



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Wednesday 20 March 2019

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 20 March 2019

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

Portfolio Question Time

Culture, Tourism and External Affairs

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The first item of business is portfolio question time. I ask that questions and answers are as succinct as possible.

Tourist Numbers

1. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the culture secretary has had with local authorities regarding their capacity to deal with tourist numbers over the summer. (S5O-03010)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I have had a number of discussions with local authorities regarding tourism, which have included issues around tourist numbers. The Scottish Government recognises the need to encourage sustainable tourism and we have taken proactive measures to address the impact of increased visitors, such as through the successful development of our £6 million rural tourism development fund.

Jamie Greene: The increase in tourism is very welcome for island communities, but it creates additional pressures, including on islanders' ability to access the islands, due to the pressure on ferries from passengers and vehicles.

What is the cabinet secretary doing to promote off-season tourism, to perhaps help to relieve or flatten some of the peaks and spikes in summer tourism?

Fiona Hyslop: A very important part of growing tourism is making sure that we help to support tourism throughout the year. Recent experience has been that the season is growing. With regard to providing different experiences, having winter activities, as well as indoor facilities, is very important. The growth of distilleries and visitor attractions in distilleries, providing indoor experiences to tourists during the winter period, has also been very attractive. A vital part of spreading tourism is making sure that we have provision through the year and, most importantly for island economies, that we have a sustainable source of people who are willing to work in the tourism industry, because they have families and need to have an income throughout the year.

I took part in a tourism summit on Islay, at the invitation of Brendan O'Hara and Michael Russell, who are the local MP and MSP. One of the issues that they have is how to extend the season. For example, Islay is having a food festival in the September to October period, which is part of trying to do that.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware that the road equivalent tariff has reduced car ferry fares by 57 per cent, leading to record numbers of visitors to Arran and Cumbrae and boosting island economies. An additional ferry now sails the Ardrossan to Brodick route for seven months, which has greatly increased capacity relative to when the Government came into office. However, reliability is a key issue. Will the cabinet secretary comment on how resilience funds will be used to minimise ferry disruptions, which are happening now, and which islanders fear may happen throughout the summer season?

Fiona Hyslop: On Kenneth Gibson's last point, I understand that £4 million of funding was provided for a resilience fund in 2018 to invest in services to ensure the future reliability and availability of vessels. I am not the transport minister—I am not responsible for ferries—but I absolutely understand the importance of ferries to island economies and to tourism. People probably forget what a difference the road equivalent tariff made when it was introduced in 2014—across the piece, we saw an increase of 60 per cent in the number of cars and vehicles and a 40 per cent increase in passenger numbers. That is great for creating demand, but it also causes pressures.

As the tourism secretary, I take a keen interest in what is happening with the operation of the ferries, and I hope that the resilience fund and the additional investment in our vessels to improve reliability will prove helpful, particularly for the season ahead.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): While some local authorities may be facing capacity pressures, other areas of Scotland would welcome more tourists and the income that comes from that. Will the cabinet secretary outline any work that is planned to better understand the pattern of tourism in Scotland and consider how we can promote other areas and activities, which would help to support sustainable tourism and spread the opportunities that exist across the whole of Scotland?

Fiona Hyslop: That is a hugely important point. Claire Baker will be aware of our campaign for the south of Scotland in particular, which has seen VisitScotland invest in a new promotional film and has also helped with infrastructure. For example, I recently announced £200,000 for Glentress, for improvements to that mountain biking attraction in

the Borders, and only this morning I was in Aberdeen to speak at the VisitAberdeenshire conference, which is important in promoting Aberdeenshire and ensuring that it is accessible to people. I was delighted to hear that the *New York Times* has said that north-east Scotland is one of the top 25 places to visit this year.

Through VisitScotland, we are ensuring that wider areas are being promoted. Another good example is the work with Wild about Argyll, through which Argyll has twinned with Glasgow to ensure that visitors to Glasgow can visit rural areas on the west coast of Scotland.

Such initiatives encourage people to go out from the central belt and visit more geographically remote but fascinating places across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I know that there are a lot of answers to some of these questions, but I must ask that you try to shorten your answers, cabinet secretary. [*Interruption.*] Sorry?

Fiona Hyslop: I did not say anything. [*Laughter.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Just as well.

Scottish Jewish Heritage Centre

2. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it can give toward the annual running costs of the Scottish Jewish heritage centre in Glasgow. (S5O-03011)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): We value our relationships with our Jewish communities, and the significant and important contributions that those communities make to Scottish society.

The Scottish Jewish heritage centre shares in our ambition to promote interfaith dialogue, to strengthen and enhance connections across communities and to lower barriers, eliminate fear and increase understanding. I recognise the importance of learning about the Holocaust as well as taking action to tackle religious prejudice, including antisemitism.

I urge the centre to explore with Museums Galleries Scotland museum accreditation and related support. In addition, the next wave of the Scottish Government's promoting equality and cohesion fund will be open for application in 2020, and I suggest that the centre considers developing an application, in the coming year, for relevant projects.

John Mason: I thank the cabinet secretary for her encouraging reply. Does she agree with me and, I think, the Jewish community, that there is ignorance not just about the Holocaust but about

Jews, Judaism, Jewish history, the Jewish way of life and the considerable Jewish community in Scotland, and that such ignorance can lead to antisemitism, when people do not understand properly?

Fiona Hyslop: I absolutely agree. The more understanding there is, the greater the tolerance, appreciation—and indeed celebration—of the variety of religions and cultures that we have in Scotland. That is an important part of promoting the positives and explaining the experiences that other people perhaps do not understand. John Mason made the point well.

Tourist Tax

3. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact of a tourist tax on the tourism sector in Edinburgh and Lothian. (S5O-03012)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): We held a national discussion on tourist taxes, which involved the industry and local authorities, to develop a shared understanding of the evidence, challenges and potential impacts of tourist taxes. We held round tables across Scotland, including in Edinburgh. Stakeholders, including UK Hospitality and the City of Edinburgh Council, provided written evidence, which we published on 7 March.

As part of the budget deal with the only party that engaged, we will formally consult on the principles of a locally determined tourist tax in 2019 and then introduce legislation. It will be for individual councils to assess local circumstances before they decide whether to use the power.

Miles Briggs: Leaders of hotel, hospitality and tourism groups in Edinburgh have voiced their opposition to and concerns about the plans for a tourist tax in the capital. It is fair to say that the cabinet secretary's support for the proposal has been somewhat lukewarm to date. Given people's concerns, does she think that a tourist tax is a good idea for Edinburgh and Scotland's tourism sector?

Fiona Hyslop: That is a matter for the City of Edinburgh Council, working with the Edinburgh community and businesses, to determine.

I stand by what we agreed as part of our budget negotiations. Had the Conservatives come to the table in any meaningful shape or form, the budget discussions might have been different. We have honoured and will honour our commitment. There will be a consultation, followed by legislation.

Our national discussion showed us that the issue is complex and that there is no single perspective. Today, when I was in Aberdeen, I

heard that although some local authorities might want to introduce a tourist tax—some might not want to do so—the read-across between what local authorities do will be important; we heard about a level playing field in Scotland.

All that will be part of the discussions that local authorities have, and if people want to present arguments, I encourage them to take part in the consultation on legislation that will follow our budget negotiations.

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): Despite what Miles Briggs said, there is widespread support for a tourist tax across Edinburgh, not least from the Scottish National Party and Labour council administration.

Last week, the cabinet secretary was reported as saying that the tax would not be in place until 2021. Is she aware that the council has budgeted for it to be in place next year? In light of the delay that she announced last week, the council will now have to make a further £10 million-worth of cuts to its budget. Where does the cabinet secretary think that those cuts should come from?

Fiona Hyslop: The member has been a member of this Parliament for some time, so she will know the process that takes place when new legislation is introduced. Decisions that the City of Edinburgh Council makes are a decision for the City of Edinburgh Council. However, as agreed, we will consult in 2019, and there will be legislation in 2020. The Parliament will consult and take forward the legislation as it normally does. There is no delay. This is the normal process for a normal piece of legislation. I would have thought that the member would understand the processes that she takes part in for any piece of legislation in this Parliament.

Screen Scotland

4. Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government when it will next meet Screen Scotland. (S5O-03013)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I am meeting Isabel Davis, the executive director of Screen Scotland, on 21 March. I meet regularly with the chair of Creative Scotland, and Scottish Government officials attend the meetings of Creative Scotland's screen committee.

Mike Rumbles: Is the cabinet secretary aware that, apart from the Scottish Film Talent Network, which is mainly funded through lottery funding, there is little support to help talented young Scottish short-film makers enter the industry? With the annual closure date for the applications for the very few Scottish Film Talent Network grants that are available coming up in just 11 days' time, what financial assistance can the Scottish Government

give to aspiring and talented Scottish short-film makers after that date?

Fiona Hyslop: The member makes an important point about the opportunities for young film makers, particularly in the early parts of their careers, and the importance of their being able to make short films, which are a good way of getting recognition.

I am not sure what I can do in the next 11 days, but the issue of how Screen Scotland will be developing and supporting young talent is something that I will raise when I meet the executive director on 21 March.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): We know that the work of the United Kingdom Government to promote the screen sector in this country has seen it thrive. The industry has been granted £632 million in tax relief, which has generated a further £3 billion investment in the production of television programmes and films across the UK. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the large amount of tax relief from the UK Government has been instrumental to the growth of the screen sector in Scotland? Is she confident that the screen sector in Scotland is on track to meet its projected growth targets?

Fiona Hyslop: On the latter point, yes, we have seen strong production growth figures, and that is before we see the results of the doubling of film investment from the Scottish Government. I completely agree that the tax measures that the UK Government has introduced have been game changing in many regards. We were supportive of them and campaigned for tax relief in this area and in other aspects of the creative industries. Funnily enough, I used that argument when I was speaking to people from the tourism industry this morning, when I suggested that, if we could reduce VAT, which is currently at 20 per cent, we could make a big difference in terms of helping that industry in particular.

What the member says about the trajectory of the film industry is absolutely right. I am confident not only that it will meet its targets but that the screen sector leadership group's recommendations are being delivered well. There are ambitious targets within that, and the sector is on track to meet them.

2021 Census

5. Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is accommodating ethnic groups that have applied to be included in the census for the first time in 2021. (S5O-03014)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): National

Records of Scotland set out proposed questions for inclusion in the 2021 census. All requests for changes to questions were considered according to user need, data quality, existing data sources and operational considerations. Requests were made for census data on Roma and showpeople, and on Sikh and Jewish populations.

Testing of the changes that are being considered for the ethnic group question was completed in February. NRS is holding events on 27 and 28 March to share the findings with stakeholders. The results of the testing will be published on the NRS website prior to those events.

The questions for the 2021 census will be considered by Parliament as part of the subordinate legislation process. Engagement on that will begin shortly and will continue through to next year.

Richard Lyle: I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am the convener of the cross-party group on the Scottish Showmen's Guild. Over the past few years, I have been working with the Showmen's Guild to ensure that the next census includes a section for showpeople. Showpeople are not Travellers or Gypsies; they are a distinct ethnic group. Census officials have been supportive of the proposal, but I seek the cabinet secretary's assurance that she will help me to ensure that showpeople are added to the census.

Fiona Hyslop: I understand that the findings from the testing of an alternative ethnic group question showed that the inclusion of a tick box for showpeople was acceptable, and that that may well be recommended for inclusion. I am supportive of that, but I refer the member to my answer to his first question, in which I said that it is actually the Parliament that will finally determine, through subordinate legislation, what questions are asked in the census.

External Affairs Budget (Priorities)

6. James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what the priorities are for its external affairs budget spend in 2019-20. (S5O-03015)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Scotland's international framework sets out how our international work supports the Scottish Government's central purpose of creating a more successful country with opportunities for all to flourish through increasing sustainable economic growth. The external affairs budget supports our commitment to strengthening our European and international relationships, funding our commitment as a good global citizen, facilitating

trade and investment actions and, ultimately, achieving our overarching objective. In 2019-20, the majority of the budget will be focused on delivering our international development programme and deepening and strengthening our network of external offices.

James Kelly: I understand the importance of having a presence internationally and of the Scottish Government having offices in other countries. However, in the budget for next year, the spend will increase from £17.2 million to nearly £24 million, which is an increase of nearly 40 per cent in cash terms. Contrasted with—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you get on with the question, please, Mr Kelly?

James Kelly: Sure. Why are council budgets being reduced by £230 million and why is the issue of protecting communities and saving jobs and services being given a lower priority—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kelly, this is not a debate; it is a question.

James Kelly: Why has that been given a lower priority than the external affairs budget?

Fiona Hyslop: I believe that James Kelly is the finance spokesperson for the Labour Party, although I may be wrong about that and I am happy to be corrected. He will understand that local government has not seen the reductions that he mentions and that our support for local government has been positive. I am not sure whether Mr Kelly has served on the Finance and Constitution Committee, but if he has, he should know that the increase in the external affairs budget of £6.7 million in the 2019-20 budget is due entirely to a change in the way that running costs—for example, for staffing—are presented across the Scottish Government. They were previously presented separately, but they are now included in the budgets for ministerial portfolios, at the request of the Parliament and its Finance and Constitution Committee. I think that Mr Kelly should do his homework.

Yemen (Support)

7. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what support it is providing in response to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. (S5O-03016)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government donated £250,000 to the Disasters Emergency Committee's Yemen crisis appeal when it was launched in December 2016. In July 2018, the Scottish Government provided a further £100,000 from the humanitarian emergency fund to support Mercy Corps to

provide 6,000 Yemeni households—some 42,000 people—with safe drinking water. We have also provided 25 Yemeni women with training and capacity building in the areas of mediation, conflict resolution, reconciliation and constitution building through the Scottish Government-funded women in conflict 1325 fellowship programme, with Beyond Borders Scotland.

Alex Rowley: Well done on those commitments.

Since 2015, 85,000 children under five in Yemen have starved to death, and one child dies there every 10 minutes from a preventable cause. Oxfam has stated that the majority of the civilian casualties have resulted from air strikes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition. Has the Scottish Government made representations to the United Kingdom Government with regard to the violation of international law that is taking place, the hunger crisis that exists as a result and the arms sales from the UK to Saudi Arabia?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes. The Scottish Government and I have made representations to the UK Government on its role in relation to Saudi Arabia and its ability and capability to end the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia. It must do so now. As Alex Rowley will be aware, export licences are a reserved matter, but there is clear evidence that munitions that the United Kingdom has supplied have been used in Yemen in breach of international law.

I commend Alex Rowley for continuing to raise the issue of Yemen. Devastation has been caused to many people, particularly children—Alex Rowley referred to that—and the UK Government can take a clear responsibility. If it wants to be a global citizen, it needs to behave as a global citizen. Alex Rowley is absolutely right to raise the issue in the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise to Mr Beattie for not reaching his question.

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind all members that this is question time and not speech-making time. If that reminder is adhered to in questions and answers, we will certainly get through all the questions and have more supplementaries.

Primary Schools (Deferred Entry)

1. **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recent survey by give them time, which found that only 19 per cent of parents knew of the right to defer entry

into primary school for children born between September and December. (S50-03018)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I am grateful to Fulton MacGregor and the give them time campaign for raising awareness of the issue.

I reassure parents that implementation of the curriculum for excellence early level and good transition arrangements should make the journey from early learning and childcare into primary education seamless and minimise the need for school deferral. However, it is important that parents are able to make informed choices for their child.

The Minister for Children and Young People met representatives of the give them time campaign in December. The Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities are now working together to improve the clarity of information that is available to parents nationally and locally. I expect all local authorities to provide clear and consistent information on school deferral arrangements.

Fulton MacGregor: The cabinet secretary may be aware that the approval rates for discretionary funding for nursery provision for children whose parents choose to defer are inconsistent across councils—the rates are between 13 and 100 per cent. Moreover, at least 13 local authorities do not even permit parents to retain their child's place in a council setting and self-finance it. What more can councils do to support parents who choose to defer school entry for their four-year-old children and access an additional year at nursery?

John Swinney: Whether children with a birthday between August and 31 December are entitled to additional early learning and childcare funding remains at the local authority's discretion. I expect local authorities to make the decision based on an assessment of wellbeing, as set out in the early learning and childcare statutory guidance that accompanied the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. When deferral is being considered, parents should be provided with accurate information and be fully involved in the decision-making process.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary think that there is simply an anomaly, in that parents quite correctly have the right to defer entry to school, but many of them then find that they lose their child's right to a funded place at nursery? Would the simplest thing not be to change the law? Why cannot that be done?

John Swinney: The answer to Mr Gray's question is in my answer to Mr MacGregor's first question. The contents of the early level of the

curriculum for excellence, which takes, as Mr Gray will know, a play-based approach to learning, supported by good transition arrangements, should make the journey from early learning and childcare into primary education straightforward. There is flexibility to accommodate the particular issues that have been raised.

Equally, the arrangements under the early level curriculum for excellence approach address many of those issues to ensure that we make judgments about the interests, needs and perspectives of individual children.

Part-time Timetables (Pupil Support)

2. Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to support school pupils on part-time timetables. (S5O-03019)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Support for pupils on part-time timetables is provided through “Included, Engaged and Involved” parts 1 and 2, which provide guidance on the promotion of attendance and the management of exclusion. Both parts recognise the importance of continued engagement to pupils fulfilling their learning potential. Part 2 makes clear that flexible or part-time arrangements

“should be for a short, agreed period with the aims and conditions around this recorded in any support plan.”

It is for education authorities to ensure that pupils receive the support that they need to benefit from educational opportunities, in line with the authorities’ responsibilities for the provision of education.

Mary Fee: The Scottish Government is starting to collect information on the number of children who are on part-time timetables, and it needs to make clear the level of use of such timetables and the reasons for such action by schools. Does the cabinet secretary agree that pupils who are on part-time timetables should be on them for their own benefit, and that such timetables should be meaningful to their education?

John Swinney: I agree with that perspective. As I said in my first answer, the guidance clearly states that part-time timetables should be used for a “short, agreed period” and have a clearly defined purpose. I very much endorse the points that Mary Fee has raised.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that some young people are being excluded from the classroom for large parts of the day without receiving meaningful educational input? In some rural areas, children are being supervised by

parents and volunteers. What will the Scottish Government do to address that problem?

John Swinney: Fundamentally, the responsibility for tackling such issues lies with individual local authorities, which carry the statutory responsibility for the delivery of education at local level. A local authority needs to be satisfied that, in all circumstances, a child’s education is being fulfilled. That is what the law says.

As I said to Mary Fee in relation to part-time timetables, the guidance in “Included, Engaged and Involved” says that any action should be taken as part of an agreed process to improve the interests of individual young people. The guidance is emphatic about the importance of ensuring inclusion in all aspects of young people’s learning, and about the need to minimise exclusion from learning.

Teachers and Classroom Assistants (Prevention of Assaults)

3. Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to prevent assaults on teachers and classroom assistants. (S5O-03020)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): It is not acceptable for anyone who works in our schools to be assaulted verbally or physically. We continually work with local authorities to support schools in developing positive and inclusive learning environments. We have produced guidance on approaches to including and engaging pupils in their education. We are funding various violence reduction and preventative approaches, such as the mentors in violence prevention programme and the no knives, better lives initiative. Our aim is to foster positive relationships and behaviour within schools, which will have a longer-term impact on the wider community.

Margaret Mitchell: Is the cabinet secretary aware that, in the past three years, teachers have been attacked more than 16,000 times, and that the number of attacks has increased in the past year? According to responses to freedom of information requests, weapons used have included knives, a BB gun, a chemical cleaner and a woodwork chisel, and the resulting injuries include torn ligaments, dislocated joints and one case of whiplash. I appreciate the quite detailed action that cabinet secretary has outlined, but in view of what I have described, does he believe that that action is sufficient to ensure that teachers and school staff feel safe in the classroom?

John Swinney: No instance of violence is acceptable or excusable in any way or in any

situation, but particularly not in a school. Whatever else I say, I want to make that point absolutely crystal clear.

The context is important. For example, between 2006-07 and 2017-18, there has been a 65 per cent fall in the number of crimes recorded by the police that have involved the handling of an offensive weapon. Since 2006-07, there has been a huge decline in the number of exclusions from our schools. There have been significant reductions in the level of violence in our society and in our schools, but I accept that there are still examples of such violence.

Margaret Mitchell generously said that I set out a number of initiatives and approaches. I think that they are effective. The mentors in violence prevention programme has been very successful, and the no knives, better lives campaign, too, has been very successful in changing the culture around knife carrying. Much of the learning from what has been achieved is being looked at by other jurisdictions, particularly London.

