



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Meeting of the Parliament

**Thursday 5 March 2020**

**Session 5**



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# Scottish Parliament

Thursday 5 March 2020

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

## General Question Time

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** Good morning. Our first item of business is general questions. Question 1 was not lodged.

### Fly Tipping

**2. Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to tackle fly tipping. (S5O-04221)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham):** Fly tipping is primarily a matter for local authorities, but it is illegal and unnecessary. Valuable resources that could be recycled go to waste, and it creates an expensive problem, often with the costs being met from the public purse. We have provided the revised code of practice on litter and refuse, given local authorities and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency powers to fine people from £200 up to a maximum of £40,000 if they are prosecuted, and consulted on new powers to seize vehicles that are linked to waste crime in our recent consultation on circular economy legislation—new powers that could be used to tackle fly tipping.

**Margaret Mitchell:** The cabinet secretary may recall that I raised the issue with the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment in June last year and pointed out that, in England and Wales, the court can make an order requiring an individual who is convicted of fly tipping to meet the costs of the clear-up.

Given that one of the aims of the rural crime strategy is to stop organised crime benefiting financially from fly tipping, does the cabinet secretary consider that the use of court orders in Scotland to recover the costs of clearing up fly tipping would help to meet the rural crime strategy's aim and, more important, provide financial assistance to local authorities and private landowners, who currently incur those costs?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** We will always look at potential changes—I will not say “solutions”—that might help the situation. I would need to speak to colleagues with other portfolios about the idea, as the member will be aware, given her personal background. Other things are happening, and we need to remember that decisions regarding both the issue that the member raises

and others tend to come on the back of successful court actions. The issue is about getting cases of fly tipping into court, which is a matter between the relevant local authorities and the Crown Office. There are real issues, as there often are with such matters, but we are trying to keep across that.

The member may be aware that the Scottish partnership against rural crime published its “Rural Crime Strategy 2019-22” last year, and tackling fly tipping is one of the partnership's seven priorities. We are trying to get on top of fly tipping, but I appreciate the enormous nuisance and concern that it causes to many communities.

**Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on what plans the Scottish Government has to review the national litter strategy?

**Roseanna Cunningham:** As the member may realise from what I have said, we are committed to reducing littering and delivering against the national litter strategy, which covers more than just the specific issue of fly tipping. In 2018, we published the updated code of practice on litter and refuse, and we intend to introduce a new penalty regime for littering from vehicles as part of the proposed circular economy bill. That was an ask that came from a number of different places. Those are commitments that we made in the national litter strategy, which also contains the commitment to conduct a review in 2020. We are considering how best we can take that review forward this year.

### Vale of Leven Hospital Out-of-hours Unit

**3. Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to secure and develop services at the Vale of Leven hospital, in light of the announcement that its out-of-hours unit is to temporarily close at evenings and weekends. (S5O-04222)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman):** As the member will know, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is at level 4 escalation. Part of that involves looking at the sustainability and robustness of the out-of-hours services. That involves the turnaround director, Calum Campbell, and an oversight board that is chaired by NHS Scotland's chief operating officer.

Given that the nine centres have not been sustainable over the recent period, the intention is to pause, fix four of them and then extend provision out to the nine centres. In the meantime, in West Dunbartonshire, the Vale of Leven's medical assessment unit remains open 24 hours a day, seven days a week; the minor injuries unit is open from 8 am till 9 pm every day, including weekends; an overnight general practitioner out-

of-hours service continues to operate seven nights a week from 11 pm until 8 am; and there is GP home visiting cover for the whole region.

Along with the local campaign group, Vale of Leven hospital watch, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde is working with the Vale of Leven's lead clinician for integrated care and local GPs to improve the robustness of the service so that there is full out-of-hours cover in the evenings and at weekends, and I expect to see that in the very near future.

**Maurice Corry:** The serious cutbacks to the out-of-hours service at the Vale of Leven hospital presents major challenges for constituents, who will struggle to find public transport to take them to hospital for treatment during antisocial hours, and for already stretched accident and emergency departments, which will now face increasing pressure to meet demand.

For the sake of local community care, will the cabinet secretary commit to preserving the Vale of Leven services and recognise that that vital lifeline cannot afford to be curtailed without consultation?

**Jeane Freeman:** I want to make a number of points to Mr Corry. First, as I have said, home visiting is available throughout the region. Secondly, as I have made crystal clear on more than one occasion, I am absolutely committed to the Vale of Leven as an important site of healthcare. A number of services are now available there, including renal dialysis, a haematology day ward, dermatology and a birthing unit. I know that Mr Corry knows that and that he is personally committed to increasing those services, as I am.

The measure in question is a temporary step. The Vale of Leven's position as regards out-of-hours services will be finalised and completed in its entirety very soon. All the necessary steps on advanced nurse practitioners, rotas and engagement with GPs will be taken to make the four out-of-hours services robust. That will be the model for increasing the number of out-of-hours units in a robust way to six or seven units, and then to nine, over a period of 12 to 18 months.

All that work is in hand but, in the meantime, "Vale News", a joint publication from NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and the hospital watch campaign, which I have read, sets out what the current services are. Because those services—at least the minor injuries unit—are very effective, they will prevent further pressures being put on A and E.

**The Presiding Officer:** Two more members wish to ask questions on this subject. I ask for slightly more concise questions and answers.

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** Does the cabinet secretary agree that the health board must fully take on board the concerns of residents who go to the Vale of Leven hospital and Inverclyde royal hospital and ensure that additional services can be introduced at both hospitals?

**Jeane Freeman:** I agree with the member, and my commitment in both those areas is crystal clear. Level 4 escalation allows us to be much more engaged with the board in directing where its priorities should lie and how it should deliver those. We will continue to do that, and we will update members accordingly.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** The cabinet secretary came to visit the Vale of Leven hospital almost a year ago to discuss the out-of-hours service, when she made a welcome commitment to consider a locally organised and delivered service. Can she explain why NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde thought that it could simply ignore that? What steps will she take to restore the service at the vale and sack the chair and chief executive of the health board?

**Jeane Freeman:** I did indeed make that visit, and I would be happy to visit the hospital again and meet the campaign group again, as I have discussed previously, most recently with Ms Baillie.

It is inexplicable to me why the board did not take up the offer from those GPs, who run many of the services that I have run through. I assure Ms Baillie that that will no longer be ignored and that those services will continue to benefit from the significant commitment of that GP group in the Vale of Leven. We will return to a full out-of-hours service in the vale very swiftly.

#### **Transport Services (Island Communities)**

**4. Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures that transport services meet the needs of island communities. (S5O-04223)

**The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse):** We are committed to providing a transport system that works for communities across Scotland, including our island communities. That is why since 2007, despite real-terms reductions by the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Government has invested over £2 billion in ferry services across the country, including new routes, new vessels, upgraded harbour infrastructure and cheaper fares. Last year, NorthLink Ferries recorded a satisfaction rating of 97 per cent.

Close engagement with communities has been vital to our investment in services, and will continue as we develop the new strategic

transport projects review and the successor to the ferries plan.

**Beatrice Wishart:** I have been contacted by several constituents and visitors to Shetland who have complained about the high cost of getting to the isles. I know of someone who was charged almost £500 for return flights from Edinburgh to visit family in Shetland for Christmas. When families have crises and need to travel to or from the mainland, such costs make already stressful situations even worse. The Government has a role in those extortionate costs, as the owner of Highlands and Islands Airports Limited. Does the minister agree that isles passengers are being penalised? Will he set out what the Government will do to make sure that people are not charged over the odds?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** The first thing to do is to acknowledge to Beatrice Wishart and other island representatives that we recognise the challenges that island communities face in respect of making journeys to the mainland and the high cost of travel. The Government is doing everything it can to maintain lower costs for people who have to commute to the mainland, or who travel for business or pleasure, and we will continue to do that.

