of Scotland. That is what we have all been sent here to do. The budget will address their priorities of bringing down NHS waiting lists, supporting families, reducing child poverty and growing the economy. Quite remarkably, the budget will do all that while delivering lower taxes for ordinary folk, with 55 per cent of Scots paying less tax in the next financial year in Scotland than they would pay if they lived elsewhere in the rest of the UK under Labour.

Since last year, the NHS has turned a corner, with the longest waits down for a number of months in a row and hip and knee operations at a record level. However, now is the time to work harder. The budget does not just increase NHS funding in line with inflation—it delivers an inflation-busting real-terms uplift of 1.8 per cent. There is over £17.6 billion for NHS boards, and that is only the funding for hospitals. The budget also delivers another £2.4 billion for primary care, including £531 million to recruit more GPs. On top of that, there is a further £36 million for new walk-in GP services, including one in Aberdeen, which will open in May and is being applauded by my constituents.

It does not stop there. The budget delivers the support that families struggling with the cost of living need. The SNP will not follow the UK example and force people on the minimum wage to pay more tax. Rather, the budget delivers an increase in both the basic rate and intermediate rate income tax bands. That means better public services and lower taxes under the SNP.

It goes on. The budget includes the baby box, which ensures that every Scottish baby, regardless of background, has the very best start in life. The 1,140 hours of free, high-quality early learning and childcare is worth around £6,000 to families. There is £14.4 million for healthy snacks for every child in day care, and an additional £15 million for breakfast clubs. On top of that, the budget provides for 250,000 free school meals each and every day, including for all pupils from primary 1 to primary 5, with a further 9 million meals for eligible families during school holidays, because some families require that extra support.

That is why we are increasing the Scottish child payment to £28.20 per week, as well as providing a further £50 million for whole-family support.

It does not stop there. Prescriptions remain free under the SNP; they are £10 each in England. Eye tests remain free under the SNP; they are £35 in England. University tuition remains free under the SNP; it is £10,000 a year of debt in England. However, not all young people will go to university. That is why the budget will increase funding for Scotland's colleges by 10 per cent, in addition to supporting 25,000 modern apprenticeships and 5,000 foundation apprenticeships.

All of that requires a growing economy, and the budget delivers for business and the economy. The budget will save £870 million by reducing rates, taking 100,000 small businesses out of rates altogether with the small business bonus scheme. There is also the provision of 15 per cent relief for retail, hospitality and leisure premises. To grow the economy, the SNP Government is providing £326 million for the enterprise agencies, £200 million for the Scottish National Investment Bank, £45 million to drive innovation and enterprise, £2.5 million for young entrepreneurs and a £90 million boost for skills development. In addition, the Government is providing £47 million to strengthen local economies and £215 million for regional improvement. It is investing a total of £7.6 billion in capital projects across Scotland. It is because of such support that the Scottish economy grew faster last year than that of the rest of the UK.

I am particularly pleased to see the £5.53 million investment in the investing in communities fund, which has been a real benefit to places right across Scotland, and in particular to my Aberdeen constituents, through support for Community Food Initiatives North East, Aberdeen Foyer and the Station House Media Unit. I thank the cabinet secretary for that resource.

17:03

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I start by joining others in wishing Shona Robison well on her retirement from the Parliament, and indeed on whatever she does next.

I hear every week from front-line NHS staff, who go above and beyond in the most pressing of circumstances. They deserve our thanks, and they certainly deserve every penny of their pay increase. Indeed, the bulk of the uplift in health is for pay. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has noted that, when pay is excluded, funding for NHS Scotland is actually down by 0.6 per cent in real terms. In other words, it is NHS services that will be impacted and, ultimately, patients will be the ones who will suffer.

On top of that, the health portfolio has been set an efficiency target to achieve of £1.1 billion. The overall target across Government is £1.6 billion, so two thirds—by far the lion's share—must come from health. It has to be said that that is a hugely ambitious saving to make—it is significantly in excess of what health boards have historically achieved. The Scottish Government has given them a mountain to climb. Undoubtedly, it will lead to cuts in some areas, deteriorating conditions and more pressure on staff. As David Phillips of the IFS—who we were fond of quoting the last time we had a debate on this budget—said:

“funding allocations for health in 2026-27 look increasingly detached from reality.”

That sums up the SNP's approach: fantasy economics, divorced from everyday life

Let me tell members about the reality of health in Scotland. Only last week, the statistics for healthy life expectancy came out, and what a damning indictment of the SNP's record they were. Healthy life expectancy is falling. Despite all the advances in science and medicine, healthy life expectancy has been going down since 2014 and is now only 59.4 years for women and 59.1 years for men. Put simply, people are living longer in England. That is the legacy of almost 20 years of an SNP Government. It was enough time to be able to transform Scotland and make it better for the next generation, but the opportunity has been squandered due to incompetence and waste. Instead of prevention, the Government funds crisis—so it is no wonder that the nation is not getting healthier.

Shona Robison: Will Jackie Baillie take an intervention on that point?

Jackie Baillie: No—let me make this point.

Nowhere is that more evident than in resourcing for primary care and GPs. That used to be 11 per cent of the health budget; now, it is 7 per cent. Although the SNP announced the introduction of walk-in clinics, GP surgeries are facing closure.

This week, I heard from a GP in Perthshire whose practice lease expires in May. The SNP promised that health boards would take over practice leases, but that practice has heard nothing from NHS Tayside and it may have to close. The GP told me that that has caused them significant uncertainty and stress, and that it effectively binds their hands in relation to running an effective medical practice, with no future guarantee that the practice will be able to remain open. That is how the Scottish Government treats our GPs.

In my remaining time, I will concentrate my remarks on social care. We could all tell countless stories about good social care: the quality and

compassion of the staff, the social care provider that goes the extra mile and the care home that truly is a home from home. When it is driven by values and delivering care with dignity and respect, the contribution of social care to the fabric of our society cannot be overestimated.

No one will disagree with what I just said but, when it comes to resourcing social care, the Government is not funding demand. Instead, we have sticking plaster solutions—but even the sticking plaster is no longer working. At the start of February, more than 10,000 people were waiting on a social care assessment or a care-at-home package. That number is a quarter higher than it was this time last year, and it is going up. At the last count, in November 2025, more than 2,000 people were experiencing delayed discharge, and that number is going up, too. I remember the cabinet secretary telling us that delayed discharge would be ended—that was 11 years ago.

Meanwhile, the health and social care partnerships that deliver social care in our communities are slashing services. Transport for people with learning disabilities to their local day centre is gone. Transport for older people in rural areas to hospital appointments is gone. In Dundee—the cabinet secretary's back yard—mental health services for older people are under review and are going. Across Scotland, social care faces a £562 million funding gap in this financial year alone, and there is nothing in the budget for social care services for the coming year.

Last time we debated this budget, I told members about delayed discharge at the Vale of Leven hospital, from which many of my elderly constituents from Helensburgh are unable to get home because of a lack of social care in Argyll and Bute. I said that someone with a care package had to die for the package to be reallocated. However, that is no longer true: now, when someone dies, the care package is cancelled and taken as a saving. This budget does nothing to fix that.

After 20 years of the SNP being in charge, it feels as though the country is going backwards and we have lost compassion and care. SNP members should hang their heads in shame.

17:09

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I think that this is a budget to be welcomed and one that delivers for people in this country. I commend Shona Robison for delivering, in her last budget, a very fine one indeed.

As far as the position that others have taken is concerned, I had—naively, perhaps—hoped that we might see a degree of reconsideration between stage 1 and stage 3 on the part of those who have turned their faces against the budget. Alas, that

has not been the case. I commend those who have contributed positively to the budget process and who have achieved a positive outcome in the form of some of their priorities being reflected in the budget.

I remind all members that that opportunity was available to each and every one of them. Frankly, to remove yourself from the park and not even play part of the game is a dereliction of responsibility. However, given the meagre turnout of Conservative and Labour members, it seems that they are not even willing to be here to take part in the process. They are not willing to be here, at work, to take part in the process of deliberating on Scotland's budget. Maybe they are just getting ready for, and getting used to, the number of members that they will have after the election, which will amount to a meagre level of representation.

I want to make a few points about the budget, some of which I set out in the stage 1 debate. I make no apologies for reiterating them, because they relate to measures that are particularly welcome. First, I will look at those that will help with some of the cost of living challenges that people are facing.

The doing away with peak rail fares had already been announced, but the funding in the budget also provides for a freeze in rail fares for the coming year. I represent an area where a considerable number of people—thousands of people—have to commute to work each and every day. The freezing of rail fares will make a real difference to them. I also continue to welcome the absence of prescription charges and the maintenance of free eye examinations, which Kevin Stewart mentioned.

That comes against the backdrop of a press release that the UK Government put out on 21 November, in which Wes Streeting celebrated the fact that it had kept prescription charges under a tenner, as if that was something to be proud of. We know that there is medicine avoidance happening in the rest of the UK, whereas here in Scotland there is no taxation on medication.

I also welcome the maintenance of no university tuition fees. The Labour Government has just announced that, south of the border, tuition fees will go up to £9,500 from the next academic year. I could not have contemplated going to university if that had been what I had had to pay. I am proud that we have a system in which no tuition fees have to be paid.

In addition, I welcome the new universal breakfast club provision for primary school children and children with additional support needs, which will benefit some 25,000 children in North Lanarkshire.

Another issue that I want to focus on is the increase in the Scottish child payment to £28.20 per week, with some families receiving a premium payment of £40. The First Minister set for his Government the challenge of trying to eradicate child poverty. We know that child poverty is going in the right direction in this country, and we should be proud of that. I regret that some members in the Parliament want to undo that approach. We have heard about the Scottish Conservatives' plans to cut back entitlement to the Scottish child payment. I see that Mr Hoy is nodding. He thinks that that is something to be proud of, even though we know that the Scottish child payment is making a positive contribution to bringing down the levels of child poverty in Scotland.

I found much to agree with in Ross Greer's remarks about the context in which we talk about entitlement to social security. Just today, Social Security Scotland published research that shows that, although 91 per cent of people who responded to the survey agreed that anyone could find themselves in circumstances in which they need financial support, there is significant concern about the stigmatisation associated with the claiming of social security benefits. Seventy-five per cent of respondents said that they believed that a contributory factor was the type of rhetoric that they hear from politicians and the media. I know which politicians they are talking about—they are over there on the Conservative benches. I am proud of the record that we have on social security.

I mentioned university. Picking up on my colleague Kevin Stewart's point, I very much support the significant additional investment in colleges. It is right for us to be proud of the 10 per cent uplift in college funding. I see at first hand the excellence in college delivery. I see that Mr Kerr is shaking his head at the point that I am making about excellence in college delivery in Scotland. I would have thought that he would agree that there is excellence in college delivery in Scotland. *[Interruption.]* No, he is still saying that there is not excellence in college delivery in Scotland. I say that there is excellence in delivery in colleges in Scotland, including in New College Lanarkshire, which is in my constituency. The extra funding is welcome.

There is much more that I could say about the budget, but I do not have much time. I want to focus on one area that I particularly welcome, which is the additional support for general practice. We know that GP services are under pressure. The additional £531 million over three years for general practice to recruit more GPs and improve access is something that we should all welcome, as is the £36 million for new walk-in GP services. Those are already being rolled out, and I am keen

to see them rolled out to my constituency—I have picked that up with NHS Lanarkshire and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care.

Those are just some of the reasons why I believe that we should support the budget today. This is a budget to be welcomed, and it is a budget that should be supported today.

17:15

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Well, that was phony rhetoric from Jamie Hepburn. Of course we recognise the excellence of the college sector, but we also believe colleges when they tell us that there has been a 20 per cent real-terms cut in their budgets in the lifetime of this Parliament. That is what we, as Conservatives, reject.

This issue is all about priorities. The SNP might not like to hear this, but I am afraid that government is about choices. Let us look at what we have because of this budget. What do we remain with? High tax, low growth, rising spending, shrinking ambition—that is certainly the case from the SNP when it comes to Scotland—and absolutely no willingness to confront the structural weaknesses in our public finances. The country, and especially its finances, are in a mess of this Government's making.