Having said all that, I am absolutely committed to working with the teaching profession and local authorities to ensure that we make violence in our schools a thing of the past and that teachers, classroom assistants, other members of staff and, indeed, pupils are not subjected to it.

Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Subjects (Promotion)

4. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to promote science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects to pupils across Scotland during 2019, which marks the bicentenary of the death of James Watt. (S5O-03021)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): James Watt's achievements are a significant contribution to Scotland's long and proud history of science, engineering and invention. We are committed to promoting STEM to everyone in Scotland. Indeed, on 13 March, we announced funding worth over £2.6 million in 2019-20 for the four Scottish science centres, and that funding will support events and activities that will be seen by around 700,000 people next year, making science accessible to all ages, I hope, and helping to inspire our future scientists. In addition, we are establishing a new young STEM leaders programme and have introduced maths week Scotland as part of further measures to promote STEM to young people.

Stuart McMillan: As the minister knows, STEM subjects are vital to our economy. I therefore

welcome the range of measures that the Scottish Government has introduced.

With the Brexit chaos of the UK Government already leading to challenges to academic funding and job security, what can the Scottish Government do to ensure that our school pupils are taught about Scottish inventors and inventions so that they realise that Scotland has always been a contributor to global progress?

Richard Lochhead: Stuart McMillan has highlighted a very topical and important issue. If we are taken out of Europe against our will, we will lose many people with the vital skills that are required for the future of the Scottish economy. It will therefore be even more important to encourage people to adopt and learn those skills in their own country, which will mean inspiring our young people to take part in STEM activities and, I hope, to consider STEM careers in the future. It is important that we continue to support the many initiatives across Scotland that are working with school pupils, in particular. Just last week, I visited a company where the apprentices are effectively STEM ambassadors who go out to speak to local schools about their own careers. We have to reinforce and support those activities in any way that we can, but let us focus on preventing Scotland from being taken out of Europe in the first place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call question 5, I draw members' attention to the headphones on their desks. They can be used for the simultaneous interpretation of Gaelic, if so required.

Gaelic Speakers (Numbers)

5. Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): A dh'fhaighneachd de Riaghaltas na h-Alba na tha e a' dèanamh gus cruth-atharrachadh a thoirt air a' chrìonadh a chaidh aithris anns a' chuid den òigridh aig a' bheil a' Ghàidhlig anns na h-Eileanan an Iar. (S5O-03022)

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address the reported decline in the population of young people in the Western Isles who speak Gaelic.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is working with partners to put in place a range of actions to strengthen the Gaelic language in the Western Isles, with the aim of increasing the proportion of young people who speak Gaelic. That includes close collaboration with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and other bodies that can make a contribution to promoting the use, the learning and the speaking of Gaelic.

Dr Allan: Am beachdaich an Riaghaltas air measadh buaidh chànanach a chur air dòigh airson nam poileasaidhean aige anns na h-eileanan gus am bi brosnachadh na Gàidhlig agus nan coimhearsnachdan Gàidhlig air àbhaisteachadh ann am poileasaidh eaconamach is sòisealta san fharsaingeachd?

Following is the simultaneous interpretation:

Will the Government consider carrying out a Gaelic language impact assessment of its policies in the islands so that the promotion of Gaelic in Gaelic-speaking communities is mainstreamed into wider social and economic policy in general?

John Swinney: The Gaelic language is a very precious part of Scotland's culture, identity and future so, for that reason, the Government is making a number of policy interventions to support the nurturing and development of the Gaelic language.

We have no immediate plans to undertake the type of Gaelic language impact assessment that Dr Allan has highlighted in his question, but I assure him that we are having very specific discussions with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar—indeed, Dr Allan and I took part in those discussions when I was in the Western Isles during the February recess—on how we integrate the experience and nurturing of the Gaelic language with wider public service provision in the Western Isles and how we ensure that some of that activity is taken forward through the comhairle's proposals for a community charter or community offer. The Government is actively considering those issues, and I will have further discussions with the comhairle and Bòrd na Gàidhlig on how we can take forward some of these ideas.

City of Glasgow College (Dispute)

6. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the on-going dispute between lecturers and management at the City of Glasgow College. (S5O-03023)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): Local industrial relations are a matter for the City of Glasgow College and the trade unions to resolve voluntarily. Therefore, the member may wish to speak to those organisations for an update.

Anas Sarwar: I reassure the minister that I have spoken directly to both the Educational Institute of Scotland and the college, and I hope that the minister, too, is taking an active interest in the on-going dispute. Although it is separate from the wider dispute with Colleges Scotland on pay, it

feeds into the breakdown of the relationship between the workforce and management.

Last week, during First Minister's question time, the First Minister said—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you please get on with the question, Mr Sarwar?

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister said last week that a 2 per cent increase for police officers in England was a punch in the face—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Get on with the question, please, Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: This is the question: why does the cabinet secretary believe that 2 per cent is an acceptable pay increase for our college lecturers?

Richard Lochhead: The question of what is or is not an acceptable pay increase for college lecturers is a matter for negotiations between the employers, the colleges and the representatives of the staff, which are the unions. I was disappointed that talks on Monday on the wider dispute did not reach a successful conclusion despite signs of movement in recent months, meaning that—as Mr Sarwar is aware—more industrial action will take place tomorrow. That is highly regrettable, given that it is in nobody's interests—least of all those of the students, who are directly affected—that such strike action should take place.

I will take an interest in those discussions, but the Scottish Government is not party to the negotiations, which involve voluntary arrangements that are agreed by both the employers and the unions through national bargaining. Any intervention from us would just undermine that process. The matter should be resolved between the two parties, and we hope that it will be. We will continue to speak to both the unions and the employers, and I am of a mind to invite them to meet me separately on Tuesday of next week, prior to the next round of formal talks on 29 March.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that, although a degree of context is often necessary when asking questions, a small degree is preferable.

School Subjects (Career Prospects)

7. **Tom Mason (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how relevant it considers the number of subjects a pupil can study in school is to their future career prospects. (S5O-03024)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Offering Scotland's young people the right choices is very relevant to supporting them in meeting their career prospects. Young people

should be able to access the range of pathways that meet their needs, abilities and aspirations, and they should be supported in making the right choices. That is central to the aims of our youth employment strategy.

Tom Mason: Committee evidence and newspaper reports have highlighted that the narrowing of subject choices caused by the Scottish National Party Government's flawed reforms is hurting pupils' career prospects. It is hampering Scottish children's ability to achieve the best grades possible and is limiting their opportunities. What does the cabinet secretary say to those children, who, through no fault of their own, will not receive the same opportunities as their parents?

John Swinney: I respectfully say to Tom Mason that the evidence does not support his question. Two weeks ago, the Government published information on the positive destinations of young people leaving education. A record 94.4 per cent of young people are leaving school to enter work, training or further or higher education. That is an all-time record, so the premise of Mr Mason's question is completely flawed.

In addition, attainment is rising in our schools, young people are securing a broad range of qualifications and every young person is experiencing and benefiting from the broad general education that is at the heart of the reform of curriculum for excellence.

I say to Mr Mason that, last week, I attended the international summit on the teaching profession in Helsinki. Only the world's high-performing education systems are invited to take part in that summit, and we should be very proud that Scotland's education system was invited to be part of those discussions.

Education (Scotland) Bill

8. John Scott (Ayr) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the education secretary's previous comments that the Education (Scotland) Bill could still be introduced if "sufficient progress" is not made, whether it has ruled out doing so in 2019. (S5O-03025)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Local government has entered into a joint agreement with us on reform, which has led to the publication of the headteachers charter and wider guidance on empowering schools. We have also reached an agreement with the Educational Institute of Scotland, subject to the definitive formal offer being made and a ballot of members, which will see Scotland's largest teaching professional association agree to collaborate with us on the empowerment agenda. I am encouraged

about the progress that has been made in implementing our landmark education reforms.

John Scott: The Education (Scotland) Bill was dropped by the SNP last year, despite being called its flagship legislation. Dropping the bill was supposed to speed up the process of reform, but we are now nine months on and there are very few signs of progress. Will the cabinet secretary tell parents and teachers how much longer they will have to wait to see all the promised reforms fully realised?

John Swinney: It would have helped if John Scott had listened to my original answer before he asked me his pre-scripted follow-up question. I announced to him that the headteachers charter is already in place; that would not have been the case if we were waiting for a bill—it would not have happened. The empowering schools guidance is in place, working and operating. The agreement with the professional association on its support and participation in the empowerment agenda is in place and is happening more quickly than could have been the case with a bill.

The approach that I have taken has delivered an intensification of the pace of reform, the education system is benefiting from that and we are seeing real empowerment in our classrooms around the country. I am encouraged by the direction of travel that has been undertaken in that respect.

Student Support

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-16407, in the name of Iain Gray, on student support. I ask members who wish to speak to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:42

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Scotland's students have been poorly served by 12 years of Scottish National Party Government. It is true that successive SNP Governments have maintained free tuition in our universities—let us not forget that that was introduced by the Labour-led Administration back in 2001—which means that we are happy to support the Government's amendment this evening.

It is also true that the SNP Government abolished the graduate endowment, which was a one-off payment on graduation that was paid only by the better-off 50 per cent of graduates. Of course, the endowment did not pay for tuition but rather for grants and bursaries for the next cohort of students from low-income families. Sure enough, having ended that payment from better-off graduates, as night follows day, the SNP Government in 2013 duly slashed grants and bursaries that went to poorer students; £35 million was removed from students' pockets and their grants were cut by 33 per cent, which was lower by as much as £900 a year for some.

That would be bad enough, but what made it worse was the biggest trick played on students: the dirty, dishonest "dump the debt" con of 2007. When it was elected, the SNP did not tell us that it would cut student grants. In fact, it actually promised to give all students all living support as grants; it would abolish student loans and even pay off outstanding student debt. Its manifesto said:

"An SNP government will ... replace the expensive and discredited Student Loans system with means-tested student grants. We will remove the burden of debt repayments owed by Scottish domiciled and resident graduates."

Instead, 12 years on, it has supersized the student loans system, which is now worth almost £5 billion, and graduates come out with twice the debt that students had when the SNP told that whopper. The poorest students, stripped of their grants and without family to lean on, are coming out with the biggest debts of all. They have even been let down on the smallest of promises, which was of a higher threshold for the repayment of loans—not much help, but some. In England the threshold is already £25,000. SNP ministers have been promising that for years now, but they just cannot get it done.

It is worse for students in further education, with a postcode lottery of bursaries varying from college to college, while year after year, colleges have been left without the resources to pay those bursaries and are having to plead for in-year budget adjustments just to keep their students afloat.

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): If I could just interrupt Iain Gray's doom and gloom with a quick intervention, does he at least acknowledge that the SNP Government and this Parliament are giving the best support package for students anywhere in the United Kingdom? Does he also acknowledge that our graduates leave with less debt by far compared with the debt that is inherited by graduates from elsewhere in the UK?

Iain Gray: In terms of living support, that is simply not true—I will come to that in a moment.

I acknowledge that, when the Government announced an independent review of student support, it looked as though it really was time and the Government was going to do something to make up for it all. That was a serious review, with a serious chair in Jayne-Anne Gadhia, and it made some serious recommendations. It promised a new social contract for students, access to a guaranteed income based on the real living wage and parity for students in further and higher education.

Labour members welcomed the review. We wanted it to go further. It was not perfect, it did not do nearly enough for our taste to rebalance grants and loans and it had nothing at all for part-time students. However, it was a start towards a fairer student support system, with equity for all, at its heart. Above all, the review recognised the thing that ministers have never really got their heads round: free tuition might remove one of the barriers to university, but it is not in and of itself enough. For many, and perhaps more, young people, their worry about having enough to live on is what holds them back.

That is why the ludicrous 16-month delay in doing anything about the review that ministers themselves commissioned is inexcusable. It took seven months for the then minister to respond at all, last June. She acted on bursaries for care-experienced students, which was great. However, for everyone else it was all so difficult. The minister was speaking to the Department for Work and Pensions about how FE support would work with benefits. She promised a review for part-time students by the end of last year. She was talking to the Student Loans Company about raising the repayment threshold.

Here we are, another nine months on. There have been two new HE-FE ministers since then—

albeit one of them very briefly—the living wage has gone up twice, a whole new cohort of students are now close to finishing their first year of study, and none of those promises has materialised.

This is the Government that said it could create a new independent nation in 18 months, but it cannot even raise the repayment threshold for graduates in that time. Our students still have less to live on than students in England or Wales, albeit, of course, that tuition is not free in those jurisdictions—that is why we cannot support the Conservative amendment.

Our motion asks only that the Government implement its own review—a modest demand indeed. Let us be clear, however: it demands some urgency. If the motion is agreed to this evening, we want the minister back here with a plan for reform in the next few weeks, and we want students to benefit in the next academic year, starting in August and September, not at some vague time far off in the future. Surely that is not too much to ask.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that financial support is vital to enabling students to complete their courses; acknowledges that there needs to be more parity in the support that is available to students in colleges and universities; believes therefore that students in both further and higher education should be entitled to a minimum student income, tied to the Scottish Government's living wage, as recommended by the independent review of student support, and calls on the Scottish Government to urgently bring forward its timetabled plan to implement this.

14:49

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): I thank the Labour Party for bringing the motion to Parliament, which gives the Government a good opportunity to outline our impressive support for Scotland's students. Our colleges and universities play a vital role in delivering the skills, the people and the innovation that are required to support our economy, and our students are of course central to that objective.

Since 2007, the Government has sought to maintain our world-class reputation in tertiary education by investing £7 billion in colleges and—in recent years—more than £1 billion per year in universities and by introducing free tuition, which has not been introduced in other parts of the United Kingdom. We have delivered significant and lasting reform across the college sector to drive forward a regional approach to skills and education in local authorities. As we are debating today, we have begun implementation of a minimum income guarantee for students; we will focus initially on society's most vulnerable

students by introducing a bursary for care-experienced students.

We have made a firm commitment to those who want to study at college or university in Scotland that access must be based on the ability to learn and not the ability to pay. We restored free education for first-time undergraduates, which helped more than 120,000 students who study in Scotland each and every year. Those students could face debt of up to £27,000 in tuition fees if they were studying elsewhere in the UK. We will not introduce up-front or back-door tuition fees in this Parliament, or ever.

In further and higher education, we are seeing record levels of student support. More full-time higher education students than ever are receiving support; there were a total of 147,920 in 2017-18, which is up 3.1 per cent from the previous year. Meanwhile, the further education budget for this academic year is at the record level of more than £111 million in college bursaries, childcare and discretionary funds—that is a real-terms increase of 33 per cent since this Government took office.

Iain Gray: The figures are quite clear. The young student bursary is currently £2,000. In 2012, it was £2,640. The Government has cut what students have got to live on.

Richard Lochhead: I am coming to the fact that the bursaries offered in our colleges and universities are the best anywhere in the UK. *[Interruption.]* An FE student can receive a non-repayable bursary of up to £98.79 per week, which is the best level anywhere in the UK, including Labour-run Wales. Therefore, rather than rest on our laurels, we commissioned an independent review of student support—as referred to by Iain Gray—to see what more could be done to build a fairer future for all.

I want Scotland's student support system to be focused on the most vulnerable students, thereby complementing the Government's wider ambitions to reduce child poverty and widen access to university. We welcome the report's central premise of creating a student support system around the key values of fairness, parity and clarity. We support the ambition that was outlined in the review to achieve a minimum income for our students and we will support the Labour motion today. After all, it was this Government—back in 2013-14—that first introduced the concept of a minimum income guarantee for higher education students, meaning that, at that time, students who were most in need could access a guaranteed income.

Iain Gray: The review did not have an ambition of a minimum income guarantee; it had a recommendation. Will the minister agree to implement it?

Richard Lochhead: Of course, it is our ambition to implement that guarantee; that is the purpose of what we are saying here today. *[Interruption.]* That is why we are supporting Labour's motion. Labour members should welcome that fact, not oppose the fact that we are supporting the motion.

We have already begun to implement the review's income guarantee by investing more than £5 million to increase the bursary for care-experienced students to £8,100 per year. The further education care-experienced student bursary increased from £4,185 to £8,100 per year and the higher education bursary increased from £7,625 to £8,100 per year. That is excellent progress. That was an important step in recognising the needs of that group of students and supporting them to enter further or higher education.

We also committed to a further £21 million per year towards the support; that will be phased in. In order to support access to bursaries to students from low-income families, we will raise the higher education bursary income threshold from £19,000 to £21,000. We will increase bursary support for low-income young students in higher education from £1,875 to £2,000 per year, which, combined with raising the higher education bursary threshold, will benefit 13,500 students in Scotland. Further to that, we will increase bursary support for the most-in-need independent students in higher education from £875 to £1,000 per year, which will benefit nearly 18,000 students in Scotland. Those combined improvements will result in around 31,000 higher education students benefiting from an improved package of support.

For students in further education, we will increase bursary support so that in 2019-20 students can receive a bursary of up to £4,500 per year, which will benefit more than 7,000 students.

Those are examples of how this Government is delivering unprecedented support to Scotland's students, especially those who are in most need—those in our disadvantaged communities. We should be proud of the record that this Parliament and the SNP Government have delivered.

I move amendment S5M-16407.4, to insert at end:

“, and further believes that access to higher education should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay, and will not introduce upfront or backdoor tuition fees.”

14:55

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Labour for bringing the debate to Parliament for two reasons. The first is that the availability of student support is as important a factor in any student's decision about whether to attend college

or university as any other. Although we do not agree entirely with the Labour position, Mr Gray has been asking very pertinent questions of the Scottish National Party Government about its ambitions for the policy.

The second reason why I am pleased that we are having the debate is the fast-changing context in which we should be debating further and higher education generally, which includes the increasing number of students who wish to access further and higher education, the widening access agenda, the increase in articulation and the overall funding structures, including for the funding of student support, all of which are hugely important to the future success and sustainability of both sectors. In addition, we will shortly be able to see the results of international comparative studies, which will set out the challenges that Scotland faces in that respect.

Notwithstanding that, we can all agree with many of the recommendations that were set out in the independent review, including the principle of a minimum income level and the concept that there should be more parity across the board for different categories of students, whether they are at college or university. That is very welcome. Part-time students and students with disabilities, for example, have often felt left out of the debate. That is a major concern if we are trying to take on some of the suggestions that have come from those quarters. It is important to ensure that our workforce is more flexible so that it can adapt to the changing needs of the economy. That was strongly highlighted by Susan Stewart at the Open University and Alastair Sim of Universities Scotland, so those aspirations are extremely welcome.

With that context in mind, there is a bigger picture that we need to examine. Professor Sir Ian Diamond was very clear about that when he called for reform in Wales, where the central proposal was to look at the student package overall rather than to identify the funding of living costs as an issue on its own. I agree to a large extent with Sir Ian's approach, and there are some other interesting examples from around the world—New Zealand being one—in which policy is similarly set in the context of overall support rather than in the context of a rigid divide, whereby student support is dealt with separately from paying for tuition.

It is important to say that the Scottish Conservatives have always believed that the Scottish system must be distinct and that it is not in any way appropriate to implant another system in Scotland just because it has been successful elsewhere. However, we should be examining the policy proposals in other countries and their respective costs much more closely. Because the issue is complex and no system in the UK has got

things right—some of the claims that the minister made about bursary support are from a different planet—we must look at the whole perspective.

Given the experience elsewhere, there is surely a strong case for reform of student loans. That was highlighted in the independent report and in several other reports on the funding of tertiary education. We would do well to be concerned about what Lucy Hunter Blackburn has been saying about the balance between bursaries and loans, which was also mentioned by Iain Gray. Grants are now so low that people from the lowest-income families will be taking on some of the highest debt, which is a major concern.

I will finish by dealing with the SNP amendment. Whatever SNP members like to say, university education in Scotland is not wholly based on the ability to learn, rather than the ability to pay. Hundreds of well-qualified Scotland-domiciled pupils in schools are being squeezed out of the university system and will tell us exactly that. The SNP Government knows jolly well that the current system is both discriminatory and financially unviable in the longer run. It also knows that the up-front or back-door fee situation that is described in its amendment is not the position of the Scottish Conservatives.

I move amendment S5M-16407.1, to leave out from “believes therefore” to end and insert:

“welcomes the independent review on student support, and calls on the Scottish Government to work with stakeholders and the Parliament to fully explore all the options, including those recommendations made in other jurisdictions.”

14:59

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to Iain Gray and the Labour Party for lodging the motion for debate in the chamber.