My colleague, Michael Matheson, is working hard to ensure that HIAL takes its responsibilities to island communities seriously, but I would be more than happy to meet Beatrice Wishart to discuss particular issues that she is aware of, and to take them forward with my colleagues.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** The 2018-19 budget granted £10.5 million in funding for interisland ferry services in Orkney and Shetland. That came with a promise to find a sustainable solution for interisland ferry services, which are a lifeline for their communities. When can the islands expect to find a sustainable solution for interisland ferry services?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** The Government is keen to work with all parties on the budget process. Kate Forbes is hoping to cement the budget in Parliament shortly.

I encourage Rhoda Grant to engage with me. As she knows, we have been working hard with Orkney Islands Council, Shetland Islands Council and Argyll and Bute Council to find long-term solutions for their internal ferry services. I am pleased to say that this year we have, in the budget that is due to be approved by Parliament, provided a solution that will resolve issues in Argyll and Bute.

We have continued our discussions with Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council. There are specific issues in relation to both, including differences in relation to how they fit with

the routes and services methodology, fare structures, and the funding arrangements as they stand. Those arrangements are complex. I commit to Rhoda Grant that we will continue discussions with colleagues in Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council to try to reach a solution as soon as we can.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** In light of the Scottish Government's decision to extend free bus travel to under-18s, what consideration will it give to allowing young island residents on Cumbrae and Arran, for example, to travel free on ferries?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I acknowledge Kenneth Gibson's strong commitment to improving services for residents of Cumbrae and Arran, and other parts of his constituency.

We have committed to a national concessionary travel scheme for free bus travel for people aged 18 and under from January 2021, subject to completion of the necessary preparations, including due diligence and research. We will engage with young people across the country to ensure that all areas benefit from the measures.

Support is provided for young people who use ferries through the YoungScot national entitlement card. Young people between the ages of 16 and 18 who live on islands receive four vouchers for single trips or two returns from the islands to the mainland. In addition, under-16s travel for half the adult fare, and under-5s travel completely free.

I would be keen to hear from Mr Gibson, if he has any specific proposals.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** This year's budget shows that, once again, the Scottish Government has no serious ambition to deliver genuinely fair funding for Orkney and Shetland ferries. Will the minister go into next year's Scottish Parliament elections once again making promises to the islands that he has no intention whatsoever of keeping?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I think that Jamie Halcro Johnston has some brass neck on that issue.

**Members:** Hear, hear.

**Paul Wheelhouse:** Jamie Halcro Johnston's colleagues in the UK Government have failed to provide a budget in advance of the Scottish Government budget. That creates significant uncertainty for the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and for the Government in pushing forward our budget, because we do not yet know what we will receive from UK ministers.

I am sure that Jamie Halcro Johnston will, if he is serious about commitments to fair funding for services in the Orkney and Shetland islands, have made representations to Kate Forbes during the

budget process about including additional funding for ferries for Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council. If he has not done so, he is guilty of gross hypocrisy, on which he should reflect.

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** There was news this week of agreement between Orkney Islands Council and the Scottish Government on funding a replacement for the MV Golden Mariana. Will the minister confirm that that will pave the way for agreement on replacement of other vessels in a fleet that provides genuine lifeline services to the island communities and constituency of Orkney, which I represent?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** I know that Liam McArthur's question is a genuine one on behalf of his constituents. On the agreement that we are trying to reach with Orkney Islands Council, we are trying to provide additional funding. As Liam McArthur knows, there are on-going discussions with the council about the longer-term position for Orkney Ferries. As I outlined to Rhoda Grant, they are complex discussions that involve differences in fair structures and alignment with the routes and services methodology: we believe that Orkney is below the RSM standard.

Given funding constraints, these are not easy matters, but I assure Liam McArthur and Jamie Halcro Johnston that we continue to have discussions with the council and will look for a long-term solution for the islands.

**David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** The minister will be well aware of the news that broke overnight that regional airline Flybe has collapsed, which is putting at risk 2,000 jobs across the United Kingdom. Will the minister urgently raise the issue with the First Minister—who is, I note, in her place in the chamber—to assess job losses in Scotland and to provide specific aviation support in the Highlands and Islands, such as endorsing a public service obligation for the service between Wick and Aberdeen?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** Those are important issues. I assure David Stewart that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, Michael Matheson, is actively dealing with the matter. The situation is obviously very serious; our thoughts are with the staff of Flybe, who face a horrendous situation, as do the customers who have been affected by what happened overnight.

In relation to the Highlands and Islands region, which David Stewart represents, I put on the record that Flybe does not currently operate in any of the islands, although Flybe's franchise partner, Eastern Airways, operates the Aberdeen to Wick service and has confirmed that it will continue to do so, which is obviously great news for people who are served by Wick John O'Groats airport.

## Curriculum for Excellence Review

**5. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it will ensure that all information required and requested by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development as part of the review of the curriculum for excellence will be made available. (S5O-04224)

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** The OECD has provided the Scottish Government with guidance on gathering background information and evidence to inform the review. We will be working closely with our national partners to provide a comprehensive evidence base at the outset, and to ensure that the review process captures the views and experiences of a broad range of partners, practitioners and learners.

**Jamie Halcro Johnston:** The cabinet secretary will be aware that the Education and Skills Committee has on several occasions found it difficult to access all the necessary data from Scotland's education agencies. He will also know that several of Scotland's education experts have been concerned that Scotland is not as data rich as it should be, when it comes to measuring educational attainment. What actions is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that better qualitative evidence that covers a broad range of areas is available ahead of the OECD review?

**John Swinney:** I am afraid that Jamie Halcro Johnston is having bad day when it comes to the questions. Scotland has never had more information about the performance of individual pupils through our education system at any point in the past 20 or 30 years. That situation has come about through the reforms that this Government has made to ensure that we deliver improvements in performance.

We now know about the performance of young people at curriculum for excellence early level, level 1, level 2 and level 3; such information was never available in the past. Mr Halcro Johnston needs to get up to date with the statistics, and he needs to understand the reforms that the Government has put in place and why young people in our country should be proud of their performance in education.

## Young Disabled People (Transition to Adulthood)

**6. Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it provides to young disabled people in their transition to adulthood. (S5O-04225)

**The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd):** There are already a number of



policies and initiatives under way to support the needs of disabled children and young people going through transitions, but we all recognise the need for something more.

A number of important aspects of transitions are already covered by legislation in Scotland. Across Scottish Government directorates, over 30 projects or programmes are already being progressed to effect real change to the transitions experiences of our young people. We will build on that to maximise impact, through greater co-ordination of work across Scottish Government.

We will also ensure that planning for transitions is integrated into good practice through the upcoming refresh of the getting it right for every child policy and practice guidance. We will ensure that the voices and lived experiences of children, young people and families feature strongly in our policy development.

**Johann Lamont:** I am sure that the minister is aware of how important a time it is for young disabled people, as they face the transition to adulthood. However, despite what she says, provision is simply not working. Young disabled people face significant barriers because of their disability.

The minister might be aware of my proposed member's bill, which will seek to address the absence of support for disabled young people as they become adults. Given the powerful testimonies about the lack of serious planning and abandonment of families at that important time that I have received in response to my consultation, will the minister agree to meet me to discuss my bill proposal and to discuss how best to secure the rights of disabled young people and the support that they need to achieve their potential as adults?