John Mason: Does the member accept that, in comparison with other European countries, this is a low-tax country?

Stephen Kerr: I am comparing our country with the rest of the United Kingdom, of which we are the highest-taxed part. That creates an economic disadvantage for Scotland as a place in which to live, work, build a business and employ people. Those are real issues in the real economy that the party of Government ignores.

Let us talk about the benefits bill, which is spiralling. Public services are under strain and the economy is stagnating but, instead of tackling those core challenges, ministers boast about increasing welfare spending. The Conservatives believe that the way to help people out of poverty is by providing them with the means to work. We believe in employment. By the way, the Government's position also used to be that the way to reduce child poverty and all forms of poverty is to help people into good jobs. It remains the Conservative Party's position.

There are alarm bells and red warning lights—

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: I will, but please be brief.

Jamie Hepburn: Why, if the Conservatives' priority is to get people into good work as the means to alleviate poverty and get children out of

poverty, did child poverty increase under the previous Conservative Government?

Stephen Kerr: We can have a big debate about what has happened in the past. If that is what the member wants to talk about, that is fine, but I want to talk about the budget and the state of our country. I want to talk about the inequality of opportunity in our country. Equality of opportunity is the bedrock of the Conservative Party's position in respect of economic growth and the opportunities that it will create for all the people of Scotland.

The red warning lights are very real, and the warnings are not coming only from us. Jamie Hepburn might wish to listen to this, because it is not the Conservative Party speaking about this; it is the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Maybe he does not respect the Institute for Fiscal Studies, but I certainly do. It warns of a

"significant slowdown in funding growth"

and cautions that repeated reliance on carried-forward funding is a problem. The Fraser of Allander Institute reaches the same conclusion. It says that Scotland will continue to run an underlying deficit and that the current approach

"cannot be relied on indefinitely."

Those are the words that I think that my colleague Craig Hoy referred to earlier.

While I am talking about my colleagues, and given that everyone is giving congratulatory nods in different directions, it would be completely remiss of me not to mention Liz Smith, whose speech in this debate was a masterpiece. She forensically handled the detail of the budget bill, as she has done on all the occasions that she has spoken on the public finances in the Parliament. She will be badly missed when she leaves the Parliament. None of us knows who will be in the next session of Parliament—that is a fair point—but some people who we know are leaving will be sadly missed.

What is the Government's response to the situation that I have set out? The budget does not represent reform, renewal or a serious plan for growth. It is a continuation of the model that prioritises ever-rising spending, ever-rising taxation and an ever-expanding state without a credible plan for how it will all be paid for in the medium term.

Welfare spending continues to rise sharply. We all accept the duty that we have to support those who are in genuine need. However, when commitments grow faster than the tax base that funds them and long-term liabilities are locked in without structural reform, that is not compassion secured but a bill deferred—and deferred bills always come due. That is what the independent

economists are pointing out to the SNP Government.

As I have mentioned, our country is the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom. Businesses operate in an environment of increased complexity and uncertainty. Investment decisions are made with one eye on the tax differential and another on regulatory risk. This is a Government that likes to meddle. That is not how to build the most competitive economy in these islands.

Growth is not an optional extra but the foundation of everything else. Without growth, there is no sustainable funding for public services; without productivity, there is no rising prosperity; without enterprise, there is nothing to redistribute—yet the Government continues to assume that wealth can be shared before it is created, taxation can be pushed higher without behavioural consequence and structural deficits can be managed indefinitely through short-term adjustments.

Ivan McKee: Will Stephen Kerr give way?

Stephen Kerr: I would love to take that intervention, but I think that I have only 30 seconds left. Echoing the words of Liz Smith and Craig Hoy, I say that independent voices are warning us that one-off fixes will not correct the permanent pressures that are built into what is a reckless budget. The Fraser of Allander institute has warned that underlying deficits

"cannot be relied on indefinitely."

Those are not ideological critiques but economic realities, and Scotland deserves better than drift.

17:21

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I find myself in the unusual position of agreeing with Stephen Kerr. I associate myself with his praise for Liz Smith, with whom I have worked in committee roles in the Parliament and whose contribution will be greatly missed.

I also find myself being a bit reflective—I do not know whether Ross Greer's remarks have led to that. I remember meeting a young Shona Robison in the early 1980s, in Babbity Bowster in Glasgow, with a group of young nationalists who were sitting there, plotting revolution and talking about social justice. Shona Robison, Nicola Sturgeon and Roseanna Cunningham went on to be some of the most senior politicians in our country. It is testament to that passion that Shona leaves the Parliament in the knowledge that her work here, and her budgets, have lifted children out of poverty. I thank her for that.

A lot has been said during the debate, and other members have already mentioned much of what I

wanted to say about the budget. However, some of their contributions have had an impact on me, such as when Ross Greer spoke about why child poverty matters. It is a matter of medical record that growing up in poverty causes chronic stress and brain damage to young children; it affects their learning and their health for the rest of their lives. That is why it is important that we focus on those issues in Scotland at the moment.

Jamie Greene said that being in opposition placed limitations on members' ability to provide input to the budget process. However, we never seem to get around to what the limitations of the union mean for that process in Scotland. Everyone on the Conservative benches was happy to use exaggerated terms about our social contract when it came to discussing support for people who receive ADP and for those who are in work, but we must remember that having an equal society benefits everyone. If we look to our European neighbours, we can see that those with more equal societies are healthier and happier than we in this country are.

The Conservatives will always say that the problem is our benefits bill, but we never talk about the other factors in Scotland that affect our chances—for example, the multinationals that operate here, such as Amazon, Starbucks and Rockstar North, which receive grants towards their work but do not pay any tax into the Scottish or UK economies.

There is also the issue of VIP lanes for contracts negotiated during the Covid pandemic, which were another waste of money and were absolutely to the detriment of Scotland's economy.

We never talk about the other issues at Westminster. We hear all about the refurbishment of the decrepit building there that could cost up to £39.2 billion to fix—it is crumbling, full of rats, mice and moths and not fit for purpose. That is just one more reason for moving forward with independence both for the sake of our economy and to achieve a better, more socially just Scotland.

I represent Motherwell and Wishaw, which have suffered greatly from Westminster policies such as the closure of Ravenscraig and other actions that have left pockets of deprivation in my constituency. I see at first hand the pressures on people, including those who are working to support themselves. They are not people on big budgets. Neither are our charities able to claim tax credits like other major organisations in our country do, including big businesses on our high streets and in all our communities. Such charities generally employ people who work day in, day out, at the very limit of sustainable employment, to try to improve the welfare of people in my constituency.

In this country, our view of what is valuable, what work is and where our money goes is completely skewed, and it is always big business that benefits. Franklin D Roosevelt said that

“no business which depends for existence on paying less than fair wages to its workers has any right to continue”.

We need to consider how we can make our tax system fairer and identify all the issues affecting it.

I again thank the cabinet secretary for reducing child poverty in our country. I thank her for the Government's huge investment in our people, through education, health services, young people and measures such as the baby box. Those are investments in Scottish people and in how we want our society to be. I am disappointed that the Conservatives will always see a handout on any occasion when we on the SNP benches give people a hand up.

17:27

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): It is evident that this lacklustre Scottish National Party budget is miles off the mark on improving the lives of hard-working Scots. Members should mark my words: each bit of spin produced, each fact manipulated and each cover-up made does not go unnoticed by Joe Public. In 10 weeks' time, the Scottish people will call out this tired, weary and sick SNP Government.

This budget is one made by an SNP Government that has neglected public infrastructure. We have crumbling roads that are full of potholes, bridges that have been closed for years, schools that are not fit for purpose and a chronic housing shortage. Local councils have no choice but to cut vital public services that we all need. The SNP is pinching the councils' dinner money and telling them that a bad boy from Westminster did it.

The crumbs from the table that my Lib Dem colleagues have negotiated will probably never see the light of day, but I cannot fault them for trying. The Government will be saying, “Yes!”, because the Lib Dems took the bait.

Time and again, the SNP has shown itself to be incapable of basic arithmetic, so, regardless of what happens at the election in May, there will be a new budget in the autumn, when chronic underfunding of local councils, which deliver the vast majority of services for people, will continue.

If the SNP Government's plan is that people will not notice council tax rates going up by 5, 6 or even 9 per cent, it is surely mistaken. People are not stupid. They know that the mismanagement and waste coming from this dysfunctional Government mean that councils are having to

increase tax on family homes. People know that fiddling around with the 19 and 20 per cent tax bands does not amount to anything. A few of them might save 9 pence a day in tax, but that is set against the hundreds of pounds going on top of their council tax.

What do Scotland's people get out of the piece of fiction that is the budget? Certainly not an improved NHS. They get token gestures including providing walk-in GP surgeries, which means that patients now need to travel further to get a service poorer than the one that they relied on 10 years ago. Meanwhile, stories of 12, 18 and 24-hour waits for ambulances fill my inbox and, once people are able to get in an ambulance—

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Davy Russell: Not just now; I have a big speech to do. Once someone is in an ambulance, it can take hours for them to get to hospital. They can then face a nine-hour wait in the car park because accident and emergency cannot admit them. Ambulances sit and wait. It is a vicious cycle. Some of my constituents have taken taxis to A and E because they know that it will be faster than waiting for an ambulance.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care knows this because I have sent him details of numerous cases. Every time a constituent reaches out to me with an even more unbelievable complaint, the cabinet secretary gives me the same old reply, telling me that everything is all right out there, that it is a garden of roses and that nothing is wrong with our hospitals. Perhaps he could tell that to my constituent who had to be resuscitated after a seven-hour wait for an ambulance. That is the latest in a long line of such stories. No doubt, every member in this place has heard similar stories. I told the First Minister about a shortage of co-codamol; the next day, NHS Lanarkshire told its GPs not to discuss the matter with its patients.

I will be joining Scottish Labour members in abstaining on the budget in order that police officers, teachers, nurses and other vital public service workers can get paid in a few weeks' time.

Kevin Stewart: The member mentioned a real difficulty in the supply of certain drugs. A lot of that is down to Brexit and down to the UK Government and reserved policy. Will he join me in calling on the UK Government—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, Mr Stewart.

Kevin Stewart: —to sort this out once and for all?

Davy Russell: I was making a point about incoherence in the SNP Government's approach. I

will join my Scottish Labour colleagues in abstaining on the budget in order that police officers, teachers, nurses and other vital public service workers get their wages. However, that does not mean that we agree with it—far from it, as it is letting Scotland down, as per usual.

The SNP Government's budget will not improve things. People are being systematically ground down into accepting poor service, as though the Scottish Government is doing us a favour. However, on Thursday 7 May, the Scottish people will have a chance to vote for hope, improvement and better lives. We need to get rid of this diabolical, deceitful SNP Government. We, the people of Scotland, have a big decision to make—either to be burdened with Mr Swinney and his motley crew or to vote for a better, brighter future with Scottish Labour.

17:33

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Ind): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. I will use my time to talk about the importance of funding social care like it matters—not just because it matters for the many people who use it but because it matters for all of us.

Almost all of the population will use or experience social care. That might be directly, it might be because someone close to us needs support, it might be because we work in care or it might be because we provide unpaid care. It is essential infrastructure for the delivery of a Scotland where opportunity is available to all. Funding it well is not only the right thing to do—it is the economically sensible thing to do, too.

Social care unlocks freedoms. It is what makes ordinary things possible. I am one of the many people who rely on social care to live, study, work and build a life. Social care freed me, and that is why I want to use the opportunity, in what will be the last budget debate in this place that I will speak in, to talk about its importance.

Social care changed my life, and it did so because of the hard work of the incredible women who support me with the things that many people never need to think about. They support me in getting up, getting dressed, managing pain, cooking, cleaning, fixing my wheelchair, getting out and getting on with my day. Like the almost 200,000 people who work in care in Scotland, they work their socks off. Because they do that, I can work my socks off, too. On the record, I say to them and the care workforce across Scotland: thank you.