We seem to go through phases in debating education policy. Further and higher education were very much the focus in the previous parliamentary session. However, since 2016, the focus has moved towards our schools and early years policies, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Even at that, since the most recent election, remarkably little chamber time has been given to the important issues in education that we are talking about. It is therefore to Labour's credit that it has put the issue of student support back on the table today.

For centuries now, the ethos that has underpinned Scotland's education system is universalism: that education is, and should be, for everyone. We came to that conclusion way before many others, but it has still taken us a long time to come even close to making it a reality, and there is still some way to go.

If someone decides to go to college or university in Scotland, they should do so in the knowledge that the financial support that they need will be there. However, we know that that is not yet the reality for far too many people. Free tuition—which enjoys broad support in the chamber—goes only so far, as has already been pointed out. To make Scottish education genuinely accessible, we need to get a grip not just on the support package that we can offer, but on living costs for students and what is driving them up in the first place.

Right now, there is a clear inequality in our further and higher education systems. Students from wealthy backgrounds do not need to take on paid work to cover their living costs, although many do so to supplement their incomes. That means that, if they choose to do so, they can devote greater time and energy to their studies: they can put in the hours that they need to put in to do well.

Students who do not come from privileged backgrounds and who do not have the financial support of their families face a tougher time. For too many, part-time or even full-time work is not something that they take on to supplement their income; it is a necessity, without which they just cannot cover the costs of staying in education. That, in turn, squeezes out the time that they would otherwise commit to making the most of their courses and of the wider experience of being at college or university.

The problem is not just the time that students spend at work. They are more likely to be working in bars, shops or supermarkets, or as cycle couriers, which is hard, often deeply exploitative and low paid. When someone is exhausted at the end of a long bar shift or after hours of cycling across a city, going to the library for a few more hours of studying is just not realistic for them.

Loans for living costs are available. They may cover living costs at the time—although I know from friends that, right now, for many, they are not doing so—but they also mean taking on debt that takes years to pay off. Such students' future take-home pay will be lower because of loan repayments than that of students who were lucky enough to have wealthy parents who could fund their education. We can all agree that that is just not fair. We might have different solutions, but we can agree on many of the principles—although that might not have been evident from some of the opening exchanges.

We know that the burden of debt and the financial cost that is associated with higher education also act as a barrier for those from lower-income backgrounds. We might not have gone down the route that has been gone down in England, where students are charged extortionate fees of more than £9,000 per year and

maintenance grants have been axed, but we cannot be complacent. The disparity between student support at universities and student support at colleges is an acute inequality that has been acknowledged by the student support review. The review could not even use a clear and concise figure for student support at colleges, because no national set entitlement exists.

A college student's cost of living is not cheaper than a university student's. Here in Scotland, where colleges play a greater role in delivering higher education, we need to ensure that students are entitled to similar levels of support. Ensuring that students have proper maintenance grants that afford them a decent standard of living is an important goal, but it is only one part of the solution.

We need to get to grips with the cost of living for everyone. Increases in private rent and the cost of public transport are putting intense pressure on students. We need public ownership of housing and transportation to ensure that they are available as a public good. Making public transport fare free—a Green policy that is partially addressed in Labour's other motion today—would remove a major barrier to education for some students. A minimum student income and tuition-fee-free university, alongside policies such as the one that I have just mentioned, are what we need to deliver inclusive college and university education.

Greens will be more than happy to support the Labour motion and the Government amendment. We all agree on much more than we have been letting on so far in the debate.

15:03

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): I, too, thank Iain Gray and the Labour Party for lodging the motion, which Liberal Democrats will support, along with the Government amendment.

I will make two observations on the minister's opening remarks. When ministers talk about student support, it is important that they mention loans and the balance between those and bursaries—that argument will undoubtedly be rehearsed during the debate—because that balance has surely changed. The position has become more difficult for students from all backgrounds and, as Mr Gray rightly said in his opening remarks, that is particularly the case for those from the most deprived backgrounds. That is of significant concern. I am sure that it is of concern to the Government, but it will need to recognise that in how it addresses the debate.

Secondly, Richard Lochhead helpfully clarified that the Government will support the Labour Party's motion, which means that it will be agreed

to. That means that, as Iain Gray said, there is an onus on the Government—Richard Lochhead can do this when he winds up the debate—to say when it will produce its plan. If it cannot give a timetable today, I suspect that Parliament and, more to the point, student bodies would be very grateful if it could set that out at some stage in the coming weeks so that students and parents can understand whether a new arrangement will be in place for the start of the new academic year in August and September.

I have a number of observations to make about the balance between bursaries and loans, which other speakers have highlighted. For me, it is at the core of the issue. The poorest students continue to take on the highest loans in Scotland, at £5,780 per year for the lowest household income bracket, compared with £4,940 for the highest. For a student doing a standard four-year Scottish degree, the total would be £23,120 of debt.

Bursaries spending was £105 million in 2008-09. It is now £76.3 million, which represents a decrease of 27 per cent. The consequences of that are very clear. The value of loans was £187 million in 2008-09. It is now £528 million, which represents an increase of 183 per cent. The average student took out £2,420 in 2008-09; the figure is now £5,290. It is reasonable to ask the Government, as the purpose of the review set out, to reflect on why that balance has changed. Also, when the word "support" is used, it would be more accurate to say that "loans" or, rather, "debts" have greatly increased for Scottish students over the past 12 years. That is according to the Government's figures. They are not figures that any others of us have come up with; we are talking about the Government's own figures.

The report of the independent review is an important contribution, not least because, as Iain Gray and Liz Smith rightly said, it addresses the distinction between higher education and vocational educational and training and the need to find a better way to deal with that. We have talked for many a year about parity of esteem. Here is a review that actually provides some concrete examples of how to deal with that.

This is about the Government finding a constructive way to tackle the increase in student borrowing and recognising the part of recommendation 19 by the commission on widening access that says that there is a need to look at

"the balance between loan and bursary impacts upon access, retention and choice of institution."

The Government has not addressed that yet, and the review did not address it, either.

I hope that those matters will be taken forward. When Richard Lochhead winds up this short debate on behalf of the Government, he will have a chance to tackle all those issues and to set out exactly when the Government will produce its plan.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): We move to the open debate. I ask for speeches of a tight four minutes.

15:07

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): It is a matter of regret that students in further and higher education have been let down by the SNP with the lack of financial support being provided while they are at college or university. Free tuition is one part of the equation, but living costs are the other. Despite pledges by the SNP to scrap student debt completely in 2007, the debt is skyrocketing. Student debt is up by 169 per cent. The day-to-day cost of living and the lack of financial support from the Government are seeing the poorest students being forced to take on multiple low-wage part-time jobs, which has a negative impact on their grades and their wellbeing.

I acknowledge that free tuition opened doors for students who previously thought that they could not afford to attend university, but for many, loans instead of bursaries are simply unsustainable and are storing up huge debt for the future. The reduction of the young students bursary in 2013 meant that the SNP claim of supporting the poorest students in Scotland did not just sound rather hollow but was downright dishonest, and although I appreciate that the bursary might have been raised for 2019, it is well short of the 2013 level. The Government cannot expect to be congratulated for putting a little back after taking a lot away in the first place.

Let me try to be fair and acknowledge the helpful steps that the Scottish Government has taken. First, commissioning an independent review of student support was the right thing to do. Secondly, committing to increasing the bursary for care-experienced young people was the right thing to do. Thirdly, raising the threshold at which repayment of loans starts is the right thing to do, although I confess that I find it hard to believe that the UK Government is moving more quickly than the Scottish Government on that.

However, it is so disappointing that there has been little progress on the other recommendations, such as the real living wage for students and parity between further and higher education. There was no real understanding shown in the minister's response of the need to do something pretty urgently. We need practical

implementation, not some kind of vague ambition that simply kicks the can down the road.

A minimum student income, based on the recommendations of the independent review, would help more than 170,000 students in further and higher education to be in a much better financial situation than the one that they are in currently. Getting decent financial help would undeniably have a positive knock-on effect on their wellbeing and attainment.

Not all students have the bank of mum and dad to fall back on at the end of each month. Students are as diverse as the subjects that they study. Some are carers, some are parents, some have disabilities and some are even mature students. All of them need a minimum student income. Without it, many students do not start further or higher education in the first place, and too many end up dropping out because they cannot afford to remain.

I want briefly to raise a constituency issue. The young people of our armed forces families living in Scotland are experiencing very real struggles due to the complex nature of their parents' careers. Let me give a very specific example.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, but this has to be brief.

Jackie Baillie: It will be, Presiding Officer.

A young person from Helensburgh has been told that she is unable to receive a tuition fee waiver for a college course because her parents have not bought a home here yet. Her father is a Royal Navy officer who is transferring to Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde. She is living locally, but he is currently in a submarine underwater and will be for the next six months, without any contact at all with his family. Communication in those circumstances is impossible, and no flexibility or help is being given to that young person. I ask either the minister or the cabinet secretary to intervene.

I regard education as a key driver of our economic success, but to enable that economic success to happen we need to provide sufficient support for students to live. It is time that the Scottish Government stepped up to the plate for Scotland's students.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I am sorry, but we are really tight for time in these short debates. That is how it is set out by the bureau and the parties leading the debate. It is tough, but that is the way it is. I call Clare Adamson, to be followed by Murdo Fraser.

15:12

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I had been quite looking forward to the debate, which I thought would be interesting and informative, so I was somewhat disappointed by the tone of the opening speech from the Labour Party, which referred to Scotland's students being "poorly served".

We have 120,000 students a year studying in Scotland, benefiting from free education, and we have more students attending our colleges and universities. To say that we are letting them down is painting the worst possible picture.

I have listened to the pleas from the Labour Party about what it wants the Government to do and what it says the Government should do. I have sympathy with a lot of what it is saying, but why did it not bring forward such proposals for the budget, which was passed only a few weeks ago? It could have done that then.

Iain Gray: We have repeatedly, in previous budget proposals, included a call for improvements to student support—to no avail. Perhaps we should blame the Greens for not putting that in their budget deal, or—here is a good idea—let us blame the Government, which is in charge of the budget.

Clare Adamson: I cannot believe that we are arguing and making comments about manifestos from 2007 as if the financial crisis had never happened—and that is from the party of backdoor tuition fees.

I welcome the contributions from colleagues around the chamber who have approached the debate in a positive way.

I want to talk about parity of esteem. I looked back at some of the work that was done around the summary recommendations of "A New Social Contract for Students—Fairness, Parity and Clarity". At the time, the Government commissioned the Institute for Public Policy Research to do some research on support for students, which involved five international comparisons—its report went into great detail on those. It presented

"some more general discussion of the relationship between financial aid and student participation, retention and experiences."

The IPPR report highlighted that there was a very different approach in the UK, in particular towards higher education and the vocational post-compulsory education and training—VET—areas. The data draws out some commonalities with other countries, but most countries do not separate the higher education and VET areas in the way that we seem to have done in the UK,

which has led to the disparity of esteem that we talk about so much.

I spent last week at New College Lanarkshire in Motherwell, speaking to some of the Construction Industry Training Board joinery apprentices there, and seeing some of the great work that they are doing in the college. I remember that fondly, because I used to watch my father and my brother go to university together. They were both on student grants at the time, and I understand what it means for people who are from poorer backgrounds to be able to access higher and further education.

It is a complex situation. The IPPR pointed out that we do not have full control over social security benefits, including housing support, which makes the situation more complex when we try to do the right thing by our students.

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is definitely in her last minute.

Clare Adamson: I am sorry, but I do not have time. I have taken one already.

It is important that we recognise that if we had more powers to deal with issues such as social security, we would be in a better position to support our students in a simpler and less complex way, which is what the IPPR recommends.

15:16

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As Iain Gray fairly pointed out at the start of the debate, it is not possible to have a discussion in Parliament on student support without thinking back to the 2007 Scottish Parliament election. That was the election when, famously, the SNP stood on a platform to dump the debt. It promised every student and every graduate in Scotland that their student debt would be written off. Needless to say, that never happened. In fact, after 12 years of the SNP in government, far from student debt having been dumped, it has in fact doubled. Therefore, we have to take anything that the SNP says on the issue with a serious pinch of salt.

In her comments, Liz Smith drew a comparison between the situation in Scotland and that south of the border. Although I do not think that we in the Parliament need always look at what happens down south, nevertheless there are sometimes useful comparisons to be drawn. Despite all the rhetoric that we hear about free education in Scotland, it is simply not the case that the fee regime that exists in England and Wales—which is not one that we support—has deterred people who are from less well-off backgrounds from accessing

higher education. Indeed, the admission rate for people who are from disadvantaged backgrounds to universities in England has for a long time been substantially higher than it is in Scotland. The reason for that is very simple: people who are from the poorest backgrounds do not pay tuition fees, either up front or deferred. Moreover, they have, in the past, been able to access much more generous bursary support, which is funded from fee income to the higher education sector. We need to end, once and for all, the nonsense claims that having fees or a graduate contribution will, in themselves, deter people who are from poorer backgrounds from going to university, because the evidence tells us something completely different.

Richard Lochhead: Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: I will give way, but I hope that the minister will accept that point. There is no evidence of that central claim.

Richard Lochhead: Can I take it from Murdo Fraser's comments that his policy remains to scrap free higher education and reintroduce tuition fees?

Murdo Fraser: I note that the minister did not admit that basic point. He should look at the evidence. He will know perfectly well that, in the past, we have set out plans for a modest graduate contribution. For coming elections, we will set out in manifestos exactly what our policy is at that particular time. The minister needs to accept the reality that having a graduate contribution does not deter people from the poorest backgrounds from going to university, because that is precisely what the evidence tells us.

We have backing on that point from the former Scottish Government civil servant, Lucy Hunter Blackburn, who confirmed that free tuition, alongside the cut in grants that has been delivered by the SNP, has helped middle-class families and students and made poorer students worse off. This is what Lucy Hunter Blackburn said:

"Free tuition in Scotland is the perfect middle-class, feel-good policy. It's superficially universal, but in fact it benefits the better-off most, and is funded by pushing the poorest students further and further into debt."

That is a damning verdict on the SNP Government's record in the area.

We are now seeing growing concerns from middle-class parents in Scotland about access to universities here. The cap on places for Scottish students—again a direct result of the so-called free education policy—means that many talented pupils are not able to get into the university of their choice in Scotland. We see the consequences of that in our national health service. We are turning away far too many talented young Scots who want to study medicine here and cannot get a place, at

a time when our NHS desperately needs their skills.

Liz Smith set out the principles that should apply to student support and endorsed the recommendations in the recent independent review, including the principle of a minimum income level. I agree with that approach. We need to be informed by the work that is going on. I am pleased to support the amendment in Liz Smith's name.

15:20

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): I have a long-standing interest in student support, so I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate this afternoon.

My first job was as a welfare adviser in a students association, and I vividly remember dealing with hugely distressed students who were trying to prove their independent status. I remember one student, in particular, who had had a really negative experience of coming out and had been disowned by their parents. The student could not prove that they were now self-funding and they were battling with the Student Awards Agency for Scotland to get the bursary support that they needed. We also operated a crisis fund—a discretionary grants scheme—on behalf of the university, and we had to make decisions daily on applications for funds from people who needed to pay for childcare or who were on the verge of being evicted from their flats. It was desperate stuff, and student poverty is still prevalent, if not worse, today.

I left that job in 2006 to go and work for the National Union of Students. Alongside student officers, I helped to draft the NUS Scotland manifesto for the 2007 election. It is with that background that I say that I welcome the idea of a student minimum income guarantee, which the independent review put forward. However, it is not a new idea; NUS Scotland proposed it back in 2006.

I went through my old emails today and found a document—I have a habit of keeping copious notes, which should worry quite a few people. It is a grid that shows what each political party said in its 2007 manifesto in response to NUS Scotland's call for a guaranteed minimum income. It is interesting to see that there was a reference to the idea in almost every party's manifesto: it was on page 28 of the Tory manifesto; the Greens, who were the only party to fully endorse it, had it on page 9; it was on page 34 of the Labour manifesto; and it was on page 28 of the Liberal Democrats' manifesto.

The only political party that made no reference to a minimum income guarantee was the SNP, of

course, because the SNP was promising to abolish student loan debt altogether. What an embarrassing situation we find ourselves in today.

The idea behind the minimum income guarantee was to take on the costs of rent and food and avoid a situation in which poorer students must take on part-time jobs to get by. Back in 2006, we were arguing that it should be £7,000; it has not increased hugely since then.

Clare Adamson bemoaned not having particular powers over the welfare system to do things that she would like to do. The SNP has had full power and control over student support for 12 years, and if she wanted there to be parity between FE and HE, she would have done something over the past 12 years to guarantee an income for FE students.

Richard Lochhead said that we have the best package of student support in the UK. That is hardly a badge of pride for him to carry, when we have a Tory Government that is the most right-wing, dysfunctional Government that I have seen in my lifetime.

Before members denounce what is happening in Labour Wales, let me say to the Government that the poorest students in Wales get £6,000-worth of bursary support, which is three times what the SNP offers the poorest students here in Scotland. It is high time the Government did something about that.

I am fed up of hearing calls from SNP members for parity of esteem between FE and HE, when they have done little, if anything, to address that. SNP members could turn their minds to far more imaginative ideas, such as how to help people who want to get off benefits and make the transition into college. It is almost impossible to move from housing benefit into FE, because the person has to forgo six weeks of benefit and then wait for student support. The SNP Government has the power to introduce new benefits now to help people to move off benefits and make a life for themselves and their families.

SNP members' heads are down. They know that they can do better. They know that their record is in tatters. It is high time that they admitted it.

15:25

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): There is an ever-greater recognition that we need to offer a broader range of choices and pathways if either higher or further education is genuinely to provide opportunities to all of Scotland's young people in the future.

We have a lot of work to do before we get to that position of equality, but it is important that we recognise what is already being done in our colleges and universities. As other speakers have

indicated, more Scots than ever are winning a place at university, but it is also important to say that more Scots than ever from our most deprived communities are going there, too.

Clearly, there is more than one factor at play in overcoming educational inequalities. The need for more contextual admissions policies is certainly one, but many of the factors that determine inequalities in further and higher education are the same factors that impact on inequality and poverty more generally, and the UK Government's benefits reforms represent but one such factor that comes to mind.

The independent review of student support recognised those problems among students, both in further and higher education, and the Scottish Government has responded by improving support for both groups in the past year. Indeed, the amount that the Scottish Government paid out in grants and bursaries last year was £76.3 million, which is 8.9 per cent more than the previous year. However, nobody in Scotland is shying away from the reality of student poverty, and neither does the independent review, referring as it does to examples of students who felt compelled to live off credit cards or payday loans at some times of the year.

I have said something about what the Scottish Government is doing in response to such difficulties, but some of the things that it is not doing represent an equally important contribution to solving the problem. As we have heard today, some members do not like hearing about how Scottish policy differs from that in the rest of the UK—sometimes because they find the very idea of difference offensive, and sometimes because it is just information that they do not want to hear.

However, Scotland's decision not to follow the UK's precedent in some areas of higher and further education policy has been a very conscious one. That decision has had its own financial implications but, I believe, its own benefits, too. Therefore, I make no apology for referring to one of the biggest policy differences of any kind between Scotland and the rest of the UK: university tuition. It is free in Scotland as opposed to the £9,000-a-year fees that are now common in England. There is a reason why the average student loan debt in Scotland is significantly lower than it is in any other part of the United Kingdom. In England, the average debt is £32,220; in Scotland, it is £11,740. It is important to mention that we have also made clear that, in Scotland, we have no intention of following the UK Government's decision to abolish maintenance grants for new students.

The Scottish Government has also sent out an important signal by confirming that eligible students from other European Union countries on

courses beginning in Scotland in 2019-20 will continue to be supported for the duration of their courses. That is further evidence that, despite the endless uncertainty of where the UK is headed this week or next week with regard to Brexit, Scotland is determined to show that we understand the huge benefit to Scotland that students from around Europe represent.

As this report makes clear, we have much to do, but much is being done in Scotland for students in further and higher education, and the fact that we are not following the mistaken UK education policies is something that we should never let slip from our minds.

15:29

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): As previous speakers have said, student support is a vital area for discussion, so I welcome today's debate.

Far too often, the issue of student support has been drowned out in the noise that is created in the discussion of tuition costs. As others have said, although tuition costs matter, they have not always been represented in the most accurate way. However, there are genuine concerns around student support and the cost of living at university and college. For many students in the Highlands and Islands, which I represent, going to university means moving away from home—often a long distance away from home.