**Maree Todd:** Yes.

**The Presiding Officer:** Before we turn to First Minister's question time, members will wish to join me in welcoming to our gallery the Rt Hon Catherine Hara MP, who is Speaker of the Parliament of Malawi. [*Applause.*]

## First Minister's Question Time

12:01

### Coronavirus

1. **Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con):** This week, the coronavirus spread to Scotland. The First Minister, and the Scottish Government, can be assured that the Scottish Government will have the full and engaged support of myself and all Scottish Conservatives as it deals with the virus. In turn, I thank the First Minister for the constructive way in which she has worked with the United Kingdom Government, just as she did with previous health pandemics some years ago. Both of Scotland's Governments need to work together constructively and effectively.

In recent weeks, two testing facilities have been set up in Glasgow and Edinburgh, with any positive results being sent to Public Health England for confirmation. Does the First Minister envisage that those two laboratories can meet all the anticipated demand for initial testing, or will she indicate whether there are contingency plans to further expand testing capacity in Scotland, as required?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I thank Jackson Carlaw for his comments and for his statement about support from the Scottish Conservatives. We face a potentially very serious situation, and we all have a responsibility to work together to make sure that our response is what the people of Scotland would expect.

Before I turn to the specifics of Jackson Carlaw's question, I confirm to the Parliament that, as of this morning, we have six confirmed cases. I would expect that number to rise, possibly very rapidly, in the days to come.

I want to stress that we are still very much in what is called the contain phase of the virus in Scotland. If people follow the advice, if we ensure that confirmed cases are isolated and that contacts are traced and given appropriate advice, and if the public follow the advice about hand and other personal hygiene, we can continue to have a degree of success in stopping the spread from individual to individual. It is important that we do that for as long as possible.

That said, we all recognise and accept that it looks increasingly unlikely that we will be able to contain the outbreak indefinitely, so it is likely that we will move into what is called the delay phase of the virus. That may be reasonably soon, but that will be guided by the best scientific advice. When we are in that phase, the focus will be very much on seeking to slow down the spread and reduce the peak—the number of people who are infected

at any one time. As we take decisions about that, it is important that we are informed by good-quality scientific advice.

Difficult decisions will potentially be involved—ministers will not take those decisions lightly but, equally, we will not hesitate in doing exactly what is required to protect the public for as long, and as best, as we possibly can.

We took early action to ensure that testing facilities were available in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and there are plans in both Tayside and Grampian to potentially have testing facilities there as well. I am satisfied at this stage that we have the capacity to deal with testing.

Although I am not saying that we are close to this at the moment, here, as with any outbreak, we may reach a point at which the spread is such that not every individual is tested, because the presumption will become that, if they are ill with certain symptoms, they have the virus. However, we are not at that stage right now, and we will continue to take the actions that we require to take.

**Jackson Carlaw:** I thank the First Minister for that response. If a rapidly rising number of cases transpires, one emerging issue in consequence is likely to be the availability of beds. In the past few years, healthcare has shifted from hospitals into the community, with specialist services concentrated into one place in larger hospitals. In consequence, we have fewer beds and fewer smaller community hospitals, which has happened in response to changes in demographics, technology and medicine.

Given that the chief medical officer has suggested that a full outbreak will require more intensive hospitalisation, will the First Minister indicate how many extra beds may be required and what contingency plans are being prepared to commission them?

**The First Minister:** Numbers are among the issues that we are currently assessing, and which we will assess on an on-going basis. Although it would be premature to give numbers on that right now, it is likely that we will need increased facilities for hospital care—including intensive hospital care—and also to be prepared to treat in the community more people who can be treated there in order to ensure that our hospital capacity is there for those who need it most.

The national health service has in place well-established escalation plans, which are in the process of being implemented. Through the Scottish Government resilience committee, and indeed day-to-day planning, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport and I are overseeing that and making sure that the plans are being refined and developed as we go.

We are still in a phase of learning more about the operation of the virus—that point would be made right now not just in every country across the UK, but in every country across the world. Our knowledge is incomplete, which makes it all the more important that we have in place plans that are well established and developed, but also flexible enough to respond to the reality as we face it. The Scottish Government will continue to ensure that that work is done.

**Jackson Carlaw:** Again, I thank the First Minister for that response. We know from previous outbreaks of pandemics that protecting our dedicated health workforce will be essential. However, staffing in the NHS is already under significant pressure; it is—after all—the end of winter, with staff already sprinting to stand still.

The UK Government has announced that it intends to recruit retired doctors and nurses to augment and support the health service in England and Wales. Will a similar initiative progress in Scotland, and how will it be achieved if required?

**The First Minister:** First, I pay tribute to our front-line NHS staff, which I am sure will be echoed across the chamber. We do that each and every day; however, at times such as this, the pressure and demand on them increases and we are all appreciative of the work that they do. Yesterday, I visited NHS 24 in Clydebank, whose healthcare workers are among those who are at the sharp end of that increased demand.

We have record numbers of people working in our NHS in Scotland, who work incredibly hard and under incredible pressure; nevertheless, the numbers have been increasing. We also have more staff per head of population than other parts of the UK. That is not to diminish the pressure that our staff are under now or will be under, but that is an important foundation.

Of course, we are also looking at contingency plans to encourage and ask those who are recently retired from the national health service to come back, if that is required. We are obtaining lists of retired healthcare professionals from—for example—the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Midwives, and we are looking to get such a list from the General Medical Council as well. Those plans are under way.

It is very important to be frank and honest with the public and to give them as much information as possible—that was a very important approach during the swine flu pandemic just over a decade ago—and to seek to reassure the public that, although this is a serious situation that is being taken seriously, there are well-established plans in place that are in the process of being implemented.

It is also very important that we continue to reassure the public that, although very big numbers are being cited right now, we are planning on the basis of worst-case scenarios; and that, whatever the numbers turn out to be, the vast majority of people will have mild symptoms. Part of our focus in seeking to reduce the number of people who are infected at any one time is to minimise as much as possible the impact on society and, in particular, on our national health service. That is the basis on which we will continue to take forward our planning work.

**Jackson Carlaw:** Finally, on that point about reassurance, as we have seen from the development of the virus in other parts of the world, those in the most vulnerable groups could be the most susceptible. I in no way wish to be alarmist, but many people watching who are going through treatments for cancer or other conditions and who have compromised immune systems will clearly be concerned. Has the First Minister considered how we offer specific reassurance and target resources at that most vulnerable group, who inevitably will be particularly affected and concerned?

**The First Minister:** The public generally will have a degree of anxiety, given what they are reading in the newspapers and watching on the television, but that will be heightened for those who already suffer vulnerabilities, whether those are health vulnerabilities or the vulnerabilities that come with age. To go back to a point that I made earlier, it is important for us all as politicians—as First Minister, I take this responsibility very seriously—to be frank and honest with people but not to seek to sensationalise, and to base our decisions on good-quality scientific advice and not on reasons of political expediency.

To reassure people in such groups, I again point to the importance of the containment phase. We may not be able to contain the virus indefinitely, but every day and week in which we manage that and thereby take a potential future peak out of the winter period and into spring and summer, we help to reduce the impact. The messages to all of us to wash our hands properly and to follow the advice on what to do when we cough and sneeze are important. I am very aware that politicians telling people how to wash their hands sounds patronising, but it is really important. If all of us who are healthy do that, it helps to protect those who are more vulnerable. In all of our planning for potential escalation, it is absolutely the top of our priority list to make sure that we target resources to the most vulnerable.

I appreciate the support from across the chamber as we take forward those plans. I again say that the situation is potentially very serious, but we are not powerless in the face of it. There

are many things that we can and will do to reduce the impact as much as possible, and that is what I am focused on as First Minister, as is the health secretary and indeed the entire Government.