Because of social care, disabled people can take their place in society and contribute. That matters. Social care is an investment in people, society and our economy. Because the workforce

is predominantly made up of women, social care is an investment in the women who are employed as carers. It is also an investment in the ability of women to take up work elsewhere, because unpaid caring responsibilities will be properly supported.

All of us in the Parliament know that social care is stretched. People are fighting for the care that they need and workers are still too often waiting for the pay and conditions that they deserve. I acknowledge the change in the budget to meet the real living wage, which the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland has talked about. However, that will only take us back to the status quo, because the level of funding is far short of what is needed to stabilise and guarantee the long-term sustainability of the sector.

When funding is tight, the consequences are not abstract. People miss appointments because there is no one to support them to get there, people lose out on social time and community life and people go without the personal support that they need to stay well and independent. As we all know, that leads to lower participation rates, lower employment levels and poorer health.

It is not only the lack of care that holds people back; charges for care also do so. Facing significant funding pressures, councils charge disabled people for the care that they need, and those charges are increasing. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation put it perfectly last year when it said:

“Despite aiming to develop a system that is fair, current charges are inconsistent, mask unmet need and cause significant financial hardship to disabled people. There are things that could be done to make the system fairer, but ultimately these charges need to end.”

It is simply not right that a service that is designed to support equality can deepen financial inequality. Care is not an optional extra, and nor is it a luxury; it is essential. Care enables people to get up in the morning, to work and to live an ordinary life, and people should not be penalised for needing it. I again call for non-residential care charges to be scrapped.

I say to future legislators in the Parliament that, when they next set budgets, they should remember that social care must be considered not as a cost but as an essential investment for all of us, and it must be prioritised and funded as such.

17:37

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind): Budgets provide an opportunity for the Parliament to scrutinise questions such as whether we are spending public money wisely or funding failure. I will use the few minutes that I have been allocated

to talk about public trust and how—or whether—we are getting value for money.

Trust depends on taxpayers seeing effective use of public money and measurable value for their money. There is a question about how ministers can properly assess effectiveness when substantial funding for equality and tackling male violence against women is channelled at arm's length through bodies such as Inspiring Scotland.

Recently, five Government-funded charities—Engender, LGBT Youth Scotland, the Equality Network and Scottish Trans, LEAP Sports Scotland and Zero Tolerance—have been lobbying hard to create confusion in the aftermath of the *For Women Scotland Ltd v the Scottish ministers* case, on which the Scottish Government lost yet more public money after being challenged by *For Women Scotland*.

Clare Adamson wanted us to talk about money that has been squandered, so I hope that she is listening. The *For Women Scotland* case cost £780,000. There was also the failed Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill and the court case to challenge the use of a section 35 order, which cost £370,000. In total, that comes to £1.2 million that has been wilfully wasted by the Government against public opinion.

Further, we have organisations that are now steeped in controversy, such as LGBT Youth Scotland, that have received significant public funding. That organisation has received more than £13.4 million over the past 10 years, and yet, year on year, we are told that the inequality that it claims to tackle is worsening. Are we continuing to fund failure? What independent evaluation has been undertaken to assess whether such funded interventions are delivering on expected outcomes, or whether those organisations are, in fact, part of the problem rather than the solution?

I will now touch on male violence against women and girls. The cabinet secretary has said that equally safe will receive more money in the budget. The equally safe strategy that underpins the delivering equally safe funding model states that prostitution is violence against women. At a time when Scotland is facing escalating sexual crimes and escalating domestic abuse, the crisis of male violence against women continues. The Government is finding ways and looking for excuses not to act, either by not acting itself or by not supporting members' bills on those issues. I presented a case showing that, using the Christie commission-type of evaluation, my bill would have saved the country money over time.

Why are some funded organisations notably silent on tackling demand and criminalising perpetrators exploiting women in prostitution? Why are critical front-line services such as

Glasgow and Clyde Rape Crisis struggling to survive while demand is increasing, but other lobby groups seem to be thriving financially while failing to deliver any meaningful improvement for those they claim to serve? There is no point in spending more money if it is not being spent well.

I am very concerned about how public money is being allocated. If adherence to following the law is not a core funding condition, it must become one. We cannot afford further wasted public funds and reputational damage from embarrassing revelations such as those that we witnessed in the employment tribunal involving Sandie Peggie and NHS Fife. The costs of that are on-going and were about £400,000 as at December 2025.

The public are not stupid. We have to earn their trust by focusing on their priorities, not on ideological indulgences, and by delivering measurable and accountable outcomes for the people of Scotland. We are not doing that, and the examples that I have given are just a tiny snapshot. I have not even had time to cover the Government's callous and kamikaze on-going fight to use public money to keep violent males in the female prison estate. My considered view is that we are continuing to fund failure, and we should urgently address that.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We move to winding-up speeches.

17:42

Ross Greer: In opening the debate, the cabinet secretary encouraged her successor in the finance portfolio to be bold. I absolutely agree with that. There is one particular area in which it is essential that they are bold. She has given me the opportunity to talk about my favourite hobby-horse in the finance debate: reform of the council tax.

The Greens have often been focused on local government in our budget negotiations, but there is a fundamental problem in haggling every year over a couple of hundred million pounds at the edge of a multibillion-pound system that is fundamentally broken. Many of us—certainly those of us who believe in Scotland's independence—aspire for us to be more like our mainland European neighbours, and particularly our Nordic neighbours. However, when it comes to how we finance local government, Scotland has an incredibly British style of centralised governance.

Local government funding in Scotland is overwhelmingly dependent on the block grant from the Scottish Government—about 80 per cent of it comes from that—as opposed to the mainstream of European local government municipalities, which raise a majority of their own funding. Local government in Scotland simply does not have the power to make those decisions. It is not really

local—it is far too big—and it can barely do any governing. We have 32 regional service delivery bodies.

We have reached the end of another session of Parliament with no progress made on the replacement of the council tax. The system was out of date before this Parliament was even established, yet we have got to the end of its sixth session and we have not fixed it yet.

The poorest households in this country are paying about five times more as a share of their income in council tax than the wealthiest. That should embarrass all of us. This Parliament is responsible for that, not councils.

Yes, with any change to that system, there would be winners and losers, but there are winners and losers in the system that we have now—it is a broken system. The winners are the wealthiest, and the losers are the people who are struggling the most, in terms of how much they have to pay and their reliance on underfunded council services.

It is frustrating that, in this session of Parliament, we had the opportunity to at least agree on a revaluation. Most of us recognise that the system needs to be scrapped and replaced but, at the very least, it should be based on accurate data and, unfortunately, only the Greens and Lib Dems voted for a revaluation exercise to take place. Those who rejected that need to take responsibility for the fact that the majority of households in this country are paying the wrong rate of council tax.

We would not put up with that with income tax or most of our other taxes. Most of those who are paying the wrong rate are poorer households paying more than they should, and it is generally wealthier households that pay less. The system is fundamentally broken. Regardless of our ideological positions on tax, I believe that we all recognise the fundamental deficiencies in a system that is based on 1991 property valuations. No one can defend a system in which most people are paying the wrong rate, yet we have got to the end of the sixth session of Parliament and have not yet fixed that. That is immensely frustrating.

That said, I do not want to end on a negative, so I will talk about some of the limited progress that we have made on council tax, for which the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government as well as the Cabinet Secretary for Housing deserve some credit. The changes that we have made to council tax for second homes and holiday homes have not only raised hundreds of millions of pounds for local services; in the first year alone of doubling council tax for second and holiday homes, there were 2,500 fewer properties of that type in Scotland. Those properties did not disappear; they went back on to the market and

were bought by people who chose to live in them, thereby helping us to tackle the housing crisis.

Shona Robison: Does Ross Greer agree with me on how strange it is that the Tories always go on about funding for local government and yet oppose the very mechanisms that he is talking about for local government to raise additional funds on second and empty homes? Does he think that that is a bit strange and contradictory?

Ross Greer: The cabinet secretary is absolutely right. As well as the contradiction in the fact that the Tories demand more money for local government while refusing to give councils the power to raise that money, there is the Tories' regular refrain that this is a centralising Scottish Government and that we should instead empower local government when, time after time in this session and the sessions before it, the Conservatives have consistently opposed our collective efforts to give local government more power over its finances and other matters.

Along with reform of the council tax, the changes that we made at the same time to housing revenue accounts have resulted in the City of Edinburgh Council alone being able to commit more than £1.5 billion of additional funding over the next decade to the construction of more council housing. None of us will put reform of housing revenue accounts or ministerial direction powers on our leaflets for the coming election, but that is the stuff that really matters. People will have roofs over their heads as a result of the changes that we have delivered. However, there is still much to do.

We have a choice. To go back to what I said in my opening speech, as we go into the coming election, there is an attempt to make it feel as if Scottish austerity is inevitable because of the state of our public finances. I agree that there needs to be a change to put them on a sustainable footing, but this is one of the wealthiest countries in the history of the world.

As we go into the election, I urge colleagues, not just in the final moments of this debate but in the next session of Parliament—whoever is here—to be bold. There are far too many issues on which we have kicked the can as far down the road as we can. The most critical issue is how we fund local government. That is about how we fund those who deliver our schools, social care, libraries and roads and pavement maintenance, all of which are absolutely critical to the day-to-day lives of our constituents.

Much as the local government settlement this year is just about acceptable, we know that local services have reached a tipping point and that we cannot keep kicking the can down the road. There needs to be fundamental change to local

government finances at the start of the next session of Parliament.

17:49

Michael Marra: It has been a feisty debate at times, but, throughout it, there has been no recognition whatever from members on the SNP benches—the back benches or the front benches—of the need for a change of direction. Members would expect me to say that there is such a need, but, when the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Fraser of Allander Institute are saying that the spectre of an inevitable emergency budget is on the horizon, that should be of concern to members on the Government benches. Those are authoritative and independent bodies that SNP ministers have often quoted over the years, so they should be concerned.

Perhaps that has just become the norm and to be expected. We had three years of consecutive emergency budgets, and all the chaos that ensued, under this Government. Last year, we had a budget that was held behind closed doors. The reality is that chaotic decision making by the Government, which means that civil servants spend the whole year fighting to hold on to the budget that they were allocated at the start of it, creates real problems in how Government works and in how money is allocated. Across Government departments, basic budgets are restricted in-year and things are promised but subsequently not delivered.

Then there are the long-term trends. My colleague Jackie Baillie rightly pointed out that GP services have been downgraded from the 11 per cent that they previously commanded in the health budget to 7 per cent. GPs are furious at what we have now: an SNP electioneering gimmick about supposed walk-in centres. There is no clarity on how those will operate. Today, reports have come in from across the country about the lack of clarity on the centres. When the cabinet secretary stood up at the start of the debate, he was unable to fairly represent what is happening with the service in Dundee. He said that the service would be open to people across the city, but that is simply not the case—it is restricted to existing patients registered at the health centre to which the service will be allocated.

That comes against a backdrop of a 25 per cent cut in the number of GP surgeries in Dundee under this SNP Government. The number of registered patients in the remaining surgeries has increased by more than 40 per cent. That is the context in which a new queuing system for one surgery in Dundee has been introduced. The reality is that, instead of going forward by introducing an app on which people can book an appointment, we are going back to the 1950s and asking people to

queue up for an appointment instead. It is absolutely the case that that is not progress but a move backwards.

In his opening and closing speeches, Ross Greer talked about the UK context and the amount of money that has been provided to the Scottish Government—he called it “austerity”. Mr Greer should know that an additional £10.3 billion of funding for the Scottish Government’s budget clearly does not represent austerity. An additional £5.2 billion was provided in this budget year alone, which reflects a highly redistributive approach.

Keith Brown: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: I will take the member’s intervention in a moment.

I get that there are people in the chamber who do not agree that we should have a redistributive budget, but that is what is in place. Analysis by the Office for Budget Responsibility clearly shows that additional taxation has been introduced to produce the additional resources that the Scottish Government has benefited from.