The independent review is a good start in tackling those problems. The principle of a minimum income is a welcome suggestion that could provide additional clarity and certainty to prospective students. The issue of parity between further and higher education mirrors the issue of parity of esteem between differing destinations. If we are to support that parity of esteem, there must also be greater fairness in our approach. Students who choose a different route should not find their choices narrowed or their conditions reduced. There was broad support for those principles in the independent review's consultation, so it is important that the Scottish Government responds effectively to the review's findings.

Going to university in Scotland remains a costly business, and the average debt level is not the only element. Today, young people from low-income backgrounds are the most likely recipients of larger student loans. We should be mindful of that and its future impact on social mobility. The issue of repayment is raised in the review, but it seems to have received little attention in the chamber. This year, the annual repayment threshold for a student loan in Scotland inched above £18,000 for the first time but, for plan 2 student loans, which are available to students

south of the border, the repayment threshold is already £25,000. Although an announcement was made last year that that level will be matched in Scotland by 2021-22, the obvious point is that low-earning graduates with student loans continue to pay more in Scotland and they even have to pay back when students from other parts of the UK do not.

That was recognised as an issue in the SNP's 2016 manifesto, which pledged a threshold increase to £22,000, but we are still some distance away from that. In the meantime, are we supposed to believe that the position in Scotland can somehow be seen as fairer to students and graduates here? The long-standing and significant disparities between the two student loan types leave Scottish graduates with a considerably worse deal, often at the very start of their careers. Just as important, those disparities leave lower-earning graduates more out of pocket.

Those examples are emblematic of the lack of attention that has been paid to student support. For too many years, a real focus on student funding in the round has been sacrificed for a narrow glance at tuition costs. The independent review is a credible attempt to address the issues, but it has resulted in the same lack of clarity and the same delays from the Scottish Government that have burdened discussions on student support in the past.

I welcome the warm words from the SNP on the review's recommendations, but I cannot forget the cynical promises that that party made more than 12 years ago, when it narrowly won an election on the back of a pledge to wipe out student debt in its entirety. Instead of that, we have seen a doubling of average debt and Scottish graduates have been left worse off through the repayments system. Again and again, the burden has fallen on those who are least able to pay. Therefore, it is essential that we have less SNP rhetoric and more reform, and that reform must be carried out at pace.

15:32

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): This is an important debate, and there is nothing in the Labour motion that I disagree with in principle—students must have sufficient income to live on. However, the fact is that the Scottish Government has already committed to more investment in student support than the review immediately called for, as the £21 million it has committed goes further than the £16 million that was recommended in the review.

Student funding is at the core of our higher education system, and the SNP Government remains committed to providing all students, especially those from our most deprived

communities, with the financial support that they need to succeed. Our commitment not to charge university tuition fees is one of the most precious policies that the Government has introduced, and I am extremely proud of it. It is not just one factor in widening access to education—it is a huge factor.

This year and next, we are investing £16 million to expand access to further and higher education bursaries for students from the lowest-income families and we will raise the higher education bursary income threshold from £19,000 to £21,000. In addition, bursary support will be lifted from £1,875 per year to £2,000 per year. Last year, bursary provision rose by 8.9 per cent to £76.3 million.

Currently, a 19-year-old full-time further education student in Scotland can receive a bursary of up to £4,247 per year, which is the highest level anywhere in the UK. In comparison, a 19-year-old full-time further education student in England can receive up to £1,200 per year, while the figure in Wales is £1,500 and in Northern Ireland it is £2,092. Crucially, at a time when we want to encourage more young people to study in Scotland, the Scottish Government has confirmed that it will support eligible EU students who commence courses in the academic year 2019-20.

Iain Gray: Does the member acknowledge that the £4,100 for FE students is half of what the independent review said that they should have access to?

Rona Mackay: The minister explained that we are working towards building on that. That is part of the review that we are looking at. We cannot discount the fact that students here do not pay tuition fees and that the figure here is still the best in the UK.

The number of Scots who are entering university is at a record high, as is the number of students from the most deprived areas who are attending university. We have no intention of following the UK Government, which abolished maintenance grants for new students in England from the 2016-17 academic year.

It is also worth emphasising that the average student loan debt in Scotland is significantly lower than it is in any other part of the United Kingdom. In England, the average student loan debt is £32,220; in Scotland, it is £11,740. That is a huge difference.

However, there is still work to do, and we cannot be complacent. Jayne-Anne Gadhia, who led the independent review that resulted in “A New Social Contract for Students: Fairness, Parity and Clarity”, said in that report:

“The Scottish Government’s focus on funding tuition fees for social and economic prosperity is to be commended.”

To build on that report, we established the commission on widening access, and we are leading an evidence-based programme for implementation. We are determined that young people of all backgrounds have access to higher and further education.

In conclusion, the Scottish Government regards education and student wellbeing as a top priority. I believe that our record in supporting students demonstrates that beyond doubt.

15:36

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I am pleased to close this debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

I thank the Labour Party for bringing the debate to Parliament, and I once again impress on the Government the importance of making its own time available to debate education issues in the chamber.

Iain Gray was right to highlight the fact that students in Scotland have been poorly served overall by the SNP. Once again, the Government’s rhetoric does not match the reality of the lives of people throughout the country. We saw that in the decision by various SNP back benchers to dodge difficult questions again. I wonder how Dr Allan can recognise student poverty, yet not recognise that it has taken his party and the Government 12 years and an independent review to get to the point of having an ambition to do something about it. That is disappointing, and it does not serve any of us well. The debate has brought the issues out into the open and ensured that we have started to consider the independent review report’s recommendations in the round.

It is important that we agree that the availability of student support is just as important a factor in a student’s decision about whether to attend college or university as any other factor. If people do not have enough money to meet their immediate living costs, the idea that they will go to university is simply unrealistic.

It is imperative that we ensure that there is support for people who go to college, not just university. I represent a rural area, and I know that people sometimes have to travel quite far afield to access college courses.

Ross Greer was right: there is much more that all the parties agree on in principle than separates us, at least in terms of ambition. As a starting point, we must acknowledge that the current system is far from adequate and that, in many respects, it fails some of the students who depend on it most. We need new thinking and an honest debate about higher education funding policies, rather than simply pretending that all is going well.

Tavish Scott was right to highlight the balance between loans and bursaries. That is an important distinction for people, and it is disingenuous to pretend otherwise.

Some of the decisions that need to be taken are complicated, but we must recognise that some of the recommendations in the report are much simpler and quicker to implement, including those on improving clarity for students and ensuring that they and their parents fully understand the financial support that is available. We must also get messages out there about the improvements to certain areas of support that have been made since the review.

More important is that we should all be concerned by the comments from Lucy Hunter Blackburn, who is a University of Edinburgh researcher and a former Scottish Government civil servant. She said:

“the review is heavier on presentation than evidence and analysis, and ducks the issue of part-time maintenance support.”

She added:

“This feels like a review whose impact on higher education, at least, was always intended to be strictly limited.”

Those comments should give us cause for concern.

Failing to consider all the options properly and pushing difficult issues to one side will not help students or support the sustainability of the university sector. It is yet another example of the SNP Government's pick-and-mix approach to policy development, which is taken not just in higher education, but across government.

15:41

Richard Lochhead: I very much welcome the debate, and I value the speeches that have been made by members from all parties in the chamber.

We should not underestimate the challenges that Scotland's students face. I have regular meetings with NUS Scotland, as well as with students on all our campuses across the country, so I am well aware—as, I am sure, we all are—of the day-to-day pressures that students face in relation to their finances and living standards. NUS Scotland is working on an initiative that looks at the costs of the student day and at all the issues that relate to living costs. The Scottish Government has agreed to work with NUS Scotland to address some of those issues in due course, once the surveys and research have been carried out.

Today, Scotland's students and young people face real issues. There are also issues that are faced by all Scotland's families, given that we

have had 10 years of Conservative Party austerity and are now facing the impact of Brexit on our economy. We should not fool ourselves; such issues will impact on Scotland's further and higher education sectors and on students' living standards.

Important issues have been raised by members today.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): On a point of fact and for clarification, will the minister confirm that the Scottish Government does not offer the best support package in the UK for the lowest-income students?

Richard Lochhead: I will come to the support that we give Scotland's students, which I mentioned in my opening remarks. I believe that we offer the best package in the whole of the UK. I will address the point in a couple of seconds.

We have heard a lot of hyperbole and misleading comments, particularly from Labour members, and we have heard about right-wing measures from Conservative members, as we would expect. For example, Murdo Fraser and Liz Smith seemed to suggest that free higher education in Scotland means that Scottish students are chased away from Scottish institutions. The most recent Universities and Colleges Admission Service figures show that the number of Scots who win a place at university is at a record high. The number of Scotland-domiciled, full-time, first-degree university entrants has risen by 16 per cent, from just over 25,000 in 2006-07, when the SNP Government came to power, to just under 30,000 in 2017-18.

Liz Smith: There is some truth in what the minister has said. However, the most important point is that, as a result of so-called free higher education, far too many people who are domiciled in Scotland are not getting access to places.

Richard Lochhead: We are at a record high. I will come back to that point in a second or two—if time allows, given that I have taken two interventions.

Despite the hyperbole and outrageous claims that we have heard from some members, it has been a good debate overall, with valuable points made. However, I need to pick up on what Jackie Baillie said about free higher education being a small part of the equation. I would argue that, given the support that the policy has provided to Scotland's students in knocking down barriers and widening access to higher education, it is a pretty monumental part of the equation. We should not lose sight of that.

We would love to do more about the debt that students inherit when they leave university. If we had received more affluent budgets, we would

have been able to do a lot more. Had we not had a £2 billion real-terms cut from the UK Government, I am sure that we could have done much more for Scotland's students. Let us look at the facts about the debt that graduates in Scotland inherit, which many members have mentioned. In England, the figure is £34,800; in Wales, it is £21,520; in Northern Ireland, it is £22,440; and in Scotland, it is £13,230. Students who attend a Scottish institution leave with a lot less debt than those who attend institutions in any other part of the UK.

We have also heard claims that somehow free higher education and the student support package in Scotland are deterring people from disadvantaged backgrounds. We have, of course, a lot more to do to attract students from such backgrounds. Ross Greer is quite right to say that that is a major issue that we have to address—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, sit down a minute, please.

It is too noisy—I want to hear what the minister is saying. If members want to say something, they should try to intervene or say what they want to say when summing up. This is a short debate, and I want to hear everybody.

Richard Lochhead: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am sure that Scotland's students really want to hear what we have to say, given the importance of the issue to them. *[Interruption.]*

As far as widening access to higher education is concerned, I note that, in 2017-18, 15.6 per cent of Scottish full-time degree entrants to Scottish universities came from the 20 per cent most deprived areas. We are making significant progress; indeed, that is a highly significant statistic. This is about people who might previously not have gone to university now having the opportunity to do so. I commend our colleges, which these days are involved in a lot of higher education provision, and, of course, our university sector for all that they are doing to widen access. The commissioner for fair access has said:

"The latest figures vindicate"

the Scottish

"policy of free higher education".

The issues are very important. Scotland has some of the most generous bursaries in the whole of the UK, free higher education and even the best terms and conditions for loans. *[Interruption.]* Scotland's students have the best package. There is a lot more to do, but the SNP Government is certainly delivering for Scotland's students.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you.

Mr Findlay, the minister took two interventions, and I made a comment. I gave him his time back

for that, so do not say anything to me about how long he is getting. I am in charge of the debate—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry—this is not a discussion.

Neil Findlay: Presiding Officer—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, no, no, no! I do not want to hear from you unless it is a point of order.

Neil Findlay: Aye, it is.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Right. Let me hear your point of order.

Neil Findlay: Presiding Officer, I was not directing my comments at you, with respect.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. I take that as an apology for my mishearing you.

Neil Findlay: I was not apologising—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Oh no—I do not expect an apology from you, Mr Findlay.

Neil Findlay: I was not addressing you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I beg your pardon—you were looking at me when you said it, and I am not going to have that as the chair, who is conducting the debate. When a member takes an intervention, I try to compensate them, whoever they are.

That has wasted even more time. Ms Fee, would you sum up for Labour, please?

15:47

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Student financial support is in need of urgent reform. No one in the chamber can disagree with that, and many members across the chamber have expressed concern about the lack of progress on the issue.

Scottish Labour welcomed the independent review of student support. Our motion today highlights the need for

"a Minimum Student Income, tied to the Scottish Government's living wage, as recommended by the independent review".

We need the Scottish Government now to urgently bring forward plans to implement that. After all, the proposal comes from the review that it initiated—a review that, as Iain Gray pointed out, Labour welcomed in 2017 and which we continue to support.

Our motion, in the name of Iain Gray, demands urgency. If the motion is agreed to this evening, we want the ministers to come back here in the next few weeks with a plan for reform, because we want students to benefit in the next academic year—not at some vague time in the future. By supporting the motion, Parliament will send a clear

message that we take such a commitment seriously. Despite indicating its support for our motion and being given every opportunity today to give a timescale for coming back to Parliament with a plan—

Richard Lochhead: Will the member give way?

Mary Fee: If the minister is going to give me a timescale, I am happy to do so.

Richard Lochhead: I want to reassure Mary Fee that, as I have said, the Government will support the Labour Party's motion. I undertake, as minister, to inform Parliament in early course about our journey towards the minimum income guarantee.

Mary Fee: I say with respect that "in early course" is not good enough. We require urgency and a plan.

We do not want our young people to face having to balance education against debt. Instead of dumping the debt for students, as it promised, in 2007, it would do, the SNP in Government has delivered devastating cuts to student support, which has caused debt to soar by 169 per cent.

Scottish Labour would reform student support, and would begin by implementing a new social contract for students, which would include a minimum student income, as was recommended—I say again—in the student support review.

Scottish Labour axed tuition fees, thereby supporting thousands to study on the basis of their ability to learn, and not on their ability to pay. Our new social contract would benefit more than 170,000 students. It would include a minimum student income linked to the real living wage, and would give students a guaranteed income to study.

Instead of delivering its promise to dump the debt, the Scottish Government has, by cutting the young student bursary, forced more young people to rely on loans and has driven student debt up. The bursary that is available to students today is lower than it was before the SNP cut it by almost £900 in 2013. The new proposal on the student bursary will increase the bursary, but it would still be less than the pre-2013 figure. That disproportionately affects our poorest students.

The SNP Government commissioned the independent review of student support, but ignored its recommendations and watered down its support for the review. We welcome the Government's commitment to raising the repayment threshold, but we now need to build consensus to deliver. We must develop equity and parity between the higher education and further education sectors. For too long, college students have had a raw deal. It is only right that we take steps now to remedy that.

We know that the situation south of the border has resulted in students facing £9000 of debt for each year of university. We do not support the return of tuition fees in Scotland, and especially not for the poorest students. A new social contract that was tied to the living wage would provide what students need. Many students will continue to work: a real living wage in the workplace of £10 an hour—as pledged by Labour—will continue to support students throughout their time studying.

The National Union of Students Scotland's briefing for today's debate highlights its reservations about the introduction of loans in further education. It reiterates its view that improvements to student support should be delivered through increased bursaries rather than through loans. There should be less focus on promoting loans, and more on tackling student debt. Cuts to bursaries have caused higher debt, which is not sustainable.

Nobody wants to see our young people being saddled with debt and dropping out of university and education settings. We need real tangible support for our young people in order that they can achieve their potential. That is why I urge everyone in the chamber to support our motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on student support. It is time to move on to the next item of business.

Free Bus Travel (Under-25s)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is the debate on motion S5M-16408, in the name of Colin Smyth, on free bus travel for under-25s. I call Colin Smyth to speak to and move the motion.

15:52

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The starting point for Labour in this debate is the basic principle that public transport is a public service that, like all public services, should be accessible to all. That might seem obvious, but, under the fragmented and deregulated privatised bus network that we have today, public transport has become detached from public service. Instead of our buses being an essential service, they have become just another commodity from which private companies make a profit. We have devalued the critical role that our bus network plays for our economy, our communities and our environment.

Across Scotland, there are 388 million bus journeys a year, as people use our buses to access work and education, to socialise and to attend medical appointments. For those people, buses are a lifeline. However, although bus travel remains the single most popular form of public transport and accounts for three quarters of all journeys, the number of journeys has been in decline. Since the SNP Government came to power, the number of bus journeys has fallen by 20 per cent while bus fares have risen by 17 per cent in real terms.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Does Colin Smyth accept that bus usage has been in decline since before 1960, so it is not just linked to the SNP?

Colin Smyth: Bus usage has certainly been in decline for a long time, but it has continued to decline under deregulation and it is significantly in decline under this Government, which has no plan in place to halt the decline. There are many reasons for the decline—changing shopping habits, different work patterns and growing congestion—but decisions that have been made by this Government have contributed, too. The bus service operator grant has been reduced by 28 per cent under the SNP; there has been an overall 11 per cent fall in support for buses over the past five years alone; and the eye-watering cuts to council budgets again this year are inevitably leading to more cuts in bus routes across Scotland. There has also been a failure to make the necessary structural changes, with the Government opposing not one but two Labour members' proposals to re-regulate our buses. In short, we have had a

decade of decline on our buses under the SNP Government and little meaningful action to halt it.

It is those who can least afford it who are being disproportionately affected: young people, older people, the unemployed, students and others on low incomes. They are most likely to use our buses, so they are hit hardest by fare hikes and the axing of services, which removes the only viable travel option for many of our most vulnerable citizens. That is especially the case in rural communities such as the one that I represent.

With fares rising and the number of routes falling, it is little wonder that so many people feel unable to depend on public transport as their main mode of travel. Car usage continues to grow, and that is not sustainable. Transport accounts for more than a third of all greenhouse gas emissions, with cars contributing 40 per cent of that. In 2016, greenhouse gas emissions from Scotland's transport sector were at the same level as they were in 1990, and the air pollution that the sector causes costs 2,500 lives a year in Scotland.

We need to reduce the number of vehicles on our roads, and having better buses is key to achieving that. That will require a bold rethink about how we manage our bus network in Scotland. The timid Transport (Scotland) Bill that is before Parliament at the moment fails to achieve that. We must wake up to the fact that the current unregulated market is simply not working. We need to properly protect the lifeline services that are currently being axed and stop bus companies simply cherry picking the most profitable routes. That means fully lifting the ban on local councils setting up and running local bus companies to meet their communities' needs.

It is no coincidence that Lothian Buses, Scotland's only municipal bus company, has seen its passenger numbers grow while patronage elsewhere plummets or that it has a 95 per cent customer satisfaction rating and some of the lowest fares in Scotland. That is the result of a model that prioritises the passenger over profits—a model that encourages social responsibility and that, crucially, delivers millions of pounds a year back into the public purse. In 2017, Lothian Buses made almost £7 million in profits, and that money, which elsewhere in Scotland would be siphoned off to shareholders, was instead reinvested in services. Every local authority in Scotland should have the power to develop such a model for its community. If the Government does not amend its transport bill to deliver that, Labour will.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Will Colin Smyth take an intervention?

Colin Smyth: I will take a quick intervention if I have time, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have time.

Stuart McMillan: Does Colin Smyth accept that not every local authority area would be able to have a similar model to that of Lothian Buses because of their population?

Colin Smyth: There is no reason why local authorities cannot come together to produce bus services that cut across them with an arm's-length body, which is the Lothian model. The problem is that this Government has prevented the rest of Scotland from following that model. Reintroducing that ownership is an essential first step in rebuilding our bus services, but the scale of the challenge calls for even bolder action and proper investment in our bus services.

A success story of this Parliament's 20-year existence has been the free bus pass for older adults and disabled people, which was introduced by Labour in 2006. Free bus travel for the over-60s has helped to tackle isolation, create opportunity and fight pensioner poverty. It is widely used and highly valued by those who use it. A poll that was conducted by Age Scotland found that 96 per cent of respondents believed that the bus pass was essential or very important to their wellbeing. It not only provides social and personal benefits but is highly cost effective, with every £1 that is spent on the scheme generating almost £3 in broader social and economic benefit. That is why Labour supports the extension of the bus pass to the companions of disabled children under five and to modern apprentices, as is already proposed.

We want to go further, however. We want to open up opportunities for Scotland's young people, which is why we are asking Parliament to agree to the principle that free bus travel should be extended to young people. Transport costs are a huge burden on young people and their families.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Colin Smyth: I will take a quick intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that you cannot take an intervention, Mr Smyth. I am sorry, Mr Kerr—the member is going into his last minute.