### Coronavirus

**2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, and in particular my membership of the GMB trade union.

The first thoughts of us all are with those patients who have been diagnosed with coronavirus Covid-19. As infection outbreaks know no boundaries, the importance of a single-island United Kingdom-wide approach is paramount. We welcome the unified and cohesive response to date. We also welcome the cross-party approach that the First Minister and her Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport have taken. It is clear that we must all follow the advice of the experts, such as World Health Organization scientists, front-line health professionals and the chief medical officer.

How quickly can people expect to be tested? What steps are being taken to train and equip staff who will be involved in community testing?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** People can expect to be tested very quickly if they contact the national health service and if they fit the case definition, which has changed and undoubtedly will continue to change, in terms of travel history, contact with those who have travelled to certain countries and the symptoms that people are experiencing. Such people will be tested quickly and given all the appropriate advice. That is the process that has led to the confirmation of the six cases that we have now. In Scotland, the tests have been carried out in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Plans are afoot to have another testing facility in Tayside—I may have said earlier to Jackson Carlaw that it was Grampian; if I did so, I apologise. Those plans will continue to be progressed.

We will continue to ensure that staff have the right support and training for anything that they are asked to carry out. The testing capacity is adequate at present but, as with all aspects of our planning, that is kept under on-going review.

**Richard Leonard:** The coronavirus action plan that has been agreed to by the four Governments in the United Kingdom includes the commitment

“to support early discharge from hospital”

if transmission becomes established among the population. We know from the Government's figures that were released two days ago that the delayed discharge of patients from Scotland's hospitals has reached record levels. In the past 24 hours, I have spoken to council leaders who are

concerned that our social care system may not have the necessary resources to enable patients to be discharged on time. Can the First Minister outline how the Government plans to alleviate those concerns and ensure that, if required, the action plan can be implemented in full?

**The First Minister:** Reducing delayed discharge is a focus for the Government regardless of coronavirus, but particularly so given the challenge that we face with coronavirus. Reflecting that, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Jeane Freeman, met the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities yesterday to discuss the issue and will meet the chief officers of integration authorities later today.

Obviously, we have the budget this afternoon. I do not want to get into political territory here, but the budget includes increased resources for local authorities and social care. That is important. It may be that, through discussions with the UK Government, we will require to further increase national health service and social care resources as a result of the challenge that we face. There is an intensive focus on ensuring that we can discharge people appropriately. That is important at any time, but at a time when we face the need for greater hospital capacity for those who need it most, it is a particular focus. The health secretary, as with all aspects of our planning, will keep Parliament fully updated.

**Richard Leonard:** We heard again this week that a business case is being made to the Scottish ministers to close half of our NHS laundries. Only four would be left to serve the whole of mainland Scotland. Trade unions have raised concerns about that and the GMB wrote to the First Minister this week asking for a moratorium on cleaning cuts across councils. It also called for any additional demands—and so additional costs—on local councils to be met by the Scottish Government. Will the First Minister give an undertaking that the necessary funding and resources will be available to councils and the NHS? Will she place a moratorium on plans to close down four of Scotland's mainland NHS laundries, so that we can reduce risks, manage this emergency, keep staff safe and protect the health of the people of Scotland?

**The First Minister:** I will take those issues in turn. Richard Leonard referred to a letter that I received from the GMB. I can confirm that it did indeed write to me about council cleaning services. Again, I point to the increased resources for local government in the budget that I hope Parliament will pass this afternoon. We have provided advice on cleaning educational settings through the Covid-19 guidance that has been produced by Health Protection Scotland. That remains extremely important. We will of course

include COSLA in our on-going resilience planning to make sure that it is engaged with the actions that we take.

The laundry programme board has sought to develop a new action plan to ensure that its services are safe and sustainable. No proposals relating to that have come to ministers to consider. We have been waiting for NHS chief executives to review the business case. Of course, the final decision will be taken by the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport. I think that she has already said—if not, I will say it—that the current and emerging situation with coronavirus will very much be a factor in deciding the best way forward. The Scottish Government will not approve any plans that we think will in any way put at risk the steps that we have to take to deal with the situation.

I have made points about the budget that we will pass for the next financial year but, on the question of resources, when that draft budget was put together, we did not have all the information about coronavirus that we have now. It is almost inescapably the case that we will be required to provide additional resources to health and social care and perhaps to other parts of our public services and indeed businesses and individuals who are dealing with this challenge. Clearly, the Scottish Government budget is fully committed and we will require to have discussions with the UK Government ahead of, and no doubt after, the UK budget next week to make sure that those decisions are taken in an appropriate way. As with all aspects of the situation, we will keep Parliament duly updated.

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** We have some supplementary constituency questions.

#### **Fife Ethylene Plant (Mossmorran)**

**Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** Given the further unplanned elevated flaring by Exxon at Mossmorran this week, just a few short weeks after the last major incident, the First Minister will understand how weary my constituents have become with the whole thing. Does she agree that we have gone beyond the final warning that was issued by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency last year and that all necessary steps must be taken as a matter of urgency by the regulator and the operator failing which, the licence to continue to operate must surely be brought into question?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I absolutely understand what Annabelle Ewing describes as the weariness of her constituents and I understand and share the concerns of local people. To put it mildly, it was extremely disappointing that there was a further flaring incident on Tuesday, so soon after the restart of the plant. I know that it will have added greatly to

the frustration of the local community. SEPA shares that disappointment and is urgently seeking detailed information on the latest incident.

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform spoke to SEPA and the Health and Safety Executive after the previous episode to understand the action that they are taking. I understand that SEPA's focus is to follow through on the requirements that it has placed on the operator to reduce the frequency and impact of flaring. That involves major works at the plant and it will take time to see the full benefit. However, I am absolutely clear—and I agree with Annabelle Ewing on this—that the operator must take all necessary steps to reduce the impact on residents and fully address their concerns.

### **Flybe (Administration)**

**Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** The First Minister will be aware that Flybe has gone into administration, which has unfortunately left passengers having to make alternative arrangements, with no certainty that they will be reimbursed. Beyond that are the staff of Flybe, who this morning found themselves without a job, through no fault of their own. What engagement has the Scottish Government had with the airline about the kind of support that will be made available to those staff?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I share Gail Ross's sentiments about the collapse of Flybe. In particular, I echo her comments about the staff; my thoughts are very much with all the employees. We understand that Flybe has around 300 direct employees at its bases in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen. However, my thoughts are with everybody who was employed by Flybe.

The Scottish Government will do everything that we can to support employees. If employees are facing redundancy, we will provide support through our partnership for continuing employment initiative. We hope that other airlines will seek to employ former Flybe staff.

I want to say a word or two about the broader impact, which Paul Wheelhouse touched on before First Minister's questions. We are hoping that connectivity will be maintained by other airlines. For example, Loganair will move to operate several former Flybe routes, including connections to Manchester, Belfast and Southampton. I know that it plans to start operating those routes as soon as possible. Later this month, easyJet will begin new routes between Edinburgh and Birmingham and between Glasgow and Birmingham.

It is important to stress that no Scottish island routes are affected, as those routes are operated by Loganair and not by Flybe. The Aberdeen to

Wick route has been mentioned. It is operated by Eastern Airways, although it was under a franchise agreement with Flybe. Eastern Airways has confirmed that it intends to continue to operate the route.

It is a serious situation, particularly for the staff. The Scottish Government will continue to do everything that we can to support them.

### **Coronavirus (Universal Credit Claimants)**

**Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** Universal credit claimants who are unwell or self-isolating as a result of coronavirus must update their online portal and provide medical evidence by day 8 if they miss an appointment or cannot fulfil their claimant commitment. It is unclear how medical evidence can be secured when self-isolating and there is concern about how claimants who have caring responsibilities as a consequence of the virus will be supported. That will not be easy for Department for Work and Pensions staff, either.