Keith Brown: Michael Marra earlier said that he respects independent authoritative agencies that comment on budgets. The OBR has said that Labour’s budget this year lays the groundwork for future years of austerity. Does the member agree with that?

Michael Marra: I recall Paul Johnston of the Institute for Fiscal Studies talking about the Labour budget and saying clearly that under no interpretation could it be considered austerity. It is absolutely clear that the uplift in the amount of money that has come to the Scottish Government—we are talking about the allocation for today’s budget—has been considerable. Goodness only knows where we would be without it.

Mr Greer said that he opposed the rise in employer national insurance contributions. I understand that the rise presents challenges for businesses across Scotland, but the money has to come from somewhere. Where does he suggest that it should come from?

Ross Greer: The Labour Government faced two options when it came to employer national insurance contributions and it chose the option that increased the contribution of workers on lower wages. Why did it maintain the 2 per cent cap on ENICs for those who are on salaries above £50,000? Of the two options, the Government chose the regressive, not the progressive, way to raise more money from ENICs.

Michael Marra: Lots of fine-tuning choices can be made. Mr Greer might be right that there are more progressive ways to apply parts of different

taxes, and we continue to have those arguments. However, the idea that you just do not make such choices and therefore have less money for public services has been the SNP front bench’s approach—it asked for an additional £90 billion for spending but opposed £45 billion of revenue raisers. Frankly, that is incomprehensible and ludicrous.

The reality is that the SNP will never take the bold choices that are needed to change this country for the better. Time and again, it puts party before country—receiving tip-offs about court cases, circling the wagons to protect its own, blurring the lines between Government and party, colluding and covering up, and offering grieving families cash and trips to Disneyland rather than honesty and accountability.

The First Minister: Smear, smear, smear.

Michael Marra: That is absolutely the case, and the First Minister should be ashamed of it.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Michael Marra: The SNP does all of that because it is defending a record of failure: hundreds of thousands of Scots on NHS waiting lists, more than 10,000 children in temporary accommodation, ferries that do not sail, roads that do not get dualled, an education system that is going backwards and a justice system that is past breaking point. It is well past time for change.

17:55

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As others have done, I will start by saying a few words in tribute to Shona Robison, given that this will be her final budget debate. I wish her well in the future. I know that, in her job, she has put up my taxes, but I do not bear a grudge. I assure her that, in my role as a trustee of the Scottish parliamentary pension scheme, I will work very hard to secure her financial future.

Before I get into some of the issues that have been raised in the debate, I will provide a bit of context to the budget and say why the performance of Scotland’s economy is essential.

As we know, the budget has three component parts: the Westminster block grant, the money that is raised from devolved taxes and the block grant adjustment. The third part—the block grant adjustment—is crucial because, ultimately, that is what decides the overall size of the Scottish budget. Under the fiscal framework, which was agreed by the First Minister and recently renegotiated and signed off by the Government, the block grant adjustment depends on the relative performance of Scottish devolved taxes compared

with what happens elsewhere in the UK. Scottish Conservatives make no apology for talking about Scotland's economic performance, because that is crucial to determining the block grant adjustment and, therefore, how much public money there is to spend.

A growing Scottish economy not only delivers greater wealth and more secure, well-paid jobs but leads to better public finances. If there are more working taxpayers, more taxes are paid. If there are more economically inactive people, less money is raised in taxes and more support must be provided through the benefits system. What really matters in relation to the block grant adjustment is not how Scotland performs on a stand-alone basis, but how we perform relative to the rest of the United Kingdom.

John Mason: Will Murdo Fraser give way?

Ivan McKee: Will Murdo Fraser take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: I have a choice. I will give way to Mr McKee.

Ivan McKee: Murdo Fraser makes a fair point about Scotland's economic performance relative to that of the rest of the UK. What does he have to say about the fact that Scotland's economy is now consistently growing more quickly than that in the rest of the UK?

Murdo Fraser: It might be performing marginally better than the dismal performance of the UK economy under Labour, but what really matters to the Scottish budget is comparative tax receipts. In that regard, we must consider what the Scottish Fiscal Commission refers to as the "economic performance gap"—or, rather, the devolved tax gap—and consider how Scotland's performance compares to that of the UK as a whole. The figures show—not according to me, but according to the independent Fiscal Commission—that there is a staggering gap of £1 billion. So, £1 billion is being lost to the Scottish Government because our earnings growth is not as high as that in the rest of the UK.

John Mason: Will Murdo Fraser give way?

Murdo Fraser: I cannot give way at the moment. I do not have time.

In simple terms, that means that we are not attracting enough new people, particularly high earners, to come to Scotland to address that gap. The Scottish Government will say that Scotland's population is increasing, as are the number of people of working age. That might be true, but what matters to the Scottish budget is not the absolute numbers but the numbers relative to those for the UK as a whole. Relatively speaking, the population of the UK as a whole is growing

more quickly than the population of Scotland. As a consequence, there is a negative impact on the Scottish budget. Therefore, we make no apology for saying that we need to focus on economic growth and, in particular, attract more higher earners to Scotland. Ross Greer's recipe, which is to tax the rich more, would have the opposite impact and would diminish the Scottish budget, because we need more higher earners here.

Ross Greer: Will Murdo Fraser give way?

Murdo Fraser: I will give way to Mr Greer, given that I mentioned him.

Ross Greer: For the past 10 years, Murdo Fraser has claimed that every tax rise that we have already delivered on high earners would result in some kind of colossal exodus. However, over the past 10 years, the number of people on higher salaries in Scotland has grown and tax revenues have grown. Does he reflect at all on the fact that there is no evidence of the catastrophic impact that he claimed there would be?

Murdo Fraser: Ross Greer has not listened to a word that I have said. Compared to the rest of the UK, we are not growing the number of taxpayers—in particular, the number of higher earners—quickly enough. That is why the Scottish Fiscal Commission is saying that we are £1 billion behind where we should be. If we could grow the economy faster and attract more people, we would fill that £1 billion gap. That would give us more money to spend on all the pet projects that Mr Greer has. Imagine if we could grow faster than the rest of the UK—we would have not £1 billion but more than £1 billion. We are challenged over the argument for making tax cuts to grow the economy, but that is why we should. If we grow the economy, we widen the tax base and we increase the tax take by the Scottish Government.

In previous debates, I have raised the need for action to support struggling businesses. The announcements that we have heard in the budget to help businesses that are struggling, particularly with the current non-domestic rates revaluation, are welcome as far as they go. However, they simply do not go far enough. Businesses in hospitality are currently closing at the rate of one per week, and that will continue to be the case unless this Government thinks again. If the Northern Irish Executive can announce—as it did just two weeks ago, in response to pleas from the business community there—that it can halt the revaluation process, Scottish ministers can do the same. Even at this late hour, I would encourage them to do that before we see more job losses.

Without a growing, dynamic economy, and without thriving businesses, we will not have the jobs and the revenues to fund the public services that we need. As Jackie Baillie said, according to

the Institute for Fiscal Studies, we are already seeing in this budget what will be a real-terms cut to health services. That is not something that the SNP wants to talk about, but that is the reality. Stephen Kerr was right to say that the benefits bill is spiralling out of control. Local services are being slashed, council taxes are soaring and the income tax gap between Scotland and the rest of the UK is widening.

That is the SNP's legacy, and that is why we must reject this budget.

18:02

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): As a Government, the decisions that we have taken in this budget have been driven by our commitment to improve the lives of the people of Scotland today and into the future. That commitment reflects our values and, ultimately, shapes our priorities as a Government. Those priorities—eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency and improving public services—underpin the budget.

The budget was drafted with an eye on the upcoming tackling child poverty delivery plan, which will deliver further progress towards achieving our child poverty targets. It commits an additional £49 million to the tackling child poverty fund, taking the total to £61.5 million. It provides an extra £50 million to the whole family support package to support parents into sustainable employment and to help them to grow the economy. It begins the necessary work to introduce a new Scottish child payment premium, which is estimated to benefit the families of around 12,000 children. As the cabinet secretary highlighted in her opening remarks, that investment is vital to our progress, but I ask members not to lose sight of the human stories behind it. We should all keep in mind the individuals whom we are supporting through this budget and the lives that we are all committing to making better through the decisions that we take in this chamber.

We are pleased that the budget includes measures that will materially impact the day-to-day lives of families, giving every child in Scotland the chance to take part in a free sporting opportunity this summer, investing more in activity clubs and, from August next year, ensuring that all primary school pupils can access a free breakfast to start the school day.

We know that the long-term prosperity of our country is reliant on our economic success. That is why the budget bolsters our support for businesses, people and place, with a package of non-domestic rates relief that is estimated to be worth more than £870 million in 2026-27 alone,

and ensuring the lowest basic property rate since 2018-19. We are providing more than £325 million of funding for the enterprise agencies in order to continue to improve business and community resilience, as well as creating and protecting jobs.

We also know that investing in the people of Scotland and their future will support economic growth, which is why this budget invests a combined increase of £70 million in Scotland's colleges and a further £8 million to support adult learners.

The Government also recognises that our future can be protected only by taking seriously the climate emergency that we face. That is why the budget invests more than £5 billion of climate-positive spend in 2026-27, including £31.7 million of investment to make progress in Scotland's transition to a circular economy. We are also taking forward measures that encourage a switch to sustainable modes of transport, including a freeze of ScotRail fares in 2026-27. We remain committed to delivering on the priorities of the climate change plan in a fiscally sustainable way. The budget supports that ambition.

The budget also delivers support for the public services that the people of Scotland rely on. It will provide record funding to local government of £15.7 billion, including the additional £20 million of funding that was announced at stage 1, which can be used towards funding the real living wage in the adult and child care sectors. It invests more to improve our transport services by providing more than £4.4 billion of capital investment to 2029-30 to enhance our rail network and fleet, and more than £1 billion of capital to deliver ferry service improvements. It also supports new approaches to public services by providing £36 million to begin the roll-out of the new high street GP walk-in centres, which will provide additional same-day access for communities.

In her opening remarks, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government underlined the importance of collaboration in a process such as this, and I whole-heartedly agree. Our pre-budget and post-budget engagement with members across the chamber has been motivated by a commitment to consensus and co-operation. As a result, the Liberal Democrats and Jeremy Balfour have confirmed their support for the bill. I thank those members and others who have engaged in the process. Their thoughtful contributions have helped this Government to develop a stronger budget for the people of Scotland.

Beyond those specific asks, there are measures in the budget that other members in the chamber hold dear. The Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill became an act on 11 February, and work is under way to make progress

on its implementation. The 2026-27 budget will support outdoor learning policy development and implementation. We welcomed Liz Smith's constructive approach to improving the affordability and deliverability of the bill, and I fail to see how she could vote against a budget that contains that measure.

Liz Smith: Does the minister recognise that that commitment, which the Parliament has now made by passing the bill, was an SNP manifesto commitment in 2021?

Ivan McKee: It still needs to be funded, and we still need to pass the budget. Liz Smith has to decide whether or not she wants to support that measure.

We are providing an additional £40 million of investment in sport and physical activity to support opportunities for people across Scotland to be more active. I am sure that colleagues such as Brian Whittle will welcome that and vote accordingly.

We are committing £926 million to continue progress towards the affordable housing supply programme target of delivering 110,000 affordable houses by 2032. Given Miles Briggs's recent representations on that in the Parliament, he should surely support our capital spend being focused on that area by voting for the budget.

There were interesting contributions this afternoon. Jamie Hepburn, Kevin Stewart, Ross Greer and others reminded us of the choices that we have made in Scotland and the long list of types of support that the citizens of Scotland get that is unavailable elsewhere in the UK. Jamie Greene recognised the seriousness of the work that we do and the implications of the decisions that we make in the real world. Serious politicians get on and get things done. I am sure that Kenny Gibson will be back in the Scottish Parliament, but if not, I have no doubt that a career in comedy beckons. As for Agent Marra, the first rule of negotiations is that if you do not ask, you do not get. Perhaps the Parliament will deliver training on negotiation skills alongside training on the budget process, which I am sure that Mr Marra will benefit from.