Colin Smyth: With many of them earning below the adult minimum wage, never mind the living wage, young people can find themselves spending half their income on travel. The cost of travel has become a barrier to opportunity, but the Parliament has a chance today to break down that barrier. The ability to pay should not determine young people's access to education, to jobs and to social and leisure activities, but the reality is that it does. Free bus travel would help to put a stop to that injustice. It would provide young people with

the same benefits that it delivers for older adults and disabled people. Beyond that, it would tackle the wider decline of bus usage in Scotland by encouraging lifelong habits, so that the next generation would choose public transport as their primary mode of travel.

Our policy is a win-win. It gives young people a break and invests in their future, and it will help to halt the dismantling of Scotland's bus routes before our network disappears for good in more of our communities. I ask members to send a clear message to Scotland's young people: this Parliament is on your side.

I move,

That the Parliament is concerned by the reduction in number of journeys, fleet size and staff employed in Scotland's bus sector; believes that significant action must be taken to reverse this trend; considers that the principles of the Concessionary Travel Scheme for Older and Disabled People have been a success; welcomes proposals to extend the scheme to modern apprenticeships and companions of disabled children under the age of five, and further believes that these principles should be used to deliver a scheme that extends free bus travel to people under the age of 25.

16:01

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): I welcome this debate on bus travel, which accounts for some three quarters of all public transport journeys in Scotland. Buses serve the whole of Scotland, including the most vulnerable people, and today's debate focuses on our young people. I want to align what we are doing to support and improve bus services before signalling our intent to conduct further work in this area.

Just last week, bus passenger satisfaction figures were strong again, with 91 per cent of passengers satisfied with their bus service compared with just 88 per cent in England. However, bus passenger numbers continue to decline across the United Kingdom, as they have done since 1960. The causes are varied, and we are working with partners to address that where we can.

Among a host of measures that the Government is taking to improve transport are those contained in the Transport (Scotland) Bill. The bill outlines a range of options for local transport authorities to adopt in improving bus services by statutory partnership, franchising or even running services themselves in certain circumstances.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Is the cabinet secretary aware that, between 2007 and 2017, the drop in bus services in Wales was the biggest drop in all the nations of

the United Kingdom? Of course, there is a Labour Administration in Wales.

Michael Matheson: I am aware of that. However, as I am sure all members will recognise, bus patronage has been in decline for decades now, and the reasons for that are complex. The suggestion that there is one simple solution that could address that decline is misguided.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Can the minister also confirm that passenger numbers actually rose, from 460 million a year in 2004 to 487 million a year in 2007, when Labour left office? I think that the concessionary travel scheme that was introduced by the last Labour Government resulted in the increasing numbers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Interventions have to be short. Cabinet secretary, I cannot give you time back, because we have no spare time now.

Michael Matheson: I recognise the point that the member is making. I also welcome the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's support for the general principles of the Transport (Scotland) Bill in its stage 1 report.

Alongside the legislative measures, the Government continues to provide more than £250 million of support for bus services and concessionary travel as part of our £1 billion of annual public transport funding. The bus service operators grant, which supports bus services across Scotland, has provided some £682 million of investment, supporting 5.2 billion passenger journeys since 2006-07.

Last year, we made the decision to keep the age of eligibility for older people at 60. We also listened to views on other issues and committed to extending the scheme to cover companion cards for eligible disabled children under five. We are working towards the pledge to extend concessionary travel to modern apprentices.

In addition to what we are doing with free bus travel, we have the Young Scot national concessionary travel scheme for all young people aged 16 to 18 and full-time volunteers up to the age of 25, which provides a third off the price of bus and rail travel and 50 per cent off the cost of rail season tickets in Scotland. Eligible cardholders who live in the Scottish islands also receive ferry vouchers for two free return journeys to the mainland. From January 2007 to 2017-18, the scheme provided £16 million of concessionary travel discounts, contributing to 27 million journeys.

The importance of improving young people's experience of public transport was recently highlighted in the Scottish Youth Parliament's "All Aboard" report, and it is a challenge that all

partners in transport need to rise to. Of key relevance to today's debate is the report's ask to review the existing young people's concessionary discount on public transport to include all young people under 26. At the third annual meeting of cabinet members with children and young people, earlier this month, we discussed that very issue and agreed to take forward such a review. In addition, we will conduct an appraisal that considers the costs and benefits of extending free bus travel to young people under the age of 26. That said, it is important that, as we take that forward, we recognise that the policy needs to be financially sustainable.

It has been suggested that such a scheme might cost in the region of £13.5 million. The reality is that, annually, it is more likely to cost between £200 million and £230 million. As a Government, we will continue to take forward a range of measures to improve transport for the public in Scotland, and the Transport (Scotland) Bill will help us to achieve that by supporting bus services at a local level.

I move amendment S5M-16408.3, to leave out from "and further believes" to end and insert:

"applauds the work of the Scottish Youth Parliament in its 'All Aboard' campaign, which recommends reviewing an extension of discounts on public transport that are available to 16- to 18-year-olds to everyone under the age of 26, and believes that an appraisal, which considers the costs and benefits of extending free bus travel to people under the age of 26, should be taken forward alongside that review."

16:06

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I thank Labour members for bringing forward today's debate. There is much to agree with in the main body of their motion.

The bus industry currently faces several complex challenges. As we know, journey numbers have fallen by more than 100 million over the past decade; fare revenue continues to fall as a percentage of total operator revenue, despite the fact that fares have increased in price; and passenger satisfaction is an on-going concern. A recent survey, which I looked at this morning, showed that 64 per cent of passengers were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the frequency of their local services and 58 per cent felt that their local bus services were poor value for money.

There is no disagreement from Conservative members that funded concessionary bus travel has several welcome social and economic benefits for those who use the service. In advance of today's debate, I read the submissions from the likes of the Confederation of Passenger Transport, Transform Scotland, the Poverty Alliance and Friends of the Earth Scotland, and they deserve merit. They point to factors such as the cost

effectiveness and reliability of services, as well as the stigma around bus usage, as being key barriers to access and improving passenger uptake.

This is a welcome debate, which kicks off a sensible debate about eligibility. We should have a frank and honest debate about who is eligible, why they are eligible and how we will fund any additional free travel. That is the crux of our amendment today. We chose to agree with most of what Labour is saying, but committing to adding new user groups without a wider discussion about the cost-effectiveness of the overall scheme—although socially admirable—is not sensible policy making. Any changes to concessionary eligibility must be undertaken in consultation with groups that represent current or potential users and with the bus industry. There are more than 200 operators in Scotland and we must consult them before making such sweeping changes.

We do not oppose changes to the scheme—indeed, in previous manifestos, we have had our own ideas about extending the scheme to areas such as community transport—but due and proper analysis must be made of the long-term cost and feasibility of such extensions or changes.

Unfortunately, due to procedural pre-emptions, we are unable to support the Scottish Government's amendment but, for the record, there is nothing in it that we disagree with. If I compare the two amendments, I think that the Conservatives' choice of words better reflects how the Parliament ought to proceed on the subject, but I apologise to the Scottish Youth Parliament; I hold its work on this subject in high regard and I welcome its calls for a review.

In the short time that I have today, the overarching message that I want to get across is about how inexplicable it seems to commit to adding further users to the eligibility criteria when, 10 months into the financial year, the current concessionary travel scheme is already running out of money. Reaching the £200 million cap on this year's annual subsidy settlement to bus operators before the end of the financial year means that operators are already looking to cut services, cut routes, change timetables or increase fares—that is under the current scheme and before we add a single free journey for a single new passenger. If the current model is not working, why would we choose to add to the burden without a clear pathway for how Government will compensate operators adequately for the service?

A headline-grabbing conference speech from Labour announcing universal free travel is no doubt an easy and popular thing to do, but easy and popular are not choices that Governments often face. I do not think that the proposal

addresses the serious underlying issues that the industry faces, and the Confederation of Passenger Transport agrees. We need to have a sensible debate about how to make best use of public funds to improve bus patronage, and I welcome that. Labour has suggested one road to take; I, respectively, suggest that we look at all avenues.

I move amendment S5M-16408.2, to leave out from “, and further believes” to end and insert:

“; agrees that concessionary and subsidised bus travel, where appropriately targeted, provides a number of social, financial and employability benefits to users, but considers that any alterations to the eligibility criteria should take into account the financial implications of such change and be considered subject to adequate consultation with both users of the scheme and the bus industry.”

16:10

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green):

I declare my concessionary bus pass. The Scottish Government has a transport budget of £1,155.6 million and a larger sum for capital, and over the past seven years that budget has increased by about 20 per cent. The budget for bus services, by contrast, has increased by only about 5 per cent and the bulk of that has been for concessionary fares. I align myself with many of the comments made by my colleague Colin Smyth—certainly those about how the market has distorted things. At decision time, the Greens will support the Labour Party motion.

That investment is in reimbursements, rather than direct investment in services. Colin Smyth also talked about the Lothian model. What is not to like about something that delivers such high levels of satisfaction, works collaboratively across local authorities and delivers profit and a good service? That is the model that we would like to see replicated. I accept that in the scheme of things, unfortunately, that model is an anomaly, but a municipal model with scope to include community transport is very important.

The Scottish Green Party advocates fair, free access to public transport, including ferries, and believe that this is all about relative priorities. The cabinet secretary mentioned a figure of £200 million to £230 million and if that figure is correct, it roughly doubles the existing sum for concessionary travel of £213 million, which we agreed in the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee just the other week. Everything is about priorities. I do not hear about the same level of consultation on investment in road building—with which the Scottish Government has a blind obsession, supported by the other parties. Politics is always about priorities, and if the priority is not serving the public, in the widest sense, then what is it?

Buses are predominantly used by people who earn £10,000 to £15,000 a year and 58 per cent of bus users are women. We also know that 30 per cent of households in Scotland do not have access to a motor vehicle, so we must prioritise bus travel. The road haulage and motor car lobby has had its say for far too long.

Liam Kerr: Is John Finnie proposing that the Government should take money from the roads budget and plough it into this system?

John Finnie: No, that is not correct; we require a much more comprehensive discussion than that. However, there is not the same level of debate about road building where there is, of course, the difference between capital and revenue, and the revenue costs of maintaining the capital build. I do not see why this sum, which is small in the scheme of things, requires such an amount of questioning about why we would do it—we know the benefits and the Government knows the benefits. When we were considering the statutory instrument for the concessionary payout, one of the supporting papers said:

“In response to surveys, card holders tell us that the scheme provides them with social and health benefits, including by enabling them more easily to access services”.

Although the Green amendment was not accepted, it would have sought a further extension of the scheme to include people with addiction issues who are in receipt of treatment. We know that many of those people have chaotic lifestyles. Something that would help them would be the stability of not having to worry about their transport needs.

We have debated buses a lot. In March last year, I led a Green debate in which we sought to place on the Scottish Government a statutory target on passenger numbers, which have been in decline. We need to deliver cheaper fares, more routes and reliable services. We know that those deliver success and increased bus use, as we have seen in Edinburgh.

Because we are short of time, I will leave it there.

16:14

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): It is helpful to have this short debate on the importance of bus travel. No doubt we shall return to the issue soon, when we debate the stage 1 report on the Government's Transport (Scotland) Bill two weeks from now, when we shall have time to explore the issue in greater detail.

There is agreement that we must take action to arrest the further decline in bus use that has taken place over the past few years—we are agreed that stopping that would help to meet a range of

environmental, health and social inclusion objectives. How should we address that decline? The Scottish Government has come up with some ideas, but the Liberal Democrats' view is that those fall somewhat short of what is required.

Another way to address the matter would be for the Government to subsidise bus usage more widely. I am pleased that the present Government has continued the policy of free bus passes for the over-60s and for disabled people, which my Liberal Democrat colleague Tavish Scott introduced when he was Minister for Transport in Scotland's coalition Administration—I am amazed that the Labour Party has forgotten who the relevant minister was at the time. The policy is not a cheap option—it will cost the Scottish taxpayer some £213 million in the forthcoming year—but it is generally accepted as being a great success, in that it benefits not only individuals but society at large by reducing congestion and helping the environment. At decision time, I trust that we will approve the motion, in Graeme Dey's name, on the order to renew the concessionary bus travel scheme for older and disabled people for the coming year.

I turn to the detail of the motion and the amendments for the debate. I was expecting the Labour Party to lodge a motion promoting its new policy of having free bus passes for the whole population, so I was somewhat surprised to read the motion and find that it was not there. I also expected to find a fully costed proposal for the party's new policy; I cannot tell you how disappointed I was not to find that, either. The motion concentrates solely on extending the present scheme to people under 25 years of age and what is also disappointing—there has been a lot of disappointment today—is to see that there is no mention of how much taxpayers' money that would cost and how Labour proposes to pay for it. Far be it from me to suggest that that is a somewhat cavalier approach to budgeting—

Neil Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

Mike Rumbles: I will if I might have the time back, Presiding Officer, but I see that I will not, so I am afraid that I cannot take the intervention.

As I was saying, the Labour Party's approach to budgeting seems somewhat cavalier, and I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work will not be slow to take the same view. For that reason, the Liberal Democrats will support the Scottish Government amendment, which takes a more reasonable approach to the issue of extending the free bus pass scheme to others. We believe that before we commit the Scottish Government to such an extension, undertaking a cost benefit analysis would be only prudent—I can see the leader of the

Scottish Labour Party blushing, but there we are. The Labour Party's motion would have been a far more reasonable one to debate if it had taken the trouble to identify exactly how much taxpayers' money would be needed to fund such an extension of the scheme. As its commitment is completely unfunded, it cannot reasonably have expected it to be supported.

For that reason, Liberal Democrats support the Government's amendment to the motion that is before us today.

16:18

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): The bus market in Scotland is broken. The deregulated model that was introduced over 30 years ago has failed passengers and the public, and it has failed on its own terms. Instead of a competitive market, there is a patchwork of monopolies serving a diminishing network.

As Colin Smyth said, despite the Scottish Government having the power to replace that broken market with a fairer, more robust system, it has presided over a decade of decline in bus services. Passenger numbers have plummeted, the total number of bus journeys is down by 100 million, 64 million vehicle kilometres have been stripped out of the bus network, fleet sizes and industry staff numbers are down and routes have been cut, while fares keep rising. In my region, passengers are being asked to pay more each year despite facing further disruption and service cuts.

Bus companies in West Scotland have made sweeping timetable changes, cut lifeline routes and scrapped services altogether. Enough is enough. It is time for new thinking and new ideas about how bus services should be run, owned and controlled and how a modal shift can be achieved in society towards cleaner, greener public transport. That is why I welcome this debate and the wider debate about free bus travel that Richard Leonard has initiated. I hope that the Parliament will agree to support in principle the idea that concessionary travel should be extended to those who are under the age of 25.

As I said earlier, when Labour left office in Scotland, before the SNP's decade of decline, passenger numbers were rising. Why was that? It was because we had just introduced the free bus pass. I acknowledge that we did that with the support of the Liberal Democrats, and I say to Mike Rumbles that I do not see why we cannot work together to deliver the policy that we are proposing today as well. The free bus pass has come to represent not just a lifeline for many of our older and disabled people but a substantial investment in public transport, too.

Extending concessionary travel to include the under-25s would open up new opportunities and possibilities for our young people—opportunities for young people on low wages to get to work, to get from A to B and to study without having to pay exorbitant bus fares. Surely that is not too much to ask for our young people. However, we want to go further. It is not just about having a bus pass; people need to know that there are services to use it on, and we want to make bus travel more affordable for all.

The decline of bus services need not be inevitable. It can be reversed. If the bus companies cannot or will not deliver services that meet the needs of the community, it is time to give our communities the power to deliver bus services themselves. A people's bus service that is run for passengers and not for profit—that is what Scottish Labour, the Co-operative Party, trade unions and passengers all want to make a reality.

The Scottish Government's Transport (Scotland) Bill should be amended to provide a realistic route to common ownership of bus services. It should make municipal ownership of buses, which we see in the Lothians, possible elsewhere in Scotland and it should allow councils to work with community-owned operators, too. Crucially, it should call time on the deregulated market, shifting power from the owners of the big bus companies to the communities in my region that depend on public transport.

Faced with a broken market and a diminishing bus network, we can be in no doubt that something has to change. My Labour colleagues and I will continue to argue for democratic control of bus services and I hope that, when the time comes, there will be a majority in the Parliament for strengthening the Transport (Scotland) Bill. Today, I hope that Parliament will agree that, as part of a transformative agenda for public transport, bus travel should be free for the under-25s. On that basis, I hope that Parliament will support the Labour motion in the name of Colin Smyth.

16:22

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Today, we have a debate on a Labour motion that asks for more spending but has no mention of where the money is to come from. What is new? However, let us look first at the transport side of the debate. Are young people under 25 the most in need of help? Is the fall in bus patronage primarily linked to fares? It seems that there are other reasons for the fall in bus use. For example, some young people who can afford it are using taxis and private hire cars, apparently because they feel safer or because it is more convenient. Improved train services are another issue. In the

Carmyle area of my constituency, the train service has greatly improved and there has been a subsequent decline in the use of bus services.

I appreciate the briefings that we have received for the debate from a number of organisations, including the Confederation of Passenger Transport. It points out that falling bus patronage is caused by worsening congestion, the low cost of car ownership, changing work patterns and the rise of online shopping. Transform Scotland highlights a KPMG report that gives three main reasons for the fall: car ownership, online services and bus journey times.

Having a car is obviously expensive, and it seems surprising that anyone should argue that it is cheap. There is the one-off cost of purchase—I am thinking of replacing my car, and that might cost me, say, £12,000—and then there are the annual costs of insurance, road tax, services and MOTs. However, for people who have a car already, the marginal or extra cost of taking the family out for a day is pretty low. It is definitely lower than the cost of travelling by train and probably lower than the cost of travelling by bus.

One challenge that we have is whether and how to increase the marginal cost of car use, and parking costs at work and elsewhere are certainly a factor that comes into play in that regard.

Transform Scotland also makes the point that public ownership is no guarantee of increased bus usage. Bus patronage has been declining since at least 1960.

The Poverty Alliance and Oxfam put affordability at the top of their list when they held an event in February on transport and poverty. That makes me wonder whether age is the best measure of need. It is true that we use age as that measure for the over-60s, which means that relatively well-off people such as me do not need to pay for the bus and it is up to us whether we give the savings away.

John Finnie: Is the member aware that the turnaround in services in East Lothian came about specifically because Lothian Buses targeted young people and had a positive return from doing so?

John Mason: Anyone we target by giving them a free bus pass is more likely to use the bus. There is an argument that families with children, not young people, are the hardest hit by bus fares and train fares.

On the positive side, I agree that more people using buses is a good thing, even if the buses are subsidised, and that protects services. I disagree slightly with the Confederation of Passenger Transport, which says that the concession scheme is not a subsidy but just a payment for a service.

I move on to the financial side. Is the proposal costed? Why was it not part of Labour's budget negotiations? The CPT suggests that it would cost £200 million, roughly matching the cost of the present scheme, because there would be roughly the same number of people involved, whereas I believe that Richard Leonard has suggested that the cost would be £13 million.

It is worth exploring a possible expansion of free bus travel, but that has to be based on a proper appraisal. I agree with Jamie Greene—for once—that both the costs and the benefits have to be considered.

16:26

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have to say that the Labour Party's motion shows a lack of ambition and looks a bit like uncoded political opportunism. I believe that any vision should be about our future not about a political future.

I do not believe that this is the day for Parliament to be rushed into making uncoded decisions on extending concessionary bus travel. We should be looking at the real problem, which is all about the decline in the use of buses. If we address that, what we want to achieve—fewer cars on the road, less-congested streets and a reduction in emissions—will naturally follow. That is the responsible thing to do.

The problem with falling bus usage does not boil down to the price of a ticket—we heard that in the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee. It is far more complicated than that. We looked at the Transport (Scotland) Bill in numerous evidence sessions and we heard that the culture has changed. People now expect smart ticketing and up-to-date and up-to-the-minute travel information, and they expect to get from A to B on time with fewer delays and without changes.

For too long, timetabling issues and gaps in services have meant that passengers are heavily inconvenienced and the result is that they question whether they should be travelling on the bus at all. It is no wonder that the latest surveys indicate that passengers do not regard travelling on the bus as good value for money. We have heard that, in the Highlands, the level of satisfaction with value for money has fallen from 59 per cent to 51 per cent. That is a damning statistic.

In recent years, it has also become clear that there has been a huge shift away from travelling on the bus, with the number of journeys falling by 100 million in the past decade. That big statistic tells us one thing: how Scotland chooses to travel is changing, and if we want more people to take the bus, we need to come up with solutions that encourage the whole population to do so. We

need a holistic approach that gets the young, the old and everyone in between back on the bus.