Will the Scottish Government make constructive representations to the United Kingdom Government to ensure that universal credit claimants will not be sanctioned or otherwise in detriment, due to coronavirus?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Yes. We will continue to make those representations to the UK Government. In my view, the DWP must review its guidance now and provide clear information that people will not be sanctioned if they cannot meet their claimant commitment, if they are following health advice to self-isolate for a fortnight or are caring for someone with coronavirus. I am aware that the UK Government has advised workers without statutory sick pay to claim universal credit if their work is disrupted. However, waiting five weeks for a payment or accruing debt through an advance is not really acceptable, so I hope that the UK Government will initiate immediate hardship grants for people in those situations.

The Scottish Government is also looking at what we can do to have contingency funding for people in that position. We cannot have people feeling that they must work against medical advice because the welfare system is not meeting their needs. The social security system should be a safety net for people when they need it. In this instance, the actions of individuals have an impact on wider health, so it is important that those changes are made, and made quickly.

### **Fife Ethylene Plant (Mossmorran)**

3. **Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):** The Scottish Greens are wholly committed to working with the Scottish Government and with other

parties as we face the challenge of the coronavirus. I appreciate the on-going briefings provided by the cabinet secretary and the Chief Medical Officer at this busy time.

This week, the skies over Fife were ablaze from flaring at ExxonMobil's plant at Mossmorran. That light pollution affects communities up and down the east of Scotland and the people living in the shadow of that fossil fuel relic have had their lives made a misery. NHS Fife has said that the plant has a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of people there.

My colleague Mark Ruskell has repeatedly asked for ministers to visit the communities who are suffering. The Scottish Government has refused. The Greens have also called for an independent inquiry into the future of Mossmorran. Will the First Minister finally agree to those simple requests, or is she too close to the fossil fuel industry to hold it to account?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** This is a serious situation, and the tone of the question does not do justice to that seriousness.

I remind Alison Johnstone that, as I understand it, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, which is an independent regulatory body, is now focused on concluding an on-going criminal investigation to an evidential standard. It continues to scrutinise different actions. There are on-going, regulatory investigations. The combination of those factors makes it incumbent on ministers to be very careful not to act in a way that could undermine or prejudice that investigation in any way. Ministers are not uninterested, but we want SEPA to be able to do its job and to do it properly.

As I said to Annabelle Ewing, who has been assiduous in raising the issue on behalf of her constituents, I am extremely concerned about the situation. I understand the concerns of local residents. It is important that SEPA continues to take the action that it thinks necessary, and it is important that the operator takes all necessary steps to reduce the impact on residents and to address those concerns. I hope that all members will accept the importance of allowing all those processes to take place properly.

**Alison Johnstone:** With the greatest of respect, the First Minister's expression of disappointment does not help people in the area sleep at night—it does not do justice to the seriousness of the situation.

The First Minister mentions the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. Let me read SEPA's response:

"Having been clear that flaring must become the exception rather than routine, we're disappointed that flaring by ExxonMobil has occurred again."

Our environmental regulator should be protecting our communities, not tweeting its disappointment from the sidelines. SEPA has issued warning after warning. It issued a final warning as long ago as April 2018, but the situation on the ground has not changed. The First Minister could go and visit the community. Paul Wheelhouse has met ExxonMobil to discuss the situation and the community is well aware of that.

Either SEPA is not up to the job of protecting our communities, or it does not have the powers to do so. Which is it, and what will the First Minister do to end the misery that the plant is still causing?

**The First Minister:** SEPA is neither of those things. It is taking action. It is right to do so and it has a responsibility to ensure that local residents are properly protected.

It would not do residents any good if we acted in a manner that was prejudicial to the on-going investigations, regulatory and/or criminal, that are under way. My interest is in making sure that the issue is addressed properly, safely and for the long term. That is what I, as First Minister, will ensure that the Government focuses on.

#### **Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Pay and Conditions)**

**James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab):** I have been approached by a number of members of the Fire Brigades Union who are concerned about the breakdown of talks between the FBU and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service on the latest pay and conditions proposal. Due to pressures on the health and social care budget, firefighters have been asked to take on additional duties to deal with trips, slips and falls and medical emergencies. Understandably, they have rejected the latest offer, as it is inadequate to meet their enhanced responsibilities. Firefighters operate in very difficult circumstances and deserve to be treated fairly and properly.

Does the First Minister accept that firefighters are due a fair settlement? Will the Government take action now to ensure that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service returns to the negotiating table immediately to resolve the dispute?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** The transformation plan is not about cuts to services, but about reflecting the modern role of firefighters, who do such an excellent job across our country. Following extensive negotiations between the fire service and the FBU over the past two years, an offer was made in November, which has now been rejected by the FBU.

The pay and conditions of firefighters is a matter between the employer and the FBU. We had hoped that a deal could be reached in Scotland that would have given firefighters a fair pay

award—for which the Scottish Government was going to provide the funding—for broadening their role to enable the service to respond to changing risks and do more to keep communities safe. I should say that Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom that has offered additional funding for expanding the role of firefighters.

I hope that negotiations continue. It is for the fire service to decide how they should continue, but respecting and valuing the role of our firefighters is the absolute priority in all this.

### **Veterans (Mental Health)**

**Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con):** Deaths from suicide have been dubbed the “epidemic of our time” by military officials. Over the past two months, 14 former and serving British military personnel are thought to have taken their own lives. It is likely that many of those individuals suffered from the delayed onset of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Considering those tragic events, the United Kingdom Government has brought forward its plans for a high-intensity mental health programme. Can the First Minister confirm whether there are any plans to provide a similar mental health programme in Scotland to help our veterans with serious service-related illnesses such as PTSD?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I am glad that the UK Government is taking seriously what is, of course, principally its responsibility, given the reserved nature of the issue. The Scottish Government also takes it very seriously. The health—mental and physical—of our veterans is of paramount importance. I have appointed a veterans minister—Graeme Dey has that responsibility—and we have a veterans commissioner. We do a range of work to support our veterans, and that is absolutely right and proper. The work that we do to support veterans in Scotland has been widely commended and praised.

I am very happy to ask Graeme Dey, as the veterans minister, to correspond with or indeed meet the member to discuss what more we can do in Scotland to support our veterans, who absolutely deserve not just our appreciation but our on-going support, and, of course, our encouragement to continue to make a contribution to society after they leave our armed forces.

### **Sex for Rent**

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** Last year, it was reported in the press that adverts explicitly seeking sex for rent were appearing online. As a result of those reports, websites such as Craigslist enhanced the filters that they apply to stop the

practice. However, landlords are still seeking sex for rent through online ads by using euphemistic terms such as “rent for fun”. Living Rent has claimed that 2,000 women are offered rent in exchange for sex every year. I have seen for myself that those adverts deliberately target vulnerable people by claiming—this is the key point—that the arrangement is perfectly suited to students or people who are struggling for money.

Does the First Minister agree that the practice is immoral and that it should be against the law to prey on vulnerable men and women who are struggling for money? If a gap in the law exists, I urge the First Minister to speak to the Lord Advocate to legislate against advertising sex for rent.

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** I believe that adverts of that nature are immoral and I absolutely agree with Pauline McNeill’s sentiments on the issue. Forcing someone, in any way—I stress “in any way”—to participate in sexual activity is a crime already. It is behaviour that is completely unacceptable, deplorable and immoral, and it is also illegal.

Where evidence exists, it is for the police to investigate, and it is for the Crown Office to decide whether to prosecute. I am sure that the Lord Advocate will pay attention to the specific request that Pauline McNeill has made, although whether there needs to be and should be further legislation would be a matter for this Parliament, not the law officers.