As for the Tory contributions, we heard the same old, same old: tax cuts on the one hand and more spending on the other—complete economic illiteracy from the party of Liz Truss. We heard that from Craig Hoy, Stephen Kerr and Murdo Fraser. We heard some of it from Liz Smith, but, to be fair to her, she tries to present a coherent argument that goes beyond soundbites, and we have to pay tribute to her for the work that she has done on the Finance and Public Administration Committee over many years. I think that we all agree that she will be missed in the chamber—even if she has not

yet realised that Scotland's economy is now growing faster than that in the rest of the UK and that more taxpayers are moving from the rest of the UK to Scotland than are moving in the other direction as a result of the Government's policies.

We all recognise the fiscal challenges facing our public services, now and into the future. Through prudent fiscal management, the Government continues to fund the priorities of the people of Scotland while balancing our budget and delivering within the resources available.

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

Ivan McKee: Will I get any time back, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: Yes.

Craig Hoy: One of the greatest challenges for this and future budgets in Scotland is public sector pay. Two years ago, the Government set a 9 per cent envelope for public sector pay. Going into this year, it has already spent 8 per cent of that 9 per cent. What is the message to public sector unions? The IFS says that controlling public sector labour costs is likely to be challenging. How will the Government rise to that challenge?

Ivan McKee: The Government will continue to do what it always does: it will fund the priorities of the people of Scotland, including by ensuring that our public sector workers are paid properly while balancing our budget by increasing tax and other revenues to support our growing economy.

We recognise the need for continued public service reform to ensure that resources are focused where they make the biggest difference and positively impact on outcomes. The Government will continue our work to shift spend to areas of prevention, to deliver efficiencies, to join up and further integrate services and to transform the service delivery landscape, taking forward work in our public service reform strategy. In short, the Government will be bold.

Despite the challenging fiscal context, we are proud that we have protected the social contract and have gone further in delivering our priorities. We are proud to have taken forward a process that pursues consensus over division, and we are proud to bring forward a budget that will ultimately improve the lives of individuals in Scotland.

We look forward—if I may be permitted to say this—to continuing to bring forward budgets that deliver on the priorities of the people of Scotland in future years.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill at stage 3.

Urgent Questions

18:12

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I remind members that legal proceedings are active, and that the sub judice rule applies. I will allow reference to the case for the purpose of asking and responding to questions on the handling of information. However, there should be no discussion of the specifics of the case.

Lord Advocate (Information Sharing)

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government for what reason the March 2025 memorandum relating to the Peter Murrell case was not referenced by the Lord Advocate during her appearance last week when answering an urgent question from Michael Marra MSP regarding her briefing of the First Minister.

The Lord Advocate (Dorothy Bain KC): Last week I came to the chamber and answered the urgent question with care, based on the information and documentation that were available to me at that time. I was clear in my answers that there were other examples of information being provided in similar circumstances but that I could not give details without understanding the impact on proceedings.

I had not, in the time available before answering the urgent question, seen the March 2025 document. I had not seen the document since it was sent, nor any of the other examples, nor was I given advice on the impact on proceedings if information were released. I therefore undertook to consider the point in more detail and to provide examples.

It would have been quite wrong for me to answer such a sensitive issue in a live criminal case with anything less than the fullest understanding of the consequences of the issue. Yesterday I was able to provide members with a wide range of examples to demonstrate the long-standing practice of prosecutors properly advising Governments of casework and prosecution decisions. I have now provided Parliament with the fullest information available.

Stephen Kerr: This must pass the sniff test. Either what we are dealing with is a serious error of professional judgment, or people will be thinking that it is something more serious. Last week, the Lord Advocate was asked about the nature and extent of her communications with the First Minister. She justified the January memorandum on the basis that proceedings were live and that he required to be advised so as not to prejudice them by public comment. In fact, she repeated three times the following statement:

“The communication to the First Minister was provided after the indictment was served, at a point at which there is no limitation on its terms being made public”.

However, now, we know that there was also a prior memorandum, in March 2025, which covered the alleged offence and its value. I have a higher estimation of the Lord Advocate than to believe that she had not referenced her past communications with the First Minister on the case before coming to the chamber last week. Why was that communication not disclosed then, and does she accept that her answers last week are at best—and have been shown to be—incomplete and therefore misleading to Parliament?

The Lord Advocate: I am constrained in what I can properly say about live proceedings. Where Parliament seeks wider detail, I will provide what I properly can after considering my responsibility and the appropriate legal advice from my officials. I will not say anything that risks prejudicing proceedings or disclosing material that cannot be put into the public domain. I have now published all available examples of minutes to the First Minister.

As a person who has dedicated her professional life to upholding the rule of law, I understand fully the need for Parliament to be properly and accurately informed on matters on which it requests information. I answered the questions that were put to me and told Parliament that further examples would be provided once the required checks had been undertaken by my officials.

Stephen Kerr: Three times, the Lord Advocate said:

“The communication to the First Minister was provided after the indictment was served, at a point at which there is no limitation on its terms being made public”.—[*Official Report*, 18 February 2026; c 78.]

Now, we have the same information in a memorandum from the Lord Advocate to the First Minister, dated March 2025. The fact is that the First Minister was then in possession of information that was not in the public domain. There was no reason for the First Minister to be given that information regarding a politically sensitive court case—one in which the accused was appointed as the Scottish National Party chief executive, while the First Minister was the leader of the SNP the first time around.

Journalists were asking direct questions and were denied those details. The public did not know, yet the First Minister knew the nature of the charges and the scale of the alleged sum from March 2025.

I remind the Lord Advocate of the statement that she made last week—three times—about why she shared that information in January. Now, we know that it was shared in March 2025. He knew the

nature of the charges and the scale of the allegations in March 2025. That, by definition, is an informational advantage. If that information was shared with party special advisers—as it was—does that not risk becoming a political advantage? What was genuinely new in January and what assessment has been made of the implications of the prior knowledge, from March, for any potential role that John Swinney may have as a witness and for public confidence in the neutrality of the prosecution service?

The Lord Advocate: At a point at which an indictment is served or a petition warrant is answered, there is indeed no limitation on the information contained in either document being made public. That recognises the possibility of disclosure once it has left the control of the prosecutor.

The position that an indictment is not public knowledge until it is heard in open court is entirely correct; formal public status arises through the court process. The fact that the information became knowledge before the case was called in court vindicated the practice of notifying the First Minister. I understand why people may feel uncomfortable at the First Minister having information that others do not. In a sensitive context, that feeling might be heightened. However, the First Minister gets to know some things that the public do not get to know because he has responsibilities that the public do not.

I am here today as Lord Advocate. I discharge my duties in that office independently of any other person and independently of any political interference. As I have explained, the Lord Advocate of the day may provide the First Minister of the day—or, indeed, the Prime Minister or another minister—with appropriate information on casework or investigations. That is done irrespective of the political party of the recipient of the information. It is done in the proper administration of the legal system. The Lord Advocate does not brief political parties. The Lord Advocate advises constitutional office-holders of information that they require to be aware of.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): It is absolutely clear from the information that has been provided by the Lord Advocate that this practice developed under the Scottish National Party Government. The Lockerbie bombing and the Glasgow terror attack are completely different from—and not comparable to—the cases since 2011 that have been presented in her information. There was a clear change of approach and culture at that point.

However, as has already been mentioned, three times last week, the Lord Advocate said in very

specific terms that she was able to inform the First Minister about the details of the case 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.]

Those are the Lord Advocate’s words. We now know that the Lord Advocate provided the First Minister with that information in March 2025.

So, Lord Advocate, is a new justification being provided today that is different from the one that was provided last week? It certainly seems that, three times last week, that justification was made and Parliament was misled.

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

The Lord Advocate: I have answered that question. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the Lord Advocate.

The Lord Advocate: I was clear in my answers that there were other examples of information having been provided in similar circumstances but that I could not give details without understanding the impact on proceedings. I had not, in the time available before answering the question, seen the March 2025 document. I had not seen the document since it was sent, nor any of the other examples, nor had I been given advice on the impact on proceedings if information were released. It was essential, in order to protect the integrity of live criminal proceedings, that I took care and was measured in my responses. I undertook to consider the point in more detail and to provide examples, and I did that.

It would have been quite wrong for me to answer such a sensitive question on a live case with anything less than the fullest understanding of the consequences of the issue.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I do not believe that the Lord Advocate is corrupt, but I fear that, in her dealings on the matter, she has been unwise in the way that she has acted. Twice, Stephen Kerr has put a question to her, and Michael Marra has put the same question to her, but she has not responded to that question. She has not responded to the question about whether, given that she told the chamber last week that the justification for sending a minute to the First Minister was that it was after the service of the indictment, that applied when she sent a memo in March last year. Did that apply then—yes or no?

The Lord Advocate: I have answered the question. [*Interruption.*]

All I ask is for common decency and for me— [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

The Lord Advocate: —to be given the opportunity to answer a very important question. All I ask is for common decency and the ability to answer a question that I have been asked to respond to. I am seeking to do that.

The question relates to why I did not mention the March 2025 document, and I have said why I did not. I said that, in the time before answering the question, I had not seen the March 2025 document. I had not seen the document since it was sent in March 2025, nor any of the other examples, nor—critically—had I been given advice on the impact on proceedings if information were released. I therefore undertook to consider the point in more detail, to provide examples and to respond in full and in writing, and I have done that.

Any responsible individual would understand that it would have been quite wrong for the serving law officer of the day, in a live case and in relation to such a sensitive issue, to respond with anything less than the fullest understanding of the consequences of the issue. Therefore, yesterday, members were given a wide range of examples, including the March 2025 document, and I have now provided the Parliament with the fullest information available.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): I have absolute confidence in the Lord Advocate, as I think that the overwhelming majority of members do, and I have had the pleasure of knowing her for many years. However, I am still confused about the March 2025 document.

The Lord Advocate said that she was not aware of it, but was she aware of it before she came to the chamber last week? In hindsight, does she think that she should have mentioned that document in her statement last week, or was she completely unaware of the document that she sent in March 2025, having forgotten about it?

I think that we need some clarification of what her memory was of that document. In hindsight, does she think that she should have mentioned that document in her statement last week?

The Lord Advocate: I think that I have explained that I had not, in the two hours that I had available to me before answering the urgent question, seen the March 2025 document. I had not seen the document since it was sent in March 2025. When I came into the chamber, I was not aware of the terms of the document. That is all that I can say.

I had not been given advice on the impact on proceedings if information in relation to that document were released. However, I undertook to look at the matter and to understand what had been done previously, and, in an open and

transparent way, I provided the minute to Parliament.

There is a distinction to be made between a petition and an indictment—that is quite correct. However, at the point at which an indictment is served, there is no limitation on the information that is contained in either document being made public. Indeed, when a petition warrant is shared, there is no limitation on the information that is contained in it being made public.

It was important, in advising the First Minister, to recognise the possibility of disclosure of those documents once they had been released from the control of the prosecutor. The position that an indictment is not public knowledge until it is heard in open court is entirely correct. The formal public status arises through the court process, but that is very different from the situation that applies once the petition warrant or the indictment is in the hands of the accused or his advisers.

In this case, I was vindicated in the practice of notifying the Government, because information came into the public domain before the case was called in court. Therefore, the practice demonstrates an understanding of the risks that are involved in the stages at which different parts of the criminal process come into effect. The risk involves the public knowledge of the document, and the information becoming readily available. There is a need to protect ministers in relation to their knowledge of the document and the risk of talking about a case where there are important safeguards to protect the integrity of criminal proceedings.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I have the highest regard for the Lord Advocate, but the question that has been asked by some of my colleagues bears repeating. The question is not whether the Lord Advocate had seen the March 2025 minute in her name; it is to do with understanding why she sent the March 2025 minute, given that the indictment had not been completed, which was the justification that was given last week. It would be helpful if we could understand why the minute was sent in March 2025.