We also need to ensure that our bus operators deliver services across all the routes that we want.

John Finnie: Does the member acknowledge that the profile of bus users in Edinburgh is different from the profile elsewhere, and that in Edinburgh the service is publicly run and owned?

Edward Mountain: I absolutely understand that the profile of those travelling in Edinburgh is different, but the problem is that Edinburgh has a bus operation system that dates back a long time, which we cannot roll out across all of Scotland.

There is a problem across rural Scotland. Bus services are being scrapped and lifeline services that we need are being discontinued, with hugely damaging consequences. That is what we should be addressing. As my constituents know only too well, once a bus route is removed, rural communities become more isolated and opportunities are closed off to them. If there is no bus service, there is no gain from having a concessionary bus pass.

Let me be clear, I want to see high-quality services that are delivered by well-managed bus operators and I want to see more buses being used by more people across Scotland. I do not believe that extending concessions, without knowing what the costs are, is the right approach. Can we say for certain that extending concessionary bus travel to under-25s would reverse the decline of bus travel? No, I do not think that it would. The decline in bus travel is far more complex than that, so let us treat it as such.

In my opinion, it is time to consult passengers and talk to operators and improve bus services for the people across Scotland who use them. That is what we should be discussing, not concessionary travel.

16:31

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I was delighted with Scottish Labour's visionary policy proposal at our conference in Dundee for a universal free public service. The proposal comes at a time when the number of bus journeys has fallen and fares have gone up, but—critically—we are starting to realise, in stark terms, the impact of travel on the planet.

Last week, Richard Leonard, our leader, joined young people who were protesting about climate change, and the policy is in direct response to that monumental challenge and to the needs of our communities.

Liam Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Jenny Marra: I am sorry, but I do not have time.

In Dundee, we have one of the lowest rates of car ownership, but we do not have strong enough public transport arrangements to meet people's needs. Bus routes and the frequency of services are still decided on the basis of profit. Councillors in Dundee regularly campaign to keep services and bus routes going to their communities. I believe that a modern forward-thinking country does not decide bus routes and services on the basis of profit, and that is why Scottish Labour is offering a modern transport policy for a modern country.

I have raised the issue of polluting buses in the chamber many times. Since I started raising that issue, we have seen some progress in Dundee. We have just had the launch of 14 new hybrid buses—the first hybrid buses for the city. They are cleaner, are of Euro VI standard and have replaced older, polluting vehicles. However, we still have more than 100 buses on our streets that do not meet the emissions standards. We have 57 dirty, Euro III buses belting out filth into the lungs of our citizens. On top of that, we have 47 Euro V buses that also do not meet the European standards.

Those 104 buses will either have to be off our roads by next year or retrofitted with urgency. That is because, by 2020—next year—we are moving to low-emission zones in four cities across the country, including Dundee. I ask the cabinet secretary whether enough money will go to Dundee—and to the other cities—for new or upgraded buses to replace those 104 vehicles. My concern is that routes and services may have to be cut to comply with the low-emission zones. Dundee cannot afford for any bus routes or services to be cut, so I am looking for that assurance today. Is there going to be enough money in the budget to make sure that our buses meet the emissions standards that will allow us to move to low-emission zones next year?

16:34

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I draw members' attention to the fact that I am honorary president of the Scottish Association for Public Transport. Indeed, it is the annual general meeting of the SAPT a week on Friday in Perth. Should any colleagues wish to join me, I can tell them that Tom Harris will be an excellent speaker, albeit that he will be speaking about trains, not buses.

Let me say at the outset—as I have said before—that I do not criticise everything that Labour and the Liberal Democrats did in their period in office from 1999 to 2007. The work that Jack McConnell led on smoking was visionary,

successful and to be applauded, and I applaud it again. Equally, the bus pass scheme was a great achievement of that period.

I, too, am a bus pass holder. I just looked up the details on my mobile phone and it says that it never expires. That is certainly true under this Government, despite some of the myths that have been peddled at various points. I am also a user of my bus pass, but I am among the 46 per cent of people who use their pass at least once a month, rather than weekly or daily, simply due to my travel pattern. Therefore, I have an interest in supporting the bus pass scheme that we have.

Let us look at what the Labour Party proposes. People aged 25 or under make up 19 per cent of our population, or slightly more than 1 million people. There are 1.3 million bus passes, which cost us £200 million. What will it cost to provide bus passes to a similar number of people? It will cost £13 million, if we are to believe Richard Leonard when he was interviewed by Peter MacMahon on “Representing Border”. That requires an interesting piece of arithmetic. How we get the cost down to just over 5 per cent of the current cost, I do not quite know.

The issue will run and run. Work with the Scottish Youth Parliament to ensure that we understand the costs is the basis on which we can proceed. I am in favour of extending the bus pass scheme. When I was a minister, I extended it in a relatively modest way, for disabled ex-servicemen, so in principle I am up for that and very much hope that we find ways of doing it.

However, I say gently to my Labour colleagues that where Labour is in power rather than merely talking about power, performance and behaviour are quite at odds with what I hear from members on the Labour benches. Despite the power to do so existing in Cardiff, we have seen no move there to take public ownership of the buses. We have seen no extension of the concessionary schemes to anything other than local services—and not to a national scheme. We have not seen Labour in government do anything that approximates to what the Labour Party did here before 2007 or what it seeks to do now.

I close with an international comparison. My current intern, Bella, comes from California. She has a wee house on the other side of Edinburgh and travels in daily by bus. She is astonished and delighted by the quality of the bus service that gets her to the Parliament every day. Her view accords with those of the 91 per cent of people who, according to the most recent survey, say that our bus services are very good. That is a number that is going up.

16:38

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): Members might find this hard to believe, but I need to declare an interest: I am old enough to hold an over-60s bus pass.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Never! I don't believe it!

Peter Chapman: It is hard to believe, I know.

I welcome the discussion that the motion has generated. It shines a light on the important point that bus services and bus usage in Scotland are in long-term decline.

I am a member of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, which frequently discusses public transport. With climate change a major factor in future policy, it is important that we encourage as many people as possible to use bus services.

In all our debates about bus services, a vital issue for me is the importance of buses to our rural communities. For people in our more remote areas, buses provide a lifeline service, taking them to towns and cities, shops and hospitals, and work and schools. For someone who lives in a city, direct access to such things can be taken for granted. I work in Edinburgh during the week and am amazed by the number of buses and routes here. It is fantastic to know that, wherever we are in this city, a bus can take us to wherever we want to be. That is not the case for most of rural Scotland, and it is definitely not the case in my North East Scotland region.

Aberdeenshire Council, in my region, has to subsidise more than half the available routes, most of which are in rural areas. Budget pressures have led to 27 underutilised routes being cut the length and breadth of the region, with services in Laurencekirk, Peterhead and Braemar all affected.

Neil Findlay: After the warm words that the member had for the Edinburgh service and the service in his area, does he not know that he has just made the case for publicly owned bus services such as the one that Edinburgh has?

Peter Chapman: Not at all—I do not accept that at all. That makes no difference. The service still has to be paid for.

Aberdeenshire Council's head of transportation said:

“We realise this may have a detrimental effect on passengers, but the council and communities will continue to have difficult decisions to make on the provision of local services into the future.”

Like all councils across Scotland, Aberdeenshire Council has had to grapple with a budget deficit of more than £20 million this year because of cuts from this SNP Government. It is the same old

story: our constituents pay more and get less. The north-east deserves a fair deal.

The Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee recently published our stage 1 report on the Transport (Scotland) Bill, which included a number of recommendations for how the Scottish Government can tackle the decline in bus patronage. The bill, as it stands, does not address that effectively, and the reduction of direct bus support in rural areas was a key argument that was raised in that regard.

The ability to access transport can play a fundamental role in how a person can contribute to and participate in society, and a lack of access to that transport can cause social isolation. To me, at a time of budget cuts, getting a decent bus service in rural areas is more of a priority than giving free bus travel to everyone under 25. The reality is that that would be an option open only to people under 25 who live in towns and cities. It is vital that that is addressed.

It is obvious that more needs to be done to improve bus services and patronage, increase access in rural areas and, where financially possible, increase concessionary and subsidised travel. I support the amendment from my colleague Jamie Greene, which recognises the merit in increased concessionary travel but also recognises that that comes at a cost. It equally recognises the concerning decrease in Scotland's bus fleet and patronage. That decrease needs to be addressed to help to resolve the problems of gridlocked traffic and high levels of pollution in our towns and cities.

16:42

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I start by declaring that I, too, have a bus pass, but I do not look that age, do I?

Edward Mountain: I do not believe it.

Richard Lyle: I do not believe it either.

I want to state clearly that I believe that there is a great opportunity in respect of public transportation by bus, but we must be in no doubt that it is a mode of transport that faces difficulties and requires solutions. The number of public transport journeys by bus has gone down and continues to decrease. We must consider ways of reversing that trend. I, and my colleagues in the SNP, believe that we must continue to support bus travel and to think of solutions that will take us forward.

However, that cannot be done with continual hindrance by the Labour Party and the Conservatives. We want public sector bus transport to thrive, and we could ensure that it would do so if the Labour Party and the

Conservatives would set aside their party-political point scoring and focus on solutions.

As is the case with all of Labour's proposals, one of the key questions remains unanswered. How will it be funded? Labour is yet to come up with a legitimate solution. It might tell us an amount, but it will not say where it will get that money from. I think that the term is, "Doing its sums on the back of a bus ticket." If the Labour Party is now so keen to provide free bus travel for people under 25, why was that idea not presented when SNP members were developing our budget plans? Some of us would have welcomed that. I believe that there should be an appraisal, as suggested by the cabinet secretary.

John Finnie: Will the member take an intervention?

Richard Lyle: No.

This issue must be addressed in an efficient and responsible manner. That is why the SNP Government spends up to £273 million on bus public transport. We have increased spending on it by £18 million over the past two years.

The Labour Party, which has not even presented budget options, has the cheek to tell us that we are doing nothing to solve the problem. It is time that Labour members got on the bus and talked to us.

The debate opens up questions and dialogue. How is public transport to be costed? Who should be entitled to free bus travel? How will it be paid for? All those questions need to be addressed before we can move forward, having ensured that we have the best possible answer to our problem.

We should also encourage the private sector to be more innovative. We cannot propose to spend more money without indicating how we will fund initiatives, so the Labour Party should come and talk to us. I remind all members who are present that the Tories are responsible for deregulation of public transport services. They should be held responsible for their political mistake.

I thank John Finnie for suggesting in his unselected amendment the extension of free bus travel to people who are currently recovering from substance addiction. In fairness to Jamie Greene—he will fall off his chair when I say this—I would also like to acknowledge his amendment, because we need to carefully review the financial implications that come with the motion.

It is easy to propose irresponsibly that we spend more money, but the people who are making the proposal are not explaining how we will acquire the funds that would be needed to implement their recommendation. Would they increase taxes or reduce spending, when the Government is faced with delivering more for the people of Scotland

while facing continued austerity from the UK Tory Government and its cuts agenda?

On a consensual note, I recognise, of course, that we have to encourage people, especially college and university students and young people, to use public transportation by bus. That is being done through the 2019-20 budget. I agree with the cabinet secretary's amendment. Public transport is the future, and we have to find solutions together. I welcome Michael Matheson's plan to review extension of discounts on public transport. With responsible solutions, we will move forward.

16:46

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to the debate and to close for the Scottish Conservatives. In our view, the fundamentals of the motion are supportable. As many members have stated, bus patronage is reducing, which could lead to fewer routes, fewer employees, fewer assets and reduced investment in newer and cleaner technologies, which will in turn reduce use further. We can agree with the motion that there should be

"action ... to reverse this trend",

but we have to be clear about what that action will be, and about the drivers of the current decline.

John Mason was persuasive in arguing that the drivers of decline are much more than simply fares. They include worsening congestion and increased journey times, the relatively low cost of car ownership, changing work patterns and the increase in online shopping. If we start from that point, we cannot support an unamended motion. Although providing free bus travel for under-25s might have merit as a policy—indeed, any extension to concessionary travel could provide

"a number of social, financial and employability benefits",

as Jamie Greene's amendment rightly craves—there is a fundamental lack of evidence on the impact of that policy on bus use.

If we start from the premise that it is not fares that drive the decline in use, we see that, as the Confederation of Passenger Transport has succinctly put it, a further concessionary travel scheme would not address the underlying issues behind patronage decline and could, in fact, have the unintended consequence of contracting the bus network.

In any event, as Mike Rumbles made clear, it is not helpful to the debate or to working towards a better future if proposals to add a whole new user group are introduced without first considering how much that scheme would cost. No one in Labour was prepared to take my intervention and to tell me how much that party thinks it would cost, so I am grateful to Stewart Stevenson for the reminder

that Richard Leonard thinks that it will cost £13.5 million. The Confederation of Passenger Transport has projected that providing free travel to people under the age of 25 would cost about the same as the current concessionary travel scheme, which, all in, is creeping towards half a billion pounds a year.

Even if a cost can be isolated, there simply has to be more consideration of where that money would come from. I presume that the cost of the policy will not be cannibalised from a health or education budget—John Finnie seemed to suggest that we could reduce investment in the roads that the buses use—so it will need to be new money.

John Finnie: Does Liam Kerr acknowledge that the policy would be part of a radical suite of changes that would mean that the whole budget would be reconfigured? What does he think would be an acceptable way to pay for the policy?

Liam Kerr: Everything needs to be paid for. The problem is that members come to the chamber and propose such policies without doing the groundwork on how much they will cost.

There would need to be completely new money. I know that Richard Leonard said at his conference that he would like to tax people more, but what would he really do? Would he hypothecate extra money from that tax and put it towards bus travel instead of funding the health service or the education service, for example? Clearly, he would not. Perhaps Labour would cut investment in bus services to cross-subsidise a concessionary scheme. However, Transform Scotland has pointed out that schemes are already underfunded.

It is interesting that Colin Smyth said that every £1 that is spent on concessionary bus travel generates £3 in benefits. More recent research, which I can share with him later if he wishes, suggests that investment in local bus infrastructure can deliver up to £8 per £1 in wider economic benefits. Therefore, we cannot yet be certain that concessionary travel is the right way to go.

I have limited time, so I will conclude my remarks.

We are concerned about the reduction in passenger numbers. Scotland needs a competitive structure for bus services that offers affordable fares and high-quality services, but proposals to extend concessionary travel should be implemented only in accordance with a long-term sustainable financial framework, following adequate consultation of users and the bus industry. For that reason, we can support the Labour motion at decision time only if an amendment is accepted.

16:51

The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse): This debate is very important, and I recognise that it has been largely consensual. There has been consensus across the chamber on the support for bus services and consensus—with the exception of the Labour Party, of course, which takes a different view—on the motion's failure to cost the proposal.

I acknowledge Mike Rumbles's very sensible points and, to be fair, the Conservatives' position on trying to ensure that we have properly costed proposals before the Parliament. I very much welcome Mr Rumbles's support and recognise the important point that he made on the need to get the fullest understanding of the costs and benefits of any such change in the concessionary travel scheme before making that change.

I will try to address points that other colleagues have made, the most important one of which is to do with the costing information, which we have discussed. The cabinet secretary alluded to that earlier. Labour has not yet—although it might possibly do this—provided a credible basis for the costing of £13.5 million, which Mr Leonard has previously used. As the cabinet secretary said, it has been estimated that the cost of extending free bus travel to all 16 to 25-year-olds in Scotland would be around £200 million to £230 million a year, depending on the change in the band. What assumptions have Colin Smyth and Mr Leonard made about the reimbursement rate in the calculation and about the uptake level? What is the modelling in the calculation of £13.5 million? The Scottish Government and external stakeholders think that £200 million to £230 million are the ballpark figures, so Colin Smyth and Mr Leonard are way adrift in their estimate.

Transport Scotland will conduct an appraisal

"which considers the costs and benefits of extending free bus travel to people under the age of 26".

The cabinet secretary has committed to that in his amendment, which I support. I say to Mr Rumbles and Conservative members that that appraisal will include consultation with stakeholders. If, as I hope, the Government's amendment is passed and the Conservative amendment falls, members can have confidence that consultation will be part of the review.

Jenny Marra made some fair points about Dundee and the use of hydrogen buses. Hydrogen buses have been partly funded by the green bus fund. Obviously, we are very supportive of that.

Jenny Marra also made a fair point about low-emission zones. Some £10 million has been identified for funding as Dundee transitions to the low-emission zone by 2022, £8 million of which is for an abatement scheme to address the

retrofitting of buses to improve their emission standard to the Euro VI standard. I hope that that addresses the point that Ms Marra raised.

John Finnie raised a legitimate point about the protection of vulnerable groups who have chaotic lifestyles. I recognise that point. Work is continuing across the Government to look into such issues and how we can support those who are vulnerable. Obviously, we have to bear in mind the need to achieve a balanced budget. I appreciate that John Finnie's amendment was not accepted. However, as other members have said, we very much sympathise with the needs of vulnerable individuals.

Peter Chapman suggested that there is a sense in the north-east that the area is not getting a fair deal. Notwithstanding the issues about buses, I merely point out that the Aberdeen western peripheral route has opened and the area is getting £300 million of investment in rail, so the Government is very much supporting the communities in the north-east through investment in transport.

I agree with Liam Kerr, John Mason and the other members who made the point that there are multifactoral reasons for the decrease in bus patronage. We need to understand those reasons before we make significant decisions and spending commitments, but we very much support the work that is being undertaken by the Scottish Youth Parliament.

The Transport (Scotland) Bill will address longer-term strategic issues about the provision of bus services, so Colin Smyth is not correct in saying that there is no plan to address the decrease in bus patronage. The bill offers a new and ambitious model for bus services, and it provides local authorities with options to influence and improve bus services in their areas. The cabinet secretary has indicated that he is open to widening the provisions of the bill on those points.

I had better stop there, Presiding Officer. I thank you for your forbearance.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Thank you, minister. I call Colin Smyth to wind up the debate.

16:55

Colin Smyth: Bus travel is rarely debated in the Parliament. It receives a fraction of the support from the Government that our privatised rail operators receive. However, bus travel remains not only the most popular form of public transport but the one on which people on the lowest incomes rely most heavily, which is a point that every SNP, Tory and Lib Dem member ignored today.

The Scottish Government's most recent transport survey showed that more than half of those who travel by bus earn less than £20,000 a year. The same publication showed that almost a fifth of those in the most deprived areas travelled to work by bus, compared with just 5 per cent of those in the least deprived areas, yet bus usage is on the decline.

Stewart Stevenson was keen to bandy about comparisons with other areas, but he failed to mention that passenger numbers in Scotland have fallen by nearly 8 per cent in the past five years alone, while the fall across the rest of the UK has been 5 per cent. Although the cost of running a car has reduced in real terms, bus fares have risen by 17 per cent over and above inflation.

The combination of fewer bus services and higher fares is a double whammy that hits the poorest hardest. It limits access to healthcare, work, education, social networks, shops, sport, culture—the list of negative impacts is endless. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: I ask members who are coming into the chamber to keep the noise from conversations down, please.

Colin Smyth: The decline of bus services is compounding inequality, but the approach of the SNP, Tories and Lib Dems is to accept that decline and inequality as inevitable. It does not have to be that way if the Parliament takes the bold decisions that it was established 20 years ago to take.

Free bus travel for older people and the disabled was one of those bold decisions. The policy has improved access to services, promoted social inclusion, supported those who are on low incomes, in particular, and improved health by promoting a shift away from the use of cars. If we removed the free bus pass for older people, we would remove more bus routes and passenger numbers would continue to plummet.

Progress in extending the benefits of free bus travel to others is stalling under this Government. In its budget, the Government pledged, this year, to extend free bus travel to companions of disabled children who are under five, but it has now kicked that pledge into the long grass along with plans to introduce a free bus pass for modern apprentices. Meanwhile, passenger numbers continue to fall. Getting on with the introduction of free bus travel for modern apprentices and the carers of disabled children and expanding the provision of free bus travel to young people would help to tackle the decline.

A robust framework is in place to take the policy forward through the independent charity Young Scot, which already delivers for young people. The charity works in collaboration and partnership with

Transport Scotland and councils, and—most important—it is trusted by young people. Expanding the provision of the successful card for free bus travel would fully remove the affordability barriers that young people face and would increase passenger numbers in the short term.