We have already taken action that seeks to challenge the practice directly. In 2017, Kevin Stewart wrote to online platforms, including Craigslist and Gumtree, to draw their attention to the unacceptability of the practice. Gumtree responded, but, disappointingly, Craigslist did not, although I understand that it has discontinued its personals section. Either way, it is unacceptable behaviour that needs to be dealt with criminally where appropriate.

All of us should join together to make any company that engages in the practice absolutely aware of how unacceptable the Parliament finds it.

### **Endometriosis (Diagnosis and Treatment)**

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** As the First Minister will know, this is endometriosis awareness week in Scotland.

One in 10 women of child-bearing age suffer from endometriosis, a gynaecological condition that is often painful and debilitating. Astonishingly, 74 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women are unaware of it. On average, it takes 7.5 years for a condition that is often idiosyncratic and distressing to be diagnosed.

There are now three specialist endometriosis centres, in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. What further action can the Scottish Government take to improve the diagnosis and treatment of endometriosis?

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Endometriosis is a debilitating condition, and many women have suffered in silence with it for far too long.

The Scottish Government is committed to making improvements for people who have the condition. We are contributing funding to a number of research programmes to investigate both causation and treatments. Work is also under way to raise awareness, enable quicker diagnosis and improve access to care and support. That includes the work of the three specialist endometriosis centres, which offer multidisciplinary treatment for people with complex endometriosis, as well as the development of expertise in primary care cluster groups and more support for self-management of the condition.

In addition, this year we are developing a women's health plan as part of the programme for government. The plan will set out further actions to address all the health equalities that are faced by women, including those who are living with endometriosis.

### Agricultural Sector

**4. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister how important the Scottish Government considers the agricultural sector is to the country's economy, society and international reputation. (S5F-04025)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Scotland's agricultural sector is hugely important to Scotland—[*Interruption*].

12:37

*Meeting suspended.*

12:38

*On resuming—*

**The Presiding Officer:** First Minister, had you finished that answer?

**The First Minister:** I had not even started it. [*Laughter.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Please continue, First Minister.

**The First Minister:** Scotland's agricultural sector is hugely important to the country as a whole and to our rural economy in particular. Farmed produce makes a significant contribution to our food and drink success story, which

reached record turnover levels in 2018. Farming also helps to shape our landscape, which helps to make Scotland a destination of choice for many international visitors.

**Gillian Martin:** The First Minister will have heard the very worrying comments from a United Kingdom Treasury adviser that the agriculture and fishing sectors are of "low value". The 6,000-plus people who work in those sectors in my area do not consider their work to be of "low value", and those of us who trust the quality of their produce on our supermarket shelves also do not consider our food producers to be of "low value". International markets prize the value of Scotland's food and drink.

Many people in my constituency and the wider Scottish agricultural sector are deeply worried about the messages that are coming from Westminster about their sector. I am sure that the First Minister is concerned about where the UK Government's priorities lie when it negotiates post-Brexit trade deals. Is the First Minister, like me, coming to the conclusion that the UK Government will do nothing to support our food producers and that its Brexit project will yield no benefits for the many farmers and fishermen who have put their trust in the UK Government? What does the First Minister suggest that we do to protect them?

**The First Minister:** This is a really important issue. The comments that were reported in the press were utterly deplorable and are not endorsed by this Government. We highly value our agriculture and fishing sectors. If the comments tell us anything, it is that the promises that were made to farmers and fishermen during the European Union referendum by Tory Brexiteers were empty promises.

By contrast, the Scottish National Party is getting on with delivering benefits for our farmers and crofters. We said that we would get the UK Government to return the convergence funding to Scotland's farmers, which we did, and we said that we would pay the first instalment before the end of March, which we will. This week alone, convergence payments worth £86.2 million were made to more than 17,400 farmers and crofters, which rights a historical wrong.

Unlike the Tories, this Government will deliver on its promises, and we will continue to use our powers to protect the interests of rural Scotland.

### Council Tax Debt

**5. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to Citizens Advice Scotland's statement that council tax is the "number one debt issue" it deals with. (S5F-04011)



**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Our council tax reduction scheme helps people on lower incomes with the costs of council tax, and we have provided more than £1.7 billion in funding for the scheme since it began in 2013. During that time, the number of claims has reduced due to the unemployment rate having halved.

It is worth noting that the average band D council tax rate in Scotland is £499 less than in England, and that working-age households in England have seen council tax support cut by a massive 24 per cent.

I urge anyone who is struggling with debts or meeting their council tax bill to get advice from their local advice agency or use the Citizens Advice Scotland online tool, and to contact their council to see whether they are entitled to a reduction.

**Graham Simpson:** Councils are being forced to increase council tax because of years of underfunding by this Government. *[Interruption.]* They do not like it, Presiding Officer.

**The Presiding Officer:** Let us hear the question, please.

**Graham Simpson:** The Scottish Parliament information centre estimates that the increase in council tax revenue around Scotland will be roughly 21 per cent between 2016-17 and 2020-21, which is a lot.

It is little wonder that we now have people in council tax poverty, yet the number of people using the council tax reduction scheme—*[Interruption.]* I will repeat that, because Scottish National Party members do not want to listen to it. The number of people using the council tax reduction scheme that the First Minister mentioned has fallen since the scheme was introduced in 2013.

Sadly, the First Minister will not agree to stop the council cuts. Will she agree to work with organisations such as Citizens Advice Scotland to promote the council tax reduction scheme and help to lift people out of a sea of debt?

**The First Minister:** Well, well, well. If council budgets are under pressure, it is because of a decade of Tory austerity. I note that local government budgets are under considerably less pressure in Scotland than in England, where the Tories are in government, because of the relative protection that we have been able to provide. This afternoon, we will seek the approval of this Parliament for a budget that delivers a real-terms increase in the funding that is available to our local councils.

Council tax in Scotland was of course frozen under the SNP Government for a decade. Today, as I said, the average band D council tax rate is,

literally, £500 lower in Scotland than in England. We continue to provide support to people on low incomes, which is unlike what happens in England. In January 2019, the Institute for Fiscal Studies commented on localised council tax support schemes in England, where—I remind members—the Conservatives are in government. The IFS said:

“This is the first time since the poll tax that many of the lowest-income households have been required to pay local tax.”

That is shameful, but that is the reality of Tory Government.

By contrast, the SNP Scottish Government keeps council tax bills lower than in England and we provide support to low-income households, which is why most people continue to prefer the SNP over the Conservative Party.

**Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green):** Does the First Minister agree that one of the reasons for the levels of council tax debt is that council tax remains the most regressive tax in the United Kingdom, which contributes to the fact that the poorest 20 per cent of the population pay more as a percentage of their income than the top 20 per cent? Does she agree that the council tax should be scrapped as soon as possible?

**The First Minister:** We have endorsed the commission on local tax reform’s conclusion that the present system should end. We want to see a consensus in Parliament on what could replace the council tax. In order to make progress, we have sought to convene cross-party talks on identifying a replacement that could be supported by Parliament, and that process is on-going. If there is agreement on a replacement for the present council tax—I hope that there will be—we would be prepared to publish legislation by the end of this session of Parliament, with that legislation being taken forward in the next session. I know that the Greens are on board with that and I would encourage other parties to get on board with it as well.

### Scottish Enterprise Grant Funding

6. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister for what reason Scottish Enterprise has suspended new grant funding for business. (S5F-04009)

**The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):** Due to Scottish Enterprise’s success in stimulating a high level of demand for strategic investment, its budget for the current financial year is now fully committed. That actually indicates that Scottish Enterprise has managed its budget well, ensuring that it is maximising spending to support the economy. With anticipated in-year transfers and income, Scottish Enterprise anticipates that its

total budget for 2020-21 will be £340 million, which will be used to support key strategic projects, such as advanced manufacturing and the Michelin Scotland Innovation Parc, to continue to boost vital investment by companies in research and development and to support company growth. Scottish Enterprise will also provide a range of online advice and support to many more companies than at present.