The Lord Advocate: A petition warrant is the initiating process by which an accused person comes to court. A petition warrant sets down, at that stage, the prosecutor's understanding of the charge that may eventually be brought before the court on an indictment. The petition is the initiating procedure and the indictment is the formal document that brings the accused person to court for a preliminary hearing and, ultimately, a trial, if they do not plead guilty.

The petition warrant contains information that could be brought into the public domain by virtue

of the actions of either the accused or someone who is acting on their behalf, or through some other process—for example, the details of the petition warrant might be leaked to a newspaper.

In comparison and in contrast, the indictment is the formal document that is lodged with the court, at which stage a preliminary hearing is ordered by the independent court. The terms of the indictment are not made public by the Crown but they, too, can come into the public domain by virtue of the same process that applies to the petition warrant, which is in the hands of the accused or his adviser and is within the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service; in some way, the document might be leaked.

Both stages in the process raise risks of the disclosure of the content of charges that the Crown would not otherwise make public. Such disclosure is a risk to the fair administration of justice, which needs to be protected. It is therefore critical that, when ministers such as the First Minister, in the job that they do, might be asked about a sensitive and difficult case, they are reminded that the ultimately important points are the protection of the rule of law; the protection of the accused person; the ensuring of a fair trial process; and the need not to make unlawful, illegitimate or ill-informed comment to whoever is asking questions about a live criminal case.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): Can I just check something? I am a little bit unclear from some of those answers. Had the Lord Advocate seen the March 2025 document before it was sent? I seek a simple yes or no. Had she seen it? If so, had she simply forgotten about the document when she appeared in the Parliament last week?

The Lord Advocate: I believe that I have answered that question. Of course I saw the March 2025 document when it was sent from my office. However, I did not see it before I entered the chamber to answer questions, and I did not know of it at the point at which I was asked questions.

The point that I have already answered is that it would have been improper for me to make a whimsical or ill-informed reference to a document that I had not seen before entering the chamber, as Lord Advocate, to be asked in an unprecedented way about matters in relation to a live case. It is unprecedented that a law officer be asked to comment in this way on a live case.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): In the March 2025 memo, the Lord Advocate made reference to the amount involved in the case as being more than £460,000. For what reason would the First Minister need to know that fact?

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if members avoided specific references.

The Lord Advocate: I have been asked questions before in the chamber precisely on why the amount was mentioned in the indictment—which is for the same reason that it was mentioned in the March 2025 memo.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the urgent question.

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-20898, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 3 March 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Contract (Formation and Remedies) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Reconsideration Stage Proceedings: European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 4 March 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; Health and Social Care

followed by Scottish Liberal Democrats Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 5 March 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Social Justice and Housing

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Digital Assets (Scotland) Bill

followed by Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee Debate: Climate Change Plan

followed by Appointment of Board Member to Environmental Standards Scotland

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 10 March 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

10.00 pm Decision Time

Wednesday 11 March 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

7.30 pm Decision Time

Thursday 12 March 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Building Safety Levy (Scotland) Bill

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 2 March 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[Graeme Dey]

The Presiding Officer: I call Murdo Fraser to speak to and move amendment S6M-20898.1.

18:34

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

This morning, I lodged an amendment to the business motion, to seek to insert in next week's business a statement from the Lord Advocate and an opportunity for members to ask her questions.

I lodged that amendment, before my colleague Stephen Kerr had his urgent question accepted, so that the Lord Advocate would come to the chamber to answer questions. I had hoped that we would now be in a position where I would not have to move my amendment. [*Interruption.*]

If the First Minister could be quiet for a moment. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members, let us carry out our business respectfully.

Murdo Fraser: I regret that the answers that we heard from the Lord Advocate are insufficient. She has accepted that the answers that she gave to Parliament last week were incomplete and insufficient, as she did not give Parliament a full picture, because she had not looked at all the papers that were available to her. That in itself should be a matter of concern to Parliament.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: No, not just now, Mr Stewart.

What is clear is that there are further questions for the Lord Advocate that have not been answered today. In particular, a direct question was put to her five times by members in the chamber. The Lord Advocate was asked five times why the justification that she gave last week for giving a minute to the First Minister—that it was after service of the indictment and therefore there was no limitation on its terms being made public—would not have applied when she gave a memo to the First Minister in March last year. On five occasions, she did not answer that question. Other members also raised questions.

There is a legitimate debate about the dual role of the Lord Advocate. Is having someone who is head of the independent Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and also the senior legal adviser to the Scottish Government and sitting in the cabinet legitimate?

Kevin Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: No, thank you, Mr Stewart.

I speak as a Scottish lawyer. The integrity of the Scottish legal system is absolutely essential. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Fraser.

Murdo Fraser: Anything that undermines that or gives the perception of undermining that is a legitimate matter of inquiry for the Parliament.

There are serious questions that still require to be asked. This cannot be the end of the matter. We have not heard convincing answers from the Lord Advocate to questions put by my colleague

Stephen Kerr, my colleagues on the Labour benches or me. The issue needs full exposure, not cover-up.

I move amendment S6M-20898.1, to insert after “That the Parliament agrees”:

“(za) the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 26 February 2026—

delete

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

and insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Lord Advocate Communications with the First Minister Regarding Court Cases, including on Peter Murrell

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

6.00 pm Decision Time”.

18:37

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): It is clear that the only reason that this issue is being raised again is desperation on the part of the Conservative Party and others to smear the Lord Advocate and to smear this institution and seek to undermine it, in the same way that Conservative members regularly shout down anyone who speaks against their interests.

This is part of the tawdry tactics that we have seen for the past 10 years from the Conservative Party. Instead of engaging in debate and asking questions, every time it is about running a smear campaign, particularly by two individuals who have been contaminated by the worst aspects of the Westminster bubble, and who have brought them into this Parliament. It is time that it stopped. The sensible heads in the Tory party should have a word with the rest of them and stop this nonsense.

We should oppose the amendment from Murdo Fraser.

The Presiding Officer: I call the minister to respond on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

18:38

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): In considering this request from the Conservatives, it is important that we reflect on the extent to which these matters have already been interrogated, including directly with the Lord Advocate. Any reasonable member—even on the Tory benches such creatures still exist—would surely conclude that that has been substantial.

We had two urgent questions answered by the Lord Advocate, one of which was answered only a few minutes ago. There has been a topical question on the subject, which I answered, and Russell Findlay and Anas Sarwar raised the topic in detail at First Minister's questions. In addition to that, the Lord Advocate absolutely fulfilled the undertaking that she gave the Parliament to provide more written information, to such an extent that we have a Conservative MSP, who is not with us tonight, for some reason, claiming that he had been the victim of a document dump.

Last week's urgent question resulted in 14 members having the chance to quiz the Lord Advocate. Tonight's question resulted in seven members having an opportunity to do so, and on a theme that emanates from the Lord Advocate fulfilling her commitment to provide the examples that she did. I therefore struggle to see where there is a lack of accountability at play here, let alone the cover-up that Murdo Fraser claims.

With four weeks to go until the Parliament rises for the election, a packed programme of business confronting us and perhaps a few unanticipated legitimate asks for additions to that programme to come, how can the Tories reasonably argue a case for a statement?

I ask Parliament to vote against the amendment to the business motion.

The Presiding Officer: The first question is, that amendment S6M-20898.1, in the name of Murdo Fraser, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20898, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

18:40

Meeting suspended.

18:43

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-20898.1, in the name of Murdo Fraser, which seeks to amend motion S6M-20898, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)

Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Ind)
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)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)

Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and
 Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine)
 (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley)
 (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-20898.1, in the name of Murdo Fraser, is: For 51, Against 66, Abstentions 1.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20898, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not refresh. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (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)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 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)
 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)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (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)
 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)
 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)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20898, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme, is: For 92, Against 23, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees—
 (a) the following programme of business—
 Tuesday 3 March 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 followed by Topical Questions
 followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Contract (Formation and Remedies) (Scotland) Bill
 followed by Reconsideration Stage Proceedings: European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill
 followed by Committee Announcements
 followed by Business Motions
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
 followed by Members' Business
 Wednesday 4 March 2026
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; Health and Social Care
 followed by Scottish Liberal Democrats Business
 followed by Business Motions
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.10 pm Decision Time
 followed by Members' Business
 Thursday 5 March 2026
 11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
 followed by Members' Business
 2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Social Justice and Housing
 followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Digital Assets (Scotland) Bill
 followed by Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee Debate: Climate Change Plan
 followed by Appointment of Board Member to Environmental Standards Scotland
 followed by Business Motions
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.30 pm Decision Time
 Tuesday 10 March 2026
 2.00 pm Time for Reflection
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 followed by Topical Questions
 followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill
 followed by Committee Announcements
 followed by Business Motions
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 10.00 pm Decision Time

Wednesday 11 March 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

7.30 pm Decision Time

Thursday 12 March 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Building Safety Levy (Scotland) Bill

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 2 March 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

18:47

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-20899 to S6M-20901, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Absent Voting (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Absent Voting (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Digital Waste Tracking (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.—[*Graeme Dey*]

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

Decision Time

18:47

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that motion S6M-20860, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill at stage 3, be agreed to. As this is a motion to pass the bill, the question must be decided by division. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 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)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (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)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 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)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 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)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Ind)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)

Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20860, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill at stage 3, is: For 66, Against 29, Abstentions 24.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) (No. 5) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: If no member objects, I will put a single question on three Parliamentary Bureau motions.

As no member objects, the question is, that motions S6M-20899 to S6M-20901, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Absent Voting (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Order 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Absent Voting (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Digital Waste Tracking (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Football Clubs and their Fans (Contribution to Society)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I ask those members who are leaving the chamber to do so now, and do so quietly, because we now move to the next item of business. The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20769—[*Interruption.*]

I ask members to leave the chamber quietly, please.

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20769, in the name of Gillian Mackay, on recognising the contribution that football clubs and their fans make to society. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

I point out, given the lateness of the hour and the fact that other receptions are not able to start until we finish, that I expect members to keep their time, which is seven minutes for the opening speech, four minutes for the speeches in the open debate and seven minutes for the minister to respond. Just to let members know, I have a button that can help to enforce that.

With that, I call Gillian Mackay to open the debate—up to seven minutes, please.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that football is one of the most loved and successful sports in the country and that Scotland boasts some of the most loyal supporters anywhere in Europe, but believes that, often, fans feel they are taken for granted or are an afterthought; considers that, across the country, including in the Central Scotland region, supporters groups and community trusts or charitable foundations attached to professional clubs are often enhancing their environment and giving back to those who find themselves in challenging situations, from foodbank collections to mental health initiatives; believes that football fans are often the beating heart of their communities, creating unity in spaces where division can be prevalent; considers that, with rising living costs, varying ticket prices and high transport costs, the current landscape is making it difficult for working-class fans and families to afford to follow their club, an outlet, it believes, that allows hundreds of thousands of people across the country an escapism and a sense of optimism in a time of struggle; recognises that a price cap has been in place in England for over a decade and means that travelling fans do not pay more than £30 for a ticket, yet understands that no such cap exists at present in Scotland; notes the calls for all 42 Scottish Professional Football League (SPFL) clubs, as well as the Scottish Football Association (SFA) to put fans first; further notes the view that the voices of supporters should be heard by decision makers and amplified within the Scottish Parliament, and notes the belief that those running the national game should listen to the calls from the Scottish Supporters Collective and many fans across the country and cap away football ticket prices at £25.

18:51

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):
Warning noted, Deputy Presiding Officer.

It does not take politicians speaking in the chamber to highlight just how much football means to the people of Scotland. We can see from the jubilant scenes up and down the country last November, when Steve Clarke's men's squad qualified for our first world cup since I was seven, that football is, for many, not only escapism but a way of life. Our national game can often be an outlet. Football allows hundreds of thousands of people across Scotland an escape. It can bring much-needed optimism in a time of struggle, and a sense of purpose, belonging and civic pride. It creates friendships and family bonds that can last a lifetime.