Crucially, encouraging the next generation, from an early age, to use buses as their main mode of transport would help to achieve a long-term modal shift. That would be good for the environment, good for our health and good for the fight against poverty, because we know that young people are more likely to be in low-paid, insecure work and that they spend a disproportionate amount on travel. Low-income families also spend a significant amount of their income on their children's travel.

Free bus travel for young people would open up more opportunities for children and young people. It would help them to access education, employment and training at pivotal points in their careers, it would remove barriers to social and leisure activities, and it would ensure that transport poverty does not limit the potential of our young people.

It is by no means a panacea—it needs to go hand in hand with increased investment in infrastructure improvements.

Jamie Greene: Under the logic of the member's proposal, a 24-year-old earning £25,000, £35,000 or £45,000 would get a free bus pass, whereas a 25-year-old earning £15,000 would not. Where is the logic in that? What is the rationale behind that policy intention?

Colin Smyth: I suspect that not too many young people fit into the category that Jamie Greene has highlighted. The reality is that young people are more likely to be in lower-paid employment. At the moment, they do not get even the adult minimum wage, never mind the living wage.

As I have said, the policy is by no means a panacea. Other measures need to happen, such as lifting the archaic ban that prevents local councils from running their bus services. We need to put passengers, not profits, first. However, extending free bus travel to young people would go a long way towards helping to rebuild our crumbling bus network and embedding social justice in our transport system.

Public transport is fundamentally a public service. That principle seems to have been lost in our privatised, deregulated system—a system that is, as Neil Bibby has said, broken and one that this Government refuses to change. SNP, Tory and Lib Dem members have been quick to criticise Labour's plans, saying that it is okay for them but not for young people to have a bus pass. They were quick to criticise, but not a single one of them

put forward any vision or proposal of their own. They did not explain how they would stop the decline in bus services; they did not explain how they would halt the rip-off fares; and they did not explain to Scotland's young people why they should not get the same benefits as older people receive with their free bus passes.

Given the absence of any vision whatever from the other parties, I urge them to back Labour's proposals. The SNP, Tories and Lib Dems have a very clear choice between a positive plan that gives our young people a break and starts to rebuild our bus network and more decline of bus services. My motion makes it clear whose side Labour is on—we are on the side of Scotland's young people.

Business Motions

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-16433, 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 26 March 2019

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 1 Debate: South of Scotland Enterprise Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: South of Scotland Enterprise Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 27 March 2019

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Communities and Local Government;
Social Security and Older People

followed by Scottish Green Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 28 March 2019

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Finance, Economy and Fair Work

followed by Scottish Government Debate:
Progressing Towards a Fairer Scotland
for Disabled People

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 2 April 2019

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Climate Change
 (Emissions Reduction Targets)
 (Scotland) Bill
followed by Standards Procedures and Public
 Appointments Committee Debate:
 Changes to Code of Conduct rule
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 3 April 2019

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Environment, Climate Change and Land
 Reform;
 Rural Economy
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 4 April 2019

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Transport,
 Infrastructure and Connectivity
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Transport (Scotland)
 Bill
followed by Financial Resolution: Transport
 (Scotland) Bill
 5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, in relation to any debate on a business motion setting out a business programme taken on Wednesday 27 March 2019, the second sentence of rule 8.11.3 is suspended and replaced with "Any Member may speak on the motion at the discretion of the Presiding Officer";

(c) that, in relation to First Minister's Questions on Thursday 28 March 2019, in rule 13.6.2, insert at end "and may provide an opportunity for Party Leaders or their representatives to question the First Minister", and

(d) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 25 March 2019, 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*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item is consideration of business motions S5M-16434 and S5M-16435 on the stage 2 timetables for two bills.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Human Tissue (Authorisation) (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 24 May 2019.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Fuel Poverty (Target, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 3 May 2019.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motions S5M-16436 and S5M-16437, on the approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) Act 2018 Amendment Regulations 2019 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the National Bus Travel Concession Scheme for Older and Disabled Persons (Scotland) Amendment Order 2019 [draft] be approved.—
[Graeme Dey]

Decision Time

17:03

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The first question is, that amendment S5M-16407.4, in the name of Richard Lochhead, which seeks to amend motion S5M-16407, in the name of Iain Gray, on student support, be agreed to. Are we all agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (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)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (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, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)

Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 94, Against 0, Abstentions 29.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-16407.1, in the name of Liz Smith, which seeks to amend motion S5M-16407, in the name of Iain Gray, on student support, be agreed to. Are we all agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (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)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)

Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (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, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 29, Against 94, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question, is that motion S5M-16407, in the name of Iain Gray, as amended, on student support, be agreed to. Are we all agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (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)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (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, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)

Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)

Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 94, Against 29, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that financial support is vital to enabling students to complete their courses; acknowledges that there needs to be more parity in the support that is available to students in colleges and universities; believes therefore that students in both further and higher education should be entitled to a Minimum Student Income, tied to the Scottish Government's living wage, as recommended by the independent review of student support; calls on the Scottish Government to urgently bring forward its timetabled plan to implement this, and further believes that access to higher education should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay, and will not introduce upfront or backdoor tuition fees.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Michael Matheson is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Jamie Greene will fall.

The next question, is that amendment S5M-16408.3, in the name of Michael Matheson, which seeks to amend motion S5M-16408, in the name of Colin Smyth, on free bus travel for under-25s, be agreed to. Are we all agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (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)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (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)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (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) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)

Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

Abstentions

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 65, Against 29, Abstentions 29.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The amendment in the name of Jamie Greene therefore falls.

The next question is, that motion S5M-16408, in the name of Colin Smyth, as amended, on free bus travel for under-25s, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament is concerned by the reduction in number of journeys, fleet size and staff employed in Scotland's bus sector; believes that significant action must be taken to reverse this trend; considers that the principles of the Concessionary Travel Scheme for Older and Disabled People have been a success; welcomes proposals to extend the scheme to modern apprenticeships and companions of disabled children under the age of five; applauds the work of the Scottish Youth Parliament in its 'All Aboard' campaign, which recommends reviewing an extension of discounts on public transport that are available to 16- to 18-year-olds to everyone under the age of 26, and believes that an appraisal, which considers the costs and benefits of extending free bus travel to people under the age of 26, should be taken forward alongside that review.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-16436, in the name of Graeme Dey, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) Act 2018 Amendment Regulations 2019 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-16437, in the name of Graeme Dey, on approval of an SSI, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the National Bus Travel Concession Scheme for Older and Disabled Persons (Scotland) Amendment Order 2019 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-15431, in the name of Pauline McNeill, on the prevalence of Crohn's and colitis in Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament is concerned about the reported high incidence of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) in Scotland, including in Glasgow, particularly the rise in incidence among children and young people; understands that, despite being viewed as an invisible disease, it can be severely debilitating and life-threatening; applauds the work of specialist IBD nurses, doctors and consultants who treat patients with the condition; commends the ongoing research into the root cause of the disease; congratulates Crohn's and Colitis UK on developing the National Blueprint for IBD in Scotland to improve the quality of IBD services; notes the calls on the Scottish Government to work towards the plan by improving access to age appropriate paediatric and transition services, as well as dedicated psychological support for IBD patients; supports the work of the Cross Party Group on IBD, which raises awareness of the issues faced by people with the disease and the impact that it has on their lives; notes the importance to people with IBD of public toilets, including on all public transport; is concerned at the rate of public toilet closures; notes the calls for there to be recognition, as a public health issue and in line with equalities legislation, that more public toilets are needed, and for this to be reflected in the planning system, and further notes the calls for more work to improve awareness of the radar key scheme, which allows people with IBD to use accessible toilets.

17:10

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank all the members who signed my motion and those who are taking part in the debate. I also thank the Parliamentary Bureau for selecting my motion for debate. Everyone who is watching is absolutely delighted that at long last we have a debate on inflammatory bowel disease, Crohn's and colitis.

A staggering 26,000 people in Scotland, or one in every 210 people, are estimated to be living with inflammatory bowel disease. The term is used to describe two conditions: Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. In short, they cause inflammation of the colon and the gastrointestinal tract. It is a serious disease, for which two thirds of patients need emergency care before they are diagnosed.

Unbelievably, Scotland has the highest prevalence of paediatric onset, and the rate is increasing. IBD is a global disease—its prevalence is increasing around the world—and, unfortunately, it is not curable. Crohn's and colitis are lifelong conditions and, taken together as IBD, they are often referred to as the invisible disease. Symptoms include stomach cramps, urgently needing the toilet, fatigue and joint pain. The symptoms fluctuate and their onset is rapid; they

are constant and chronic. The lifelong costs that are associated with the conditions are akin to other major diseases, such as diabetes and cancer. A paper that has just been published at this month's European Crohn's and colitis congress notes that Scotland has the highest incidence among children anywhere in the world.

The causes of IBD are not known. Professor David Wilson, who is a gastroenterologist at the University of Edinburgh, suggests that possible causes are the western diet, factors associated with living at a northern latitude and the industrialisation of food processes. It is a global phenomenon, and it will need more research to get to the bottom of it.

It is incredible that everyone I talk to—even you, Presiding Officer—knows someone with IBD. My niece and goddaughter, Angela, was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis at the age of 15. She complained of sore legs and extreme tiredness and was spending days in bed. It is terrible for anyone at any age to discover that they have the condition, but the age of 15 is a critical time for school and growing up. Like most children with the condition, she spent weeks on end in Glasgow children's hospital; it became part of everyday life. It is vital that those children know that their schools recognise their particular needs and how disruptive the condition is to their education.

Our family is indebted to the incredible IBD service at the children's hospital and its staff, including consultant Rachael Taylor and nurses such as Vicky Garrick and Lee Curtis. Some would say that they have been sent from heaven to be in the lives of young people, because they have given them so much strength and support.

I also thank Crohn's and Colitis UK and Dr Ian Arnott, who is vice convener of our thriving cross-party group. The stories of young people who are overcoming IBD are quite incredible. The number of people who are misdiagnosed is high. Last week, medics in our cross-party group told us of their view that patients, who are constantly tested for diagnosis, should be copied into all out-patient letters about their treatment. That already happens in England, and it seems obvious that we should modernise our system and do that here, too.

Joseph Logan is now 14 years old; he was diagnosed at the age of 11. His mum was worried about him, because he looked pale. She thought that that might have been due to the amount of exercise that he was doing, because he played a lot of tennis at the time. Eventually, he found it difficult to walk short distances and was admitted to the Royal hospital for sick children and diagnosed with Crohn's disease. He plays tennis now to a very high standard and regularly wins tournaments—that shows that the disease does not hold these young people back.

The cross-party group also heard last week from Roisin, a young woman who challenged the group to think about how their morning had begun. For most of us—certainly for me—it began with coffee. She told us that her day starts with dealing with the condition: cleaning her wounds, taking her medication, making sure that her food is at the right temperature and taking pain killers. It is an extraordinary start to the day, but she gets through it and she is not angry. She speaks for a lot of people.

Many people find IBD difficult to speak about; talking about the bowel can be embarrassing. A young girl talked to the cross-party group about how she experienced bullying because of her colostomy bag.

Jenny Cook, a young IBD fighter, has been an inspiration. She has gone through numerous operations to remove part of her bowel, but she is always smiling and has been raising funds for the Catherine McEwan Foundation.

I say to the health ministers that, to fight the disease, we need a number of things. We need a greater understanding of the disease—that it is lifelong and complex to manage. Many patients just need a bit of extra help to self-manage. Three years on from the publication of "Scotland Leading the Way: A National Blueprint for Inflammatory Bowel Disease in Scotland", we are still asking health boards to recognise Crohn's and colitis as priority conditions. I hope that that happens soon.

Scotland lags behind the rest of the United Kingdom in having a sufficient number of IBD specialist nurses. There should be one nurse to every 500 patients, but more than 33 per cent of sufferers have no contact at all with an IBD nurse. We need a service redesign led by senior clinical nurse specialists. Some hospitals have no identified IBD clinicians at all. Although the service is developing well for children, there is no identified service for adults. Access to toilets is crucial for anyone with the condition, and more must be done to recognise the whole range of conditions for which getting to a toilet is absolutely essential.

The best design would include age-appropriate services for 16 to 24-year-olds, including continuing psychological support. After the age of 16, that support drops off. At the age of 18, young people transition to the adult service. It is very hard for young adults who have been used to the children's service to transition. In fact, most teenagers I have spoken to find it quite a shock, because the adult service is quite different.

Although the national blueprint is a good framework for better services, there is no mandate for its implementation. In June 2019, the refreshed UK-wide IBD standards will be launched. We are

calling on all health boards to have a defined adult service for IBD. We make a plea to health board chief executives. We have been asking for two years for one of them to come to our group so that we can get the message across. I hope that they are listening. Similarly, I know that the health ministers are busy, but we have not had a visit in two years, and we would really like one.

Self-management is a key part of the blueprint. Crohn's and Colitis UK has a prototype for a flare card, with basic advice for a flare-up of key symptoms.

There should be better use of technology, especially in remote areas. Dr Thomson, from Grampian NHS Board explained the open review process, where people come back into the clinic when they need an appointment by phoning the IBD helpline or the gastro reception. He noted that the majority of people with chronic disease know their disease well, and they know when they need to talk to someone. The IBD waiting list in Grampian has halved since the remote service came in. The same is true in Highland. Professor Angus Watson noted that the average travel distance saved per patient using the attend anywhere system was 120 miles.

We need an IBD service that is fit for the 21st century. We need research to be funded so that we can find out what is causing this debilitating disease, which is on the rise, and we need the Scottish Government to work with us to redesign the service for the better.

17:18

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank Pauline McNeill for securing the debate and for the stewardship and leadership that she has shown on the cross-party group on inflammatory bowel disease.

I make a special mention of Nancy Greig from Crohn's and Colitis UK, who is watching the debate from the public gallery. She is simply a tour de force, not only in her role on the secretariat for the group but in everything that she does to raise awareness of Crohn's and colitis, which included holding an exhibition outside the chamber a few weeks ago.

I pay tribute, as Ms McNeill did, to the many people who have presented to the cross-party group about their experience of their condition and its management, not least Roisin Robertson just last week. We are acutely grateful to them—especially to the younger CPG members, who have shown such bravery and honesty in order to inform our understanding.

The motion is about prevalence, and prevalence of inflammatory bowel disease in Scotland and

across the world is increasing. The word that always comes to mind when I think of the disease is “invisible”—Pauline McNeill mentioned the “invisible disease”, and we keep hearing that term. How can it be that something that is so painful, that can be so debilitating and restricting and that is increasingly prevalent is invisible to us? That should simply not be so. However, that is the message that we are getting; members of the Scottish Parliament cross-party group keep using the term. They say that the disease is widely misunderstood and misrepresented.

Crohn's and colitis, the two main forms of inflammatory bowel disease, affect 26,000 people in Scotland, and the number is rising. It is a lifelong disease. People experience IBD in different ways, but the stigmatising effect on those who have to live with and manage it remains consistent.

As we have heard, the disease affects not just the bowel and the gut but many parts of the body. As Ms McNeill said, it can lead to diabetes, anaemia and other conditions that we would associate with the body's inability to absorb the nutrients that most of us take for granted. It leads to a lifetime of medication, coupled with an array of incapacitating symptoms that can have a severe impact on a person's long-term mental health. However, three years on from the publication of “Scotland Leading the Way: A National Blueprint for Inflammatory Bowel Disease in Scotland”, health boards are yet to recognise Crohn's and colitis as priority conditions.

The disease might seem invisible. We cannot see that a person has it—we cannot recognise that from looking at them. However, that often means that we cannot recognise the effect that it can have on their quality of life and the impact that it can have on their family. It is therefore no wonder that people with the condition continue to feel invisible.

A lot of good work is being done to raise awareness of IBD. As deputy convener of the CPG, I have been heartened to hear the stories of those who have found a support network in the group—a group that they never knew existed—among people with the condition and their families. The relentless work of the group's members is making the condition visible. It is visible in the Parliament this evening, and we must continue to make it visible.

We must work harder, as there is much to be done. We need to improve specialist nurse provision, ideally to the recommended ratio of one nurse per 500 patients. We need to improve the psychological and emotional support that is offered to those with the condition, particularly younger children and teenagers, who—we have heard—are being diagnosed more frequently.

We need to make the condition visible and make sure that people better understand Crohn's and colitis.

17:22

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank Pauline McNeill for bringing the debate forward and for her long-standing campaigning on behalf of patients. I also thank the organisations and constituents who have been in touch ahead of the debate.

It is also right that we pay tribute to and thank all those who work in the national health service for the support that they provide to Crohn's and colitis patients around our country. I know just how passionate and determined they are to see progress.

Like Clare Adamson and Pauline McNeill, I am a member of the cross-party group on inflammatory bowel disease, and some of the emotional presentations that we have had, especially those from young people, have really stayed with me. Crohn's disease affects around one in 200 people, with the majority of those who are affected being young people and children. There is clearly a need to improve access to appropriate paediatric and transitional services for young Scots with IBD, as well as—sometimes most importantly—improving access to psychological support as they go on their journey.

It is therefore concerning that a recent study by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health found that the paediatric workforce in Scotland is on the brink of a recruitment crisis and needs to increase the number of doctors by a quarter just to cope. It has been estimated that, if we are to deliver the required standards of care to children and young people, the number of consultants must rise by 25 per cent, or 82 doctors.

We should look at a number of important issues that are raised in the motion, including concerns about access to toilets. That is an issue on which I have had significant correspondence from residents across Edinburgh and Lothian. I have raised concerns with ministers and NHS boards specifically about changing place toilets for disabled people and about access to toilets in our health service, but a wider issue is the impact that council cuts are having on the provision of public toilets in public spaces. That is something that we should all look towards when we are planning public spaces and new facilities. Most important is that we should look at how NHS buildings incorporate toilets. I agree that access to toilets should be treated as a public health concern when planning legislation is being considered.

I also want to highlight some of the positive developments that we have seen. I have been hugely impressed by the examples of the use of e-

health technology, such as the attend anywhere scheme, which the cross-party group has had presentations on, and how such technology is helping to address many patient access concerns. The multi-stakeholder IBD innovation workshop in December 2018, which was instigated by Crohn's and Colitis UK and NHS Scotland, looked at many improvements in the development of digital health. I know that the Scottish Government is looking to take those forward.

Constituents in Lothian have highlighted issues with nurses and consultants not being able to communicate with families and children with IBD via email, which I believe is possible in Glasgow; some of the problems with information technology access are arising in Lothian specifically. I ask ministers to take an active role in finding potential solutions to that issue. It is important that we ensure that patients in Lothian are not left behind, and I am happy to write to the minister about the issue if he is not aware of it.

It is also important that we look to the future. Just this weekend, I read a very interesting and positive article on the development of a vaccine that is aimed at treating Crohn's disease. Recruitment is now taking place for the Crohn's MAP vaccine trials. There is obviously a huge amount of work being done to support patients. We should all keep striving to support people in Scotland who are living with Crohn's and colitis and look to the innovations and health improvements of the future, which will make such a difference.

17:26

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Pauline McNeill for securing this important debate and pay tribute to the cross-party group on inflammatory bowel disease, of which Pauline is the convener and Clare Adamson the deputy convener, for its work on these important issues. There is a history of bowel disease in my family, so that work really is appreciated. I also thank Crohn's and Colitis UK for its helpful briefing, as well as the constituents who have been in touch with me. I posted on Facebook that I was taking part in the debate and people have been in touch to share their personal experiences. I am grateful to them.

Scotland has the highest prevalence of Crohn's and colitis in the UK, so it is important that we understand the impact on people's everyday lives and ensure that our places of work and education and our public spaces are inclusive for people living with those conditions. People with Crohn's and colitis can find themselves planning their days around the availability of toilets, so adequate provision can make a dramatic difference to their lives. The need to go to the toilet can come on

very suddenly and, like Miles Briggs, I believe that access to toilets is a public health priority, especially for people with inflammatory bowel disease.

However, last year it was found that austerity-hit councils have had to close 161 public toilets across Scotland since 2010. Disability Equality Scotland described the declining number of public toilets as a health risk. I was shocked to learn from Disability Equality Scotland that some businesses, including well-known coffee shops, are locking their accessible toilets with standard keys and access codes. That practice must end.

One young woman with Crohn's contacted my office about the facilities at Glasgow Central station. She is sometimes forced to make her way down two flights of stairs in pain, desperate to make the toilet while frantically trying to find the right change to get through the barriers. I was pleased when Network Rail confirmed to me that it would remove toilet charges at Edinburgh Waverley and Glasgow Central stations, but that has not happened yet—please, just get on with it.