**Jackie Baillie:** I fear that the First Minister has been misinformed, because the 2020-21 budget for Scottish Enterprise has been cut by £42 million, which is a cut of almost 17 per cent in comparison with this year's budget. The consequence is that the budget for grants to businesses next year is already legally committed. There is no new money—nothing at all—for anything new. Given the likely economic impact of Brexit, never mind that of coronavirus, does the First Minister consider that that is a very short-sighted approach? What will she do to provide adequate resources for Scottish Enterprise to support the economy?

**The First Minister:** We are supporting sustainable, inclusive economic growth and we are doing that with a 13.8 per cent increase in overall economic development budgets, which include those for Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, south of Scotland enterprise and, of course, the new Scottish national investment bank. The resource budget for Scottish Enterprise for the year ahead takes account of, among other things, the significant transfer of resources and functions from Scottish Enterprise to the new south of Scotland enterprise and the establishment of the Scottish national investment bank. Capital spend has been maintained to reflect planned activities within its allocation. Scottish Enterprise has a fantastic track record of supporting companies and economic growth, and it will continue to have that good track record well into next year and well beyond.

**The Presiding Officer:** Thank you. That concludes First Minister's question time. We will move shortly to a members' business debate. First, we will have a short suspension to allow members, ministers and those in the public gallery to change seats.

12:48

*Meeting suspended.*

12:54

*On resuming—*

## **Whitburn Academy Be Herd Group**

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani):** The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-20457, in the name of Neil Findlay, on Whitburn academy's be herd group, shattering mental health stigma. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament acknowledges the success of Whitburn Academy's pupil-led Be Herd group, which aims to raise awareness of, and remove, stigma regarding mental health issues; understands that it was launched after the opening of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Hub in the school library, which can be used as a quiet safe place to relax or a place to talk to a mental health ambassador; notes that its work includes presentations at school assemblies, at which pupils, staff and parents can tell their personal stories, support sessions for anyone from the school community affected by mental health problems and events promoting the project; acknowledges that, in September 2019, it was awarded a West Lothian Council Stellar Award, which was followed in October by a COSLA Gold Award for tackling inequalities and improving health; recognises that SAMH has said that 25% of the population will experience a mental health problem; notes the view that it is paramount that early intervention programmes are in place to tackle mental ill health among young people and that schools play a major role in this, and commends the Be Herd group as an excellent initiative by Whitburn Academy's pupils and staff with an ambitious aim to shatter the stigma of mental ill health and offer help and support to their peers and the wider community.

12:55

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** I thank the members who signed the motion, allowing it to be debated, and I welcome the members of Whitburn academy's be herd group to the gallery. They are very welcome.

To put the debate in context, in December, almost 11,000 young people were waiting to start treatment with child and adolescent mental health services. That treatment is supposed to start within 18 weeks of referral, but in the last three months of last year only three national health service boards in Scotland met that standard. My health board, NHS Lothian, saw less than half of young people within the 18-week timeframe, with one in three young people waiting for more than a year. There are now more than 30,000 open cases in the CAMHS system. However, if a child is in mental health crisis they need help now—not in a year, 18 months or even longer.

We hear a lot from the First Minister and others about health services in England and Wales and

elsewhere. I urge people in the chamber to listen to this. In 2016-17, the rate of mental health admissions for young people under the age of 18 was 61 per 100,000 in Scotland, 33 per 100,000 in England and 13 per 100,000 in Wales and the suicide rate for young people aged between 15 and 24 was 15.1 per 100,000 in Scotland, 9.7 per 100,000 in Wales and 8.1 per 100,000 in England.

Those are shocking and completely unacceptable statistics, because delays in diagnosis and treatment can have a devastating impact on young people and their families, which can have a long-term effect well into adulthood and, for some people, for their entire life, with a greater likelihood of unemployment, homelessness, addiction, imprisonment and even early death. That is true particularly in areas where there is widespread material poverty and where the impact of deindustrialisation is still all too evident.

It is those issues and the inadequacy or absence of services that prompted pupils, teachers and families at Whitburn academy to fight back. The pupils and their inspirational teachers, led by Heather Forbes, refused to sit back and accept the status quo. They saw a desperate need and so they established the be herd group—a pupil-led health and wellbeing project. It aims to remove the stigma associated with mental health issues and encourages pupils, staff, parents and members of the wider community to be heard and to talk about their mental health.

The project's mascot, Ellis the Elephant, represents the notion of mental health being the elephant in the room. With £6,000 of funding, the group set up a health and wellbeing hub, which is a quiet and relaxing area where people can go for help, support and information. It established a network of peer supporters called the Elefriends, who listen to worries and concerns and signpost people to help and advice. Whitburn academy has 50 mental health first aiders, more than 20 staff and pupils trained in safe talk suicide prevention techniques and 17 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender plus ambassadors. The group regularly addresses assemblies at which pupils and staff are encouraged to open up and talk. All that is in a bid to destigmatise mental ill health.

I first came across the group at a concert that it held in 2019. It was one of the most moving and powerful events that I have attended in my 17 years as an elected representative. In front of their peers, teachers, support staff, parents and carers, the pupils told their stories and performed music relaying their experience and struggles with anxiety and depression, suicidal thoughts, living with an eating disorder, coping with issues around sexuality and identity, losing a parent or close family friend, or living in a situation where there

may be drug or alcohol dependency or violence. It was moving and hugely inspiring.

Since then, the be herd group has been awarded a Convention of Scottish Local Authorities gold award and a West Lothian Council stellar award. However, more important than all that, the feedback from the school community is very positive, with many people saying that mental health first aid helped them to deal with stress in their lives including at exam time, and 2018-19 saw the school achieve its best ever exam results.

I am in awe of not just the young people and their teachers but the parents and support staff who have shared their problems and helped to build resilience and support. The Scottish Government can learn from the work that is being done at Whitburn academy, and it should refocus its work on prevention, early intervention and promoting wellbeing across Scotland.

A recent freedom of information request by Tes Scotland showed that there was no clear delivery plan for rolling out school-based counselling, so I have an idea for the Government. Why does it not consult the people in the gallery from Whitburn academy and listen to the parents, the carers, the teachers and, most important, the young people who are telling this Parliament loud and clear that the system is failing young people across Scotland and that the services that they need are simply not there? Pointing the finger at integration joint boards, councils, Westminster or anyone else does not help a single child, does not take the pressure off a single family who are at their wits' end and does not address the inadequacy of services now.

The reality is that CAMHS across Scotland are at breaking point. Too often, children and young people are seen only when they are in crisis. The service urgently needs investment to ensure that children and young people are diagnosed and treated quickly, when they need to be. No one should be left to fall through the net but, sadly, we know that all too many are. I am advised that there are only 48 specialist mental health beds across Scotland for under-18s, and that there are none north of Dundee, which is shocking. That leaves children and young people at home when they are at crisis point, and it leaves families struggling to cope. Others are admitted to non-specialist paediatric wards or adult mental health wards, which are completely inappropriate for their needs.

Audit Scotland has said that young people's mental health services are "complex and fragmented" and focused largely on specialist care and responding to crisis, with less action being taken on early intervention and prevention. Its report called for a long-term financial plan; a task force to work alongside COSLA on children and young people's mental health; assurances that

data on mental health services is up to date so that effective scrutiny can be applied; and joined-up working, to ensure that gaps can be filled.

We have all heard glib statements being made—indeed, we have probably made such statements ourselves—about parity of esteem between physical and mental health. It does not exist. The waiting time for a physical ailment is 12 weeks, yet the equivalent period for a mental health issue is 18 weeks. There is no parity of esteem, so let us not pretend that there is.