Moreover, football can open up to people a world beyond their locality. It gives supporters an opportunity to visit places that they may never have considered visiting; to learn about other cultures that they knew little about before; and to have experiences that go beyond the 90 minutes on the pitch.

Last month, independent academic research revealed that Scottish football contributes £820 million to the Scottish economy and supports 14,315 jobs. That assessment, from the Fraser of Allander Institute, underlines the growing contribution of our national sport and its clubs to the Scottish economy. The study also found that attendance at professional matches involving Scottish teams topped 6.8 million during the 2023-24 campaign.

In my Central Scotland region, I am extremely proud to have several football clubs that go above and beyond in the communities that they serve. In the Scottish premiership, both Motherwell and Falkirk—two fan-owned football clubs being driven through the Well Society and the Falkirk Supporters' Society—are punching well above their weight, sitting comfortably among the top six teams in the country and mounting challenges for those lucrative European spots.

Recently, I had the pleasure of visiting Derek Allison and the team at the Falkirk Foundation. The work that the foundation does is invaluable, from providing a full pathway for under-seven girls' football to the senior team, to baby bairns classes for kids, starting at just 18 months. The organisation leads the way in offering mental health training; football classes for people living with Down's syndrome; monthly engagement initiatives to tackle social isolation for people over 60 and so much more. The Falkirk Foundation is a well-established anchor organisation at the heart of my community.

Similarly, the wonderful Dawn and the team at Motherwell Football Club Community Trust use the power of football as a tool for community engagement. In 2021—a year disrupted by lockdowns, and by restrictions on numbers and travel—the trust brought benefits of £13.64 million to the local community.

When we talk about football, we often talk about the clubs: the enthralling matches, the less enthralling matches and the trophies won. Without fans, however, those moments would be diluted, and the financial contribution would be significantly less.

I brought the debate to the chamber to highlight the contribution that football clubs and their fans make to society. As I touched on, football is one of the most loved and successful sports in the country, and Scotland boasts some of the most loyal supporters anywhere in Europe. However, the more I speak to supporters and supporters' organisations, the more aware I become that fans feel that they are being taken for granted. They are the only stakeholder that is consistently removed from debates—to put it simply, decisions that affect football fans are being made without the input of football fans. That is nothing new, but I believe that it is something that we, as parliamentarians, must seek to change.

Match-going fans have long been misunderstood. Those attending matches in Scotland have, at times, been targeted by the media, by politicians and by police. Instances of disorder, even though they typically relate to only a tiny minority of spectators, have led to football fandom suffering from stigma. However, when football fans unite and organise, they can achieve some incredible things—just ask those who run fan-supported food banks in stadiums across the country; the ultras groups who have organised toy collections or helped those in need in their communities; and Medical Aid for Palestinians, which receives significant donations following campaigns by Celtic fans. I would like to see, from my colleagues across the chamber, a commitment to see the best in football supporters, to value their contribution and to support them to grow our game and create a positive culture.

As football becomes increasingly commodified and sanitised, it loses its identity. A huge factor in that has been the rising ticket costs that we are seeing across the board. Football is meant to be for everyone, but across our country, there are families and working-class fans being priced out of attending matches. As an example, for the upcoming Rangers-Celtic match in the Scottish cup, adults are being charged £53, with concessions being around £10 less. The estimated ticket revenue from that game is more than £2.5 million. Both clubs will receive more in

gate receipts from that game than the winners of the cup will receive in prize money. It is totally exploiting the loyalty of fans.

The Scottish Greens are calling for a £25 cap on away tickets in Scotland. In January, I urged the First Minister, at First Minister's question time, to back the cap, and I wrote to all 42 professional clubs, urging them to support a fair pricing agreement that would keep football accessible for supporters during the cost of living crisis. I am delighted that that campaign has been backed by several supporters' clubs already, and by organisations such as the Scottish supporters collective and Supporters Direct Scotland.

At recent matches, supporters have taken matters into their own hands, holding up banners demanding a £25 cap and sending a clear message to clubs and football authorities across Scotland that it is an issue that fans deeply care about. I am grateful to fans at Falkirk, Motherwell, Kilmarnock, Celtic, Hibernian, St Johnstone, Partick Thistle, Dundee United and Aberdeen. We have also previously seen support for lower ticket prices at St Mirren. Fans of Falkirk and Hibs have gone a step further and boycotted recent matches at Celtic Park, stating that the pricing structure is unacceptable, and I commend their efforts.

Clubs should listen to their supporters. The passion and organisation that we have seen from fans show that there is a strong appetite for change, and it is time for football authorities and clubs to respond. We need more democracy at the heart of Scottish football. We must look at a fairer distribution of resources and at marketing our game better to attract further ethical investment that does not come from health-harming products or from gambling. We must do more to put supporters' voices at the forefront. We must ensure that fans can have an ownership stake—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Mackay, you need to conclude.

Gillian Mackay: Sorry.

Fans need to have a strong voice in how the clubs are run. Scottish football is a unique melting pot of passion, colour, joy and—at times—heartbreak. We must ensure that fans are centred at the heart of it, and I thank members for supporting my motion.

18:59

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I thank Gillian Mackay for lodging the motion for debate. This is the third debate in which I have taken part in recent weeks on the value of Scottish football—I see some regular contributors to those debates, including Mr Adam and Mr Whittle, in the chamber. I see nothing wrong in

that—it speaks to the centrality of football as part of the lived experience of many of us in Scotland. For my part, I very much enjoyed being at Firhill on Saturday, watching Partick Thistle beat Airdrie 1-0—I always enjoy watching Airdrie lose against Partick Thistle, it has to be said.

I am looking forward to being at St Mirren in a couple of weeks' time, where I will watch my team defeat Mr Adam's team in the Scottish cup quarter final. As an aside, I commend to all members my motion recognising the 150th anniversary of Partick Thistle Football Club—if colleagues have not yet signed it, I would urge them to do so. I declare an interest as a member of the Jags Foundation, which is part of the fan-owned nature of the club.

I will focus most of my remarks on what is given back by football fans. It is important to reflect on that because, all too often, we hear negative reporting in that context, but an awful lot of good does happen. The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport will be able to testify to that, given her role; I am sure that she will have engaged with many of the trusts and foundations out there. I did similar when I was Minister for Sport, Health Improvement and Mental Health, in the dim and distant past, and I was very heartened to see what was being done.

The sum total of the activity of those foundations and trusts—I am sure that someone has quantified it; I might have been able to testify to that back in the day—is significant. The figures in relation to Motherwell alone, which Gillian Mackay talked about, show that the impact on Lanarkshire is significant, and we should reflect on that. I see that with my own team through the efforts of the Partick Thistle Charitable Trust and the activity that it undertakes in north Glasgow, and through jags for good, which is an informal organisation in which supporters have been raising funds for local food banks and initiatives to welcome refugees to the city.

In my own area, which is part of the Central Scotland region, we see that as part of the core activity of grass-roots football clubs, and that core activity is, in and of itself, a social good. There is a commitment to ensuring that people have an outlet for leisure and sporting activity, and those who volunteer their time are drawing good from it. I see that with the various amateur and youth teams in my area, and with the four teams in the area that are part of the Scottish football pyramid and some of the activities that they undertake. Cumbernauld United play Cumbernauld Colts in a Cumbernauld cup game every year, which raises funds for local charities. I have seen those clubs taking part in food bank collections and in safety awareness campaigns with Network Rail for their young players.

I see that I do not have much time, but I will touch briefly on ticket costs. Something needs to be done about that, although I recognise that it is not within the gift of this Parliament to legislate in that area. The figures that were cited for the upcoming old firm Scottish cup quarter final are, to be frank, staggering. I have to tread carefully, as a west of Scotland MSP, speaking in such a vein rather than as a Partick Thistle fan per se, but I would recommend other Glasgow football teams to people who want to be able to go and watch a game. Nevertheless, that amount of money is ridiculous, and something should be done.

The football authorities should be considering the notion of a price cap—it seems to me that £25 is still a little bit too much, but there certainly should be a cap. That should be looked at, and I thank Gillian Mackay for bringing the debate to the chamber.

19:03

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Gillian Mackay for lodging her motion and bringing the debate to the chamber, allowing some of us, once again, to talk about football.

Two or three weeks ago, I chaired an event at the festival of politics on the soft power of sport, which members who are in the chamber for this debate would have enjoyed. I opened that event by saying that sport does not care about colour, creed, religion or sexuality—sport cares only about performance, and it has an inextricable ability to draw communities together around a passion. I have talked about that in the chamber many times before: how sport can break down barriers and have an influence and an impact on people's lives.

We are talking about football today, and I will mention—as I always do—the last football match that I saw. It was on Sunday, when my grandson was playing for Ayr United—these are only 12-year-olds, I should say—against St Johnstone. There is a community around that football club, which is drawn from all over the place. We in that community all gathered there to watch those kids joyfully knock lumps out of each other, as it turned out. With my eldest grandson, it is rugby, which involves a different community of people who come together around a passion for that particular sport.

Gillian Mackay rightly talked about the influence of football in communities, and there are many instances that I could talk about in that regard. I am at Motherwell Football Club every Monday night, when I join my good friend Tommy McKean, who coaches there, and we get our squads together. When Tommy was looking for somewhere to house his squad, Motherwell

Football Club allowed him to use its indoor facility for free. Clubs are the centre of our communities.

I have previously talked about things such as the changing room initiative at Hearts and Hibs and the ability of football clubs to reach into communities and go where statutory services cannot. That is incredibly powerful. I will not go into St Mirren in great detail, because I am pretty sure that it will be mentioned later. However, we have talked about the way in which community clubs bring people together—they coalesce around that passion. Frankly, we undervalue that. We undervalue the soft power of sport and the impact that it can have. We are trying to stop conflict and create a community ethos and spirit. We undervalue the power of sport, and we also underfund it.

We must be careful when we talk about ticket prices. The last time we debated the issue, I was approached by somebody from St Johnstone who said, "Did you know that we offer a free ticket to a child who goes along with an adult?" Those are the kind of initiatives that we need to be aware of.

I am running out of time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, Mr Whittle, you are indeed.

Brian Whittle: I thank Gillian Mackay for once again allowing me the opportunity to talk all things sport.

19:07

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Jamie Hepburn commented that it is one of a number of debates that we have had on football recently. I have not participated in all of them, but some might say that we have had some fixture congestion when it comes to debates on football in the chamber. I thank Gillian Mackay for bringing this particular one to the chamber to recognise the importance of fans to our national game.

It is worth repeating the immortal words of Jock Stein that football without fans is nothing. That is absolutely true anywhere in the world, but the passion and support that there is here in Scotland is seldom surpassed. The Scottish premiership already has a higher weekly match attendance per head than any other country in Europe, and that was before the rollercoaster that we have witnessed this season, with St Mirren winning the league cup, Scotland qualifying for the world cup and an exciting title race involving four teams, with Hearts and Motherwell not just winning games but playing fantastic football. As we have heard, we also still have eight teams that could win the Scottish cup. What a brilliant time to be a football fan in Scotland.

As we have heard, we must recognise the costs for fans of attending games. I have said before in relation to the world cup, and I would say in relation to football at any level, that we cannot or should not price ordinary working people out of the game that they love. Therefore, as Mr Whittle has done, I welcome and commend the schemes that are operated by clubs such as St Mirren and others that offer significantly reduced ticket prices for children or indeed free tickets for local schoolchildren. For families on low incomes, attending football matches can be particularly challenging.

Gillian Mackay: Does Mr Bibby recognise that the cap that we are looking for is on away tickets? Although there are great initiatives at individual clubs, there is an issue to do with people being priced out of following their clubs on the road.

Neil Bibby: I do. There are affordability issues, particularly for away fans but also for home fans, so we need to consider both in the round. For families who attend matches, as well as the ticket prices, there is everything else that goes along with that, even for home matches.