Accessible public toilets can make a transformative difference and a great example of that is one that is provided in my area by a third sector organisation, the Larkhall lighthouse. However, it should not be left to charities to step in. Therefore, Scottish Labour was pleased to work on a cross-party basis with colleagues such as Alison Johnstone, Jeremy Balfour and Mary Fee on changing places toilets to ensure that toilets are not just an afterthought in planning policy and community provision.

Today I read that Kevin Stewart, the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning, is a wee bit upset and thinks that the Planning (Scotland) Bill now needs to be rescued because it places too great a bureaucratic burden on councils. I hope that he is not referring to the proposals on public toilets, because they are vital. Without them, people are left with no choice but to stay at home and not take part in community life because they cannot guarantee getting to the loo.

Crohn's and colitis can be severely debilitating, or even life threatening but, as Clare Adamson said, people talk about not having visible symptoms, or about having invisible diseases. I pay tribute to Crohn's and Colitis UK for its fantastic campaign entitled "Not every disability is visible", which challenges that perception.

I have read about employers, including some in my area, such as call centres, timing staff members' toilet breaks and even deducting pay for time spent away from their desks. That creates an unhealthy culture of stigma and anxiety about toilet use, which is particularly damaging for and

discriminates against people who have inflammatory bowel disease.

Pauline McNeill talked about her niece and the impact of IBD on young people. Too often, young people in school have to seek permission to go to the toilet or access period products. We have to change that.

In conclusion, I again thank Pauline McNeill for securing the debate, and Crohn's and Colitis UK for its fantastic work. I urge the Scottish Government to respond to the recommendations that are directed at it and our health boards.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I was tempted there to say, "Monica Lennon, would you please just get on with it?"

On a serious note, I know that everyone is getting on very well tonight, but I have heard a couple of members refer to colleagues by their first names. I remind members that they should use full names, please, because that is best for the official report.

17:31

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I thank Pauline McNeill for bringing this important subject to the chamber and for her comprehensive contribution. I, too, will focus on a particular aspect of the debate: the accessibility of public toilets, which is mentioned in the motion.

As we have heard, Scotland has the highest rates of Crohn's and colitis in the UK, and their incidence among young people has soared in recent decades. Despite the growing demand for public conveniences, we know—thanks to a story in *The Press and Journal*—that, on average, Scottish local authorities have closed about 45 per cent of their public toilets. That has deprived neighbourhoods and communities of a vital public service, but it particularly affects people who have conditions such as inflammatory bowel disease. Crohn's and Colitis UK recognises that access to toilets is of great concern to people who live with such conditions. Last year, it conducted a survey in which 75 per cent of people said that they or a family member with Crohn's or colitis had had an accident in public because they could not reach a toilet in time. Just imagine that—it should not be happening.

The emotional impact of such conditions should not be underestimated. Having an accident in public can be profoundly embarrassing and hugely distressing. We must get to grips with the issue and ensure that people have the facilities that they need. We want to ensure that everyone is confident about getting out and about: if they cannot do so, they will avoid leaving home, which will result in isolation and loneliness.

The lack of suitable toilets on public transport must also be addressed urgently. My colleague John Finnie found that 22 per cent of ScotRail's toilets failed an audit that was conducted in 2017. Even when toilets are provided on public transport, they are not of a suitable standard, which, again, can severely inhibit the mobility and freedom of people who have bowel conditions.

Monica Lennon mentioned the Planning (Scotland) Bill. In September 2018, I successfully lodged an amendment to that bill—in the Local Government and Communities Committee's debate, in which Pauline McNeill and Monica Lennon were very supportive—to ensure that local development plans must include a statement of the planning authority's policies on provision of public toilets, which could be part of a community access scheme. The City of Edinburgh Council has such a scheme, through which businesses are paid £500 a year to allow free access to their toilets. New developments could be encouraged to plan for their toilets to be accessible to the public in a similar manner.

I also commend the many save our loos campaigns that have sprouted up across the country, from the Highlands to more locally. The issue is a very important one.

I was contacted by a constituent, who has given me permission to refer to her email. She writes:

"I work in the health sector and I know that there are many people who plan their outings around where they know they can access public toilets. There is a growing elderly population, and a long list of health issues which affect people's ability to control their bowel and bladder, as well as mobility issues".

As she said, that can mean that people need more time to access facilities. However, she continues:

"in the past few months, I have witnessed two customers asking if there was a toilet they could use and both being told no—one a small food outlet with a sit-in facility, the other a large store on Princes Street."

That is happening everywhere, and it is an issue that we have to address.

Monica Lennon is right in saying that it can be very uncomfortable to have to ask for a key or a code. Sanitation is a basic human right, and, if we are not providing that in 21st century Scotland, we need to have a good look at ourselves.

I realise that I have gone over my time, Presiding Officer. We must do all that we can to make sure that people with hidden disabilities do not feel stigmatised. I congratulate Crohn's and Colitis UK on its not every disability is visible campaign, and I look forward to working with colleagues to address the issue further.

17:36

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I, too, congratulate Pauline McNeill on securing the debate and on her co-chairing, with Clare Adamson, of the cross-party group on inflammatory bowel disease. I am a member of the cross-party group. I do not come with any great hinterland of experience of IBD, but I have found it fascinating. It does what good cross-party groups do: it engages in the political and policy debates, but it also gives MSPs access to the expertise of clinicians and those who work on the front line. As we have heard, it also gives us opportunities to hear at first hand about the day-to-day experiences of those who live with IBD. I vividly recall hearing from Joseph, whom Pauline McNeill mentioned. If he does not make it as the next Andy Murray, I would not be at all surprised to find him in the chamber at some point in the future, articulating his powerful arguments on this and many other subjects.

I will not rehearse again the figures that we have heard, but we must not lose sight of the prevalence of IBD in Scotland. We have the highest prevalence in the UK and the trend is upward, particularly in relation to paediatric onsets, which is putting huge pressure on services. However, we should not lose sight of the positives. There are advances in research, as Miles Briggs reminded us, and there is excellence in service delivery at the present time. There is also innovation through digital medicine and the like. So, there are positives, but there are also many challenges that we are yet to get on top of.

Monica Lennon and Alison Johnstone rehearsed very well the arguments around access to public toilets, which is obviously a key issue. Other themes that come up regularly in the cross-party group and that are mentioned in the briefings for the debate include the variations in access, which concern me. We are told in one of the briefings that urban areas generally enjoy better service provision than their rural counterparts. That might not come as any great surprise, but we clearly need to tackle and overcome the geographic barriers that exist. That might require a degree of creativity in how services are delivered, but there is no reason why there should be less access to good-quality services in rural areas than there is in urban areas.

I have also been struck by the variability in access to psychological services. As Clare Adamson reminded us, we are talking about a lifelong condition that can be painful, that is certainly debilitating and that is, for many people, invisible. It should come as a surprise to no one that the need for psychological and emotional support is often every bit as great as the need for

medical support, particularly for those who are diagnosed at a younger age.

I note the appeal for greater shared decision making by patients and clinicians. That is good practice in any event but, given the nature of IBD and how it impacts individuals in a very particular fashion, that seems to be not just good practice but essential.

I was prompted to join the cross-party group by a friend who has had the condition for many years and has been an absolute hero in raising money for Crohn's and colitis charities. I dread to think how many miles he has put in over the years—Angus's knees have certainly suffered in the cause of supporting IBD sufferers—but it has clearly been well worth it not just to raise money but, as many colleagues have said, to raise awareness.

The first time that I heard about the condition was when I was working in London and a work colleague explained his experience to me. I remember feeling absolutely horrified, and it was obvious how difficult it was for him to have that conversation with me—indeed, with anyone. Things have moved on a bit since then, but, as Clare Adamson reminded us, the sense of stigma is certainly still there and IBD is still seen as an invisible disease. Debates such as this are, therefore, absolutely crucial, and it is all the more important that we keep the issue visible.

I thank and congratulate Pauline McNeill once again, and I acknowledge the tremendous work of Nancy Greig of Crohn's and Colitis UK and everybody who is working to improve the lives of those living with the disease.

17:40

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I thank Pauline McNeill for securing the debate, and for the attention that she continues to pay to the issue and her work with the CPG on inflammatory bowel disease.

I wanted to speak in the debate after meeting a constituent who has ulcerative colitis and hearing about the difficulties that she is experiencing, particularly with her employer. She came to see me because of those problems. It is my understanding that her employment problems are, unfortunately, all too common for people with IBD. That needs to change.

When my constituent's disease is active, it leads to intense fatigue; I am sure that we are all aware that it is a symptom. She says that her employer has been somewhat accommodating as far as the more obvious symptoms of her IBD are concerned, although she confessed that she has been made to feel that she is somehow to blame

for her disease—that her symptoms are a result of something that she ate, as opposed to the disease that she has. She has also been required to provide evidence to justify the accommodations, which she has found to be embarrassing and, frankly, unacceptable. However, her employer is unwilling to look beyond the obvious symptoms and to acknowledge other aspects of her disease, such as the intense fatigue that she suffers. Given that fatigue is a hidden part of the disease, it is something that her employer finds difficult to understand or to accommodate.

My constituent suggested, to her employer, flexible arrangements at work, but all her suggestions have been refused. She needs to work and wants to work: her work contributes not only financially, but to her sense of self. However, her employer has refused to help her to establish a work schedule that would enable her to work effectively while managing her condition. Rather than have a reduced or flexible workload, she has had to be signed off by her doctor and is now on sick leave. That serves only to increase her stress level, which in her case simply exacerbate the disease. I am sure that that story sounds familiar to many members.

Thanks to Crohn's and Colitis UK, and in particular, the representatives from Crohn's and Colitis Ayrshire and Arran whom I met last month here in Holyrood, we have learned that IBD can be considered to be a disability under the Equality Act 2010, and therefore employees with the condition are entitled to protection from discrimination, and employers are required to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the demands of the disease. I am frustrated, on behalf of my constituent, that her employer has refused to do so. If she wants to continue working, she now has to speak about her disease to external organisations to gain their support, and she is not particularly comfortable about sharing information about it.

It is that sort of experience that drove the Scottish Government's national blueprint, which is changing how NHS boards treat IBD. There is good practice in NHS Ayrshire and Arran that I can share with colleagues, but I do not have time to go into it. When I spoke to the patients' rights champion, Kirsty Gibson, regarding the Ayrshire experience, she said that there have definitely been improvements following the blueprint, including having gastroenterology specialists, more IBD nurses, an IBD helpline and patients being seen at clinics.

However, my constituent still thinks that more can be done, including ensuring that people can access the right services at the right time, and at a time of their choosing; having more IBD nurse specialists, who are always needed and always

welcome; having more after-hours clinics; ensuring more uptake of mental health support, particularly for family members; and using technology so that patients can consult nurses from home, which I understand was done in the Highlands pilot.

Of course, we need to challenge public discrimination. Crohn's and Colitis UK's "Can't wait" cards are dismissed by most shops and stores. I hope that debates such as this will help to raise public awareness. As I mentioned, the possible discrimination by employers needs to be addressed. My constituent agreed that her interactions with her doctor, nurses and health staff have all been excellent, but more can always be done, particularly to encourage a more acceptable approach from her employers. There is no doubt that people are struggling enough with the concept of having a chronic illness so early in their lives, without having those additional worries to concern them.

Once again, I thank Pauline McNeill for bringing the subject to the attention of Parliament.

17:45

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I add my congratulations to Pauline McNeill for securing time in the chamber to debate the topic. In doing so, Ms McNeill is helping to raise awareness of Crohn's and colitis, which is one of the key asks from Crohn's and Colitis UK. That is a benefit of having members' debates.

Crohn's disease was something that I was vaguely aware of but, probably like most people, I did not give it too much thought. That was until I came across a young athlete who had the condition, and whose father also had the condition. I was not the athlete's primary coach, but I did some work with them and I knew the family particularly well. When working with athletes, it is incumbent on the coach to understand any specific issues that are pertinent to the athlete, any adjustments that might need to be made in their training programme and how it might affect their performance.

Only at that point did I begin to realise how debilitating the condition can be—the constant need to change the training programme, depending on flare-ups, and the increased focus on diet and access to an appropriate diet. It involves a constant planning cycle. When we were moving around from venue to venue and during warm-weather training, we had to know where the nearest toilet was and where the athlete would be able to access the diet that they required.

I am often accused of seeing things through a sporting prism, but sport exacerbates and highlights the issues. As Pauline McNeill said

about the young lad who played tennis, IBD does not necessarily have to completely shut down a person's life, because that young lad went on to become a Scottish champion.

Pauline McNeill said that IBD is an "invisible disease", despite it being potentially extremely painful and, in extreme cases, life threatening. That brought the problem home to me, because that is exactly what happened to the young lady whom I talked about. She is all grown up, and is now passing on her knowledge as a coach.

It is an invisible disease, but it is surprisingly common, with 26,000 cases registered in Scotland. Furthermore, and more important for me, is that there has been a huge increase in the incidence of IBD in under-16s.

There are many issues that need to be addressed, and have been addressed very well in the debate. I will focus on a couple of issues that are of particular interest to me. It will not be a surprise that I have picked diet, which is a topic that is raised constantly in the chamber. I understand that diet is absolutely crucial in managing IBD. That applies to the sufferer, to the parents and to the education system. After all, it is highly likely that teachers will be teaching pupils who are suffering from the condition.

That is another reason why I am so keen that we continue to consider how we make up and source school meals, and meals in other public facilities. The increase in processed food in our diet is being connected to the increase in conditions such as IBD. During my time in Parliament, I will continue to pursue ensuring that the meals that we offer and serve in schools are of the highest quality.

Access to specialist healthcare professionals and education by clinical nurse specialists and specialist dietitians would be a great part of the solution. That is something in which Scotland lags behind others, with nearly a third of IBD sufferers having no contact with a specialist nurse.

The need for psychological support has been mentioned. It is draining for people to be frustrated by inability to participate in life as they would like. Access to mental health services has been highlighted in the debate.

Healthcare technology can play a major role in tackling the lack of available treatments and promoting self-management of conditions. That, in turn, empowers sufferers. Direct access to specialist advice on many conditions via technology is a direction of travel that the health service needs to take, especially in rural areas.

Cross-portfolio solutions are required. I thank Pauline McNeill for bringing the debate to Parliament.

I see that you are looking at me, Presiding Officer; I will watch the clock next time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am tempted to say, "Aye, right."

17:50

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): I thank all members who have taken part in this evening's important debate, which I congratulate Pauline McNeill on securing. I thank her for her continued work with us, through the cross-party group—I know that other members here are also members of that group.

I thank members—in particular Willie Coffey—for giving a voice in this chamber to the many people who suffer from IBD; it is always important that we put such conditions in context. Like other members, I take the opportunity to thank Crohn's and Colitis UK for its hard work, particularly in developing the national blueprint for IBD in Scotland. It was good to hear Willie Coffey say that there is a feeling that things have improved, albeit that they are not necessarily where they should be.

I also thank Crohn's and Colitis UK for its ongoing engagement with us, to make a difference for people in Scotland who have these conditions. Since the blueprint was published three years ago, we have been working closely with the charity and other third sector partners, in conjunction with NHS boards, to improve pathways and provision for people with IBD.

Successes so far under the modern outpatient programme include the introduction of a standardised dataset, which is informing service improvements and aiding shared decision making, and a series of treatment algorithms for primary and secondary care, which are supporting the timely diagnosis, management and referral of people with IBD. Those measures have laid the foundations for improvements in care and are enabling the clinical community to consider the effectiveness of changes to services.

Pauline McNeill, Clare Adamson and others mentioned the provision of specialist nurses, which is an important issue. A pilot will shortly commence to introduce IBD specialist community nurses, to enable people to access scheduled and on-demand reviews and support in community-based settings—that is important in the context of Liam McArthur's points about the more rural parts of Scotland. The pilot will include evaluation of the use of phone and video consultations, the benefits of which members highlighted during the debate. The outcome of the IBD community nurse pilot and other work around long-term conditions such as IBD will assist NHS boards in making decisions

based on local needs, to ensure that access to specialist nursing services is enhanced.

Other developments include the introduction of a flare card, which contains information for people with IBD, to provide practical support during episodes of flare in their condition, and an individual care plan, to support better, person-centred conversations during appointments with healthcare professionals. We will be piloting that work over the next few months. Again, we acknowledge the support and collaboration of Crohn's and Colitis UK in that regard.

As part of the modern outpatient programme, an implementation plan will be developed with the clinical community to take forward recommendations in the report. Members will be interested to hear that one of the things to come out of the programme is a mobile app. The app is under development and will give the location of available local toilets, which is a matter to which I will come shortly.

Pauline McNeill: Will the member take an intervention?

Joe FitzPatrick: Is it on that point?

Pauline McNeill: No.

Joe FitzPatrick: Is it to do with toilets? I will deal with toilets later.

Pauline McNeill: It is not to do with toilets.

Joe FitzPatrick: On you go, then.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you two make up your minds?

Pauline McNeill: I did not want to mislead the minister—my question is on the modern outpatient programme. Earlier, I mentioned that, given the number of tests that people who are diagnosed have, some would say that, as part of the programme, letters about those tests should be copied to all patients. Clinicians seem to support that idea.

While I am on my feet, I hope that the minister will address the question of what more can be done by health boards to adopt the blueprint.

Joe FitzPatrick: On the point about letters, there is a responsibility in the Patient Rights (Scotland) Act 2011 to ensure that such information gets to patients using terminology that they can understand; sometimes, copying a letter to them will not fulfil that duty. It is important that people understand what is being decided on their behalf. The issue might be one that we can pick up on specifically later.

One of the other areas that Pauline McNeill, Clare Adamson and Miles Briggs talked about was research. It is essential that we are able to

develop a better understanding of the causes of Crohn's and colitis, which will lead to more effective diagnostic approaches and treatments. That is why we have partnered with the charities Cure Crohn's Colitis and Crohn's in Childhood Research Association to fund a major research project looking at the effect of environmental factors on the prognosis of Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. That project has the potential to lead to the development of personalised therapy in Crohn's disease and colitis. It has also attracted worldwide attention and is placing Scotland at the forefront of research in this area

In terms of supporting children and young people living with IBD, members may also be aware that we are developing a 10-year child and adolescent health and wellbeing action plan. It aims to take a cross-policy approach to improving the physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people in Scotland. Liam McArthur talked about the need for timely access to psychological support. That is vital, given the link between long-term conditions and mental health problems and the impact of those on disease outcomes if they go untreated.

Miles Briggs, Monica Lennon, Alison Johnstone and just about everyone in the chamber, in fact, spoke about access to public toilets. Why that is a particularly important issue for people with IBD was well covered. It is an issue that is of immense concern to people, because it has a bearing on their ability to enjoy full and active education, work and social lives.

The provision of public toilets is the responsibility of local authorities, as they are best placed to prioritise the needs of their local communities. However, I am pleased that the Planning (Scotland) Bill includes reference to local policies and proposals for public toilets and mechanisms for the expansion of the provision of changing places toilets. I know that the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning is supportive of that and is continuing to consider how we can go further than what we are doing in the bill.

Miles Briggs: Monica Lennon also raised the fact that some private businesses—indeed, some coffee shops not far from here—have locks on their toilets. Obviously, they are private businesses, but what can the Government do to try to spread the message that people need access to those toilets?

Joe FitzPatrick: We all have a role in encouraging businesses to understand that making their toilets accessible is good for business—that is one of the important things that we can do. I think that the mobile app that is under development might help with that, because I can see an obvious advantage to businesses that are

on that map. I hope that the business community hears that message.

Alison Johnstone mentioned public transport, and my colleague Paul Wheelhouse, the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands, is keen to point out an example of good practice in that regard. He has made me aware that the refit of the MV Hrossey on the northern isles route will include, for the first time, a changing places toilet. That shows that where there is a will, there is a way. We need to consider the issue at all points, because it is clearly important.

In addition, the Government is investing £6 million in the rural tourism infrastructure fund to support public infrastructure in rural tourism hotspots, including the provision of toilets. I hope that that will help in some more rural areas where there is particular pressure.

I again thank Pauline McNeill for bringing the debate to the Parliament and I thank members for their contributions. I particularly thank the members of the cross-party group on IBD. Liam McArthur was absolutely right that the group has a positive role in helping to develop policy, representing the community and ensuring that we are all aware of what can be, as members have said, a hidden disability but which, clearly, should not be.

It is the Government's intention to continue to work together across Government, with our partners and with health and social care services to ensure that everyone living with IBD in Scotland has access to the best possible care and support.

Meeting closed at 18:00.

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

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