I note that I have gone over my time. I wanted to mention a number of people—most of all, all the pupils involved and the local agencies that they are involved with—but I do not have time. I will simply congratulate the staff, the pupils, the parents and the members of the wider school community who have worked on the be herd project. I wish them well for the future and urge them to continue to provide support and solidarity to one another and the wider school community. I also make a plea to them to continue campaigning and not to give up, because it is only by putting pressure on decision makers such as those in this Parliament that we will be able to bring about the change that we so desperately need. *[Interruption.]*

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I am going to have a word with everybody in the public gallery. I would prefer it if you did not clap. The reason for that is that, if people clap all the time or if they boo or hiss because they disagree with something, it all becomes a bit silly. Therefore, please do not show any appreciation or otherwise. When we get to the end of the debate, perhaps you will get that opportunity.

13:04

**Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP):** I very much appreciate Neil Findlay securing the debate. Although Whitburn academy is not in the Almond Valley constituency—it is in the constituency of Fiona Hyslop, who is sitting next to the Minister for Mental Health—there are young people from my constituency who attend the school, who are mainly from the villages of Fauldhouse, Longridge and Stoneyburn.

One of the purposes of members' business debates is to recognise, celebrate, and thank those who are doing great things to strengthen the bonds within their communities. In this instance, people are doing that within and beyond the school community. We always need to find space in our busy parliamentary schedules to appreciate those who give freely of their time and talents, often with no fanfare and for no reward, but simply through the desire to make life better or to right a wrong.

I am therefore glad to have the opportunity to place on the record my appreciation of Whitburn academy's be herd group, and everything that it is doing to shatter the myths and stigma around mental ill health. As a former mental health officer, I am well aware of the important links between myth busting and early intervention.

Much has changed since I was at a West Lothian school 30-plus years ago or, indeed, 20-plus years ago when I started my mental health social work career, when mental health issues in young people were either not believed, hidden, or downplayed. Today, although the journey is yet to be complete, we have travelled part of the road, in that mental health issues are treated far more seriously.

It is a good suggestion—I have touched on it with the minister—that public policy and services in Scotland should always be informed first and foremost by those with lived experience. I am sure that, along with Mr Findlay, the constituency MSP would want to encourage direct engagement between the be herd group and the Scottish Government.

We have already heard from Mr Findlay that the be herd group has rightly been recognised with a West Lothian Council stellar award—which is no mean feat, although we have great schools in West Lothian—and it has achieved the COSLA gold award for tackling inequalities and improving health. Many congratulations and well done on that.

What has impressed me about the project is that it is pupil led. The role of mental health ambassadors is important. The work that the project has done in reaching out to primary 7 pupils during their transition times means that it is now a benchmark for other schools in West Lothian and, I hope, elsewhere in Scotland.

As I said, we have good schools in West Lothian. I want to touch on some of the activities in the schools in my constituency. Inveralmond community high school and James Young high school were active during mental health week with time to talk events and workshops on celebrating uniqueness. The counselling service in Inveralmond community high school is well used and appreciated. It is, of course, welcome that funding for school counsellors has increased from £4 million to £16 million, but I refer back to my earlier comments about the development of services having those who use those services at its heart.

I also want to mention the Neil's Hugs Foundation, which is a great local suicide prevention charity led by the marvellous Donna Paterson, who does amazing work with students at West Lothian College. Neil's Hugs also often

visits West Calder high school and St Margaret's academy. My old high school, West Calder, has done interesting work on reaching out to men and boys to offer mental health support.

On the more formal services and mental health support systems, it is fair to say that their journey is yet to be completed to deliver on the ask once, get help principle. We know that there are issues in the Lothians, and NHS Lothian is woefully behind the 18-week CAMHS target at 48 per cent, which is well below the 90 per cent target. Having long waits for CAMHS is unacceptable. I would never demur from the importance of resources and capacity.

Since 2006, spending on CAMHS has increased by 182 per cent, and during the current parliamentary session, £5 billion will be spent on mental health, so the problems seem to be as much about the systems as they are about the resources. We need to get the systems working far better.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I call Jamie Greene. It will have to be a generous four minutes.

13:09

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** You are always generous, Presiding Officer.

I thank Neil Findlay not only for his motion, but for the speech that he delivered. I know that the chamber emptied after the theatre of First Minister's question time, but this is, arguably, the most important debate that we will hear in Parliament this week.

Since being elected to Parliament a few years ago, I have been encouraged by members' approach to the stigma around mental health. There has often been consensus among members on the issue, and the fact that we are having the debate and talking about the issue in the public domain is encouraging.

However, the statistics that Neil Findlay shared with us are far from encouraging. This morning, I learned that 56 per cent of Scots with mental health problems face discrimination not only at work, but from friends and family members. We know that record high numbers of young people in Scotland—11,000—are waiting for CAMHS treatments. That is a shocking statistic. We know that a quarter of Scots do not even feel comfortable talking about mental health. We talk about shattering the stigma and tackling mental health, but we have far more work to do. Angela Constance said that we are still on a journey. I agree, but why is the journey taking so long?

**Neil Findlay:** I raised this point when we debated drugs. When we have consensus, it feels all fuzzy and warm. When we all agree, it is very

nice, but there are some things on which we need to break the consensus and have a right old argument. Pressure is what will make things change. A cosy consensus on such issues is what I believe has got us to a state of complacency. As Angela Constance mentioned, only 48 per cent of young people are being treated.

**Jamie Greene:** I agree. Please let me finish my speech, because there is nothing cosy about what I will say in the next couple of minutes.

I pay tribute to the work that Whitburn academy is doing with the be herd project. The forum that has been created allows people to share their personal stories of what is affecting them—stories of what is going on at home, including domestic abuse, alcohol or drug abuse, anxiety, illness and even bereavement or loss of a parent. As an only child who grew up in a household that had its fair share of some of those issues, I know only too well what it feels like to have to deal alone with one's domestic situation. There was nothing like be herd when I was at school.

No young person should have to deal with those issues, so it brings utter shame on us as politicians and as a Parliament that there are still young people who rely on projects such as be herd. Top-down action from the Government is welcome; I will be pleased to hear what the Government has to say. I am sure that we will hear some positive numbers and big figures in relation to the money that is going in at the top, but it seems to me that some of the work should be done at the grass roots.

The be herd project is a perfect example of the bottom-up and community-led efforts that will tackle mental health issues. We could establish more such pupil and school-led environments. We should have a proper look at the role that schools play in tackling mental health issues in young people, because I know that those projects make a difference. I am sure that the people in the gallery are testament to that.

Last night, I chaired a meeting of the LGBTI+ cross-party group, which Mary Fee was also at. We discussed the mental health of young people a lot. At the meeting, I was presented with statistics on young LGBT people in Scotland who have thought about suicide; a third of them have actually tried to kill themselves. As things stand, two lives in Scotland are claimed by suicide every day. That is two lives too many.

Children's mental health waiting times have doubled since 2017—there is nothing cosy about that statistic. We know that women remain significantly more likely to develop mental health problems, and that there is a higher prevalence of suicide among young men. Staggeringly, more

than five children every day phone suicide hotlines—five young people in our country.

Yes—let us celebrate initiatives and good work, and let us celebrate and welcome the work of the teachers, pupils and staff of the schools that come to Parliament. For Neil Findlay, I say that the “fuzzy” thing of which he spoke is a good thing. However, the issue is the saddest that we have to face.

I commend Whitburn academy for its work. We could see more such work, but what we really need to hear in the next few minutes is what the Government has to say about those sad and shocking statistics.

13:15

**Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab):** I, too, thank Neil