We must recognise the significant economic contribution that Scottish football and its supporters make. A recent report by the Fraser of Allander Institute that was commissioned by the Scottish Professional Football League, the Scottish Football Association and the Scottish Women's Premier League showed that the national game creates £840 million in gross value added in the economy and supports 14,315 full-time equivalent jobs.

It is clear that ticket revenues are an important part of clubs' revenues, and we must recognise that. However, I hope and expect that our football clubs will look carefully at what more can be done to balance revenue needs with the need to make attending football matches more affordable, not just for away fans but for home fans. There is no doubt that away fans help to create an atmosphere at football matches, but our football clubs will surely want to boost attendance and fill any seats in the home stands, if they can.

I thank Gillian Mackay for securing the debate. I look forward to hearing the response from the 42 clubs and from the Scottish Government. I agree that clubs should listen to and engage with fans, and I join other members in praising the work that fans do.

19:11

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Ind): I thank Gillian Mackay for securing this important debate. I know that she has campaigned passionately on various football issues to ensure that football

remains focused on the fans—the very people who sustain it.

On any match day in my Lothian region, whether people are walking through Leith towards Easter Road stadium or heading to Tynecastle park, the atmosphere on our streets is transformed. People can feel the energy, the vibrancy and the unity.

On match days, our local businesses thrive, too. Cafes, pubs and shops are full, so the local economy feels the boost.

However, match days are not just about sport; they are about community life. Families and friends gather to celebrate the beautiful game. When sons and daughters attend their first live match, the experience stays with them for ever. I remember my first visit to Tynecastle, with my uncle and other members of my family, to watch Hearts play. I am a Hearts supporter, and my team are at the top of the league at the moment. I hope that, at the end of the season, Heart of Midlothian will have won the premier league. Of course, I look forward to Scotland winning the world cup, too.

At that first match, I still remember the roaring crowd, the anticipation and the pride—that experience has never left me. I cannot remember who won, but that feeling has stayed with me since I was a very young age.

In challenging times, football offers something powerful. For 90 minutes, people can set aside their daily worries. Supporters have told me that, after a win, they feel lifted, re-energised and ready to face the week ahead with renewed optimism.

Fans are the life-blood of our clubs. They are the 12th person, pushing their team forward and creating a sense of camaraderie and belonging. However, their impact goes far beyond the stadium walls.

Earlier this week, I visited Spartans Community Foundation in Pilton. Its work brings together football, youth work, education and community engagement. It supports about 2,500 local people each week, and it employs 77 staff, many of whom are loyal supporters of the club. The foundation's new education pavilion includes a science, technology, engineering and mathematics club, and it works with 940 pupils to create academic and sporting opportunities for young people from all backgrounds.

North Edinburgh would not be the same without the Hibernian Community Foundation. With the help of volunteer funds, it runs active school initiatives, football for all sessions and holiday camps for young people. For the 2025-26 season, Hibernian FC has brought back its football for a fiver initiative, which helps to remove barriers for families who want to attend matches.

Other football foundations, such as the Big Hearts Community Trust, have amazing community programmes, such as welcome through football, which supports young refugees to integrate and find jobs. Heart of Midlothian also runs a free lunch club called warm welcome every Wednesday at the 1874 fan bar at Tynecastle, and that is a lifeline to many vulnerable and socially isolated people in the local community.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please bring your remarks to a close, Mr Choudhury.

Foyso Choudhury: That is why we must give greater power to football fans.

I end by wishing the Scotland football team all the best in the world cup.

19:15

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I, too, have been involved in many of these debates, but I will ensure that I give an entirely new speech and that you do not have your finger anywhere near that button, Presiding Officer.

I am delighted to contribute to the debate, which was brought to the chamber by my friend and colleague Gillian Mackay, and to recognise the vital contribution that our football clubs make to their fans and to our society. I have said before that football is not just a game in Scotland but is woven into the fabric of our communities. In Paisley, St Mirren Football Club has been a cornerstone of our community for generations, bringing together people from all backgrounds and ages.

I am particularly proud of the work that I established and led in the St Mirren Independent Supporters Association. We have built a fan ownership model in Paisley and SMISA now holds a majority stake in St Mirren FC, ensuring that supporters have a genuine voice in how their club is run. Our partnership with our corporate stakeholder Kibble mirrors the successful German model of fan ownership, in which clubs must follow the 50-plus-1 rule, ensuring that members retain majority voting rights. We have created a similar structure at St Mirren, where community ownership works alongside responsible corporate partnership. Kibble's involvement has been transformative but, crucially, fans remain at the heart of all decision making.

Fan ownership has grown across Scotland and there are currently supporter-owned or part-owned clubs in Scottish football, including Hearts, Motherwell, Dunfermline Athletic and Stirling Albion. That model is even more established in Germany, where all but three Bundesliga clubs operate under the 50-plus-1 rule and 15 of the 18 clubs have majority fan ownership. That has created one of the most affordable and fan-friendly

cultures in Europe, with average ticket prices significantly lower than in Scotland and England.

I have witnessed first-hand in my constituency the transformative work that is being done by St Mirren. The club is a beacon of inclusivity and has achieved recognition as a disability-friendly club through its partnership with the charity I Am Me Scotland. That groundbreaking work ensures that everyone, regardless of ability, can enjoy the beautiful game in a safe and welcoming environment. That is what football should be all about: opening doors, not closing them.

We must acknowledge that football is facing an affordability crisis. Working-class fans and families are being priced out of the game that they love. When someone on a modest income has to choose between paying bills and taking their child to see their local football team, something fundamental has gone wrong.

I support the calls for a £25 price cap on away tickets in Scotland. I recognise that ticket sales form a more significant proportion of revenue for Scottish clubs than for those in many other European leagues. Unlike England's Premier League or Germany's Bundesliga, where there is a substantial income from broadcasting deals, our Scottish clubs rely heavily on gate receipts. According to recent analysis, ticket sales account for 20 to 30 per cent of revenue for most Scottish Professional Football League clubs.

However, that should not be used as an excuse; instead, it should serve as a call for creative thinking about how to balance financial sustainability with accessibility. How can we ensure that our clubs thrive while keeping the game affordable for ordinary families? The German model shows us the way forward. By combining fan ownership with affordable pricing, they have built sustainable clubs with passionate and loyal supporter bases. Those clubs are financially stable precisely because they prioritise accessibility, community engagement and affordability.

Football clubs such as St Mirren do remarkable work in their communities, from food bank connections to mental health initiatives, but we should always put the football fan first. Let us recognise that affordable football is not a luxury but is essential for the health of our communities and the future of national game and let us champion the fan ownership model as a pathway to sustainable, community-centred football that serves everyone.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you Mr Adam. I did not have to use the button, which is always good.

I call the minister, Maree Todd, to respond to the debate.

19:19

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): Tapadh leibh, Oifigeir Riaghlaidh. In Scotland, football is more than a sport. It is a cultural anchor—a weekly ritual that is passed from generation to generation—that makes a significant economic contribution to society.

Gillian Mackay referenced the recent independent academic research by the Fraser of Allander Institute, which revealed that Scottish football contributes £820 million in gross value added to the Scottish economy and supports more than 14,000 jobs. The former figure includes fan spend that is related to matches across the country, with attendances at professional football matches involving a Scottish team in the 2023-24 season topping an incredible 6.8 million. Those figures clearly demonstrate the significant contribution that Scottish football makes to society, which is hugely encouraging.

Supporting a team regularly involves a significant commitment in time and money, whether fans attend only home games as a season ticket holder or they follow their team home and away every week. In Scotland, season ticket prices for home fans in the Scottish Premiership this season vary greatly, from £225 at Livingston to £608 at Celtic. Gillian Mackay is correct to say that there are no set ticket price caps for away fans, and that prices can exceed £30 a ticket, but that is not always the case, with tickets for five of the six Scottish Premiership games this weekend costing £30 or less.

It is important to note that the SPFL rules require that visiting supporters cannot be charged more than home supporters for a similar seat, and that pricing discrimination between home and away supporters is prohibited. It should therefore not be the case that visiting fans are being unfairly treated compared with home fans.

That is also not an issue below the premiership. Outside the top tier, it is commonplace for clubs to offer tickets below £25 to attract supporters. At Arbroath Football Club, for example, terraced away adult tickets cost £21 or £22 this season. Last Friday night, St Johnstone fans paid £24 for a ticket to see their team at Raith Rovers. In the women's game, prices are much cheaper, with the average Scottish Women's Premier League match this season costing £9.10 for an adult.

Scottish clubs already actively implement a wide range of pricing initiatives and incentives to ensure that football remains accessible to supporters of all ages and backgrounds. Those measures illustrate

that clubs are responsive to affordability concerns, and it is in their interests to be so. This year, for a second consecutive season, Hibs ran its football for a fiver initiative for the club's fixture against Motherwell in January, at which the offering of tickets at £5 to both home and away supporters led to a full stadium. St Mirren has a grass-roots and family offer. Aberdeen has had a season ticket price freeze for two seasons. Many clubs operate schemes to encourage family attendance, such as the one at St Johnstone that Brian Whittle described.

In the English Premier League, which is the richest league in the world and does not rely on gate receipts to anywhere near the same extent as the leagues in Scotland, there has been a price cap of £30 for away fans since the 2016-17 season, and Premier League clubs have agreed another extension through the 2026-27 season. However, that cap is only for that league—it does not apply to the tiers below in the English Football League, where away ticket prices vary significantly and can exceed £40 for higher-demand games. Interestingly, the cap does not apply for cup games, either, which would be equivalent to the ones that Ms Mackay mentioned.

It is also important to note that there is no price cap for home fans in the English Premier League. The cost of adult season tickets at Arsenal, for example, ranges from £900 to more than £2,000. At Everton, season ticket prices range from £640 to £900, and at Bournemouth this season, adult season tickets cost between £423 and £1,164, so although away ticket prices are capped in the Premier League, home fans pay a premium.

Football is substantially cheaper in Scotland than in England, but I absolutely appreciate that cheaper is not necessarily the same as affordable, and affordability is at the heart of the matter. Supporters' groups have been vocal on the issue, and I have sympathy with the twenty's plenty campaign. However, clubs have their own challenges. Operating costs have surged—from energy bills to stadium maintenance to the cost of improving squads. Simply lowering prices is not always economically sustainable for SPFL clubs.

Gillian Mackay: It is important to recognise that one club in the top flight is already implementing £25 tickets for away fans. Falkirk has been doing that for a while, and its stadium is absolutely jumping every week. There is a balance of affordability to be struck, but the question is also whether clubs can afford not to do it.

Maree Todd: I absolutely agree that a creative response is at the heart of the issue, as Gillian Mackay and George Adam have said. Clubs need to look at what they can manage. It is a delicate question of keeping tickets affordable but also

keeping clubs alive. The answer to the question of whether football ticket prices in Scotland are becoming too expensive for ordinary supporters is, clearly, not a simple yes or no.

Football in this country has always thrived because of full stands, local identities and the roar of passionate communities. I am passionate about football—indeed, about sport—being accessible to everyone, where communities gather, where young supporters fall in love with the sport and, ideally, where no one feels that they are being priced out. Football belongs to the people—the families who save up for season tickets and the kids who dream in club colours. Protecting accessibility is not just good economics but essential to the soul of the Scottish game.

It has been interesting and helpful to hear the views of members on this important issue. However, we also need fan groups and football authorities to contribute to what is an important debate. I therefore propose that we add the topic to next Monday's agenda for the round-table event on enhancing Scottish football, which I chair and on which Gillian Mackay sits, so that we can have a full and open discussion.

Let us support our clubs but also champion the supporters, who are the lifeblood of Scottish football.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 19:27.

Correction

Ivan McKee has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee):

At col 24, para 4—

Original text—

The responses to the consultation on a cruise ship levy, which included a scoping question on a potential point of entry levy, will be published next week alongside the analysis report.

Corrected text—

The responses to the consultation on a cruise ship levy, which included a scoping question on a potential point of entry levy, will be published on 10 March 2026 alongside the analysis report.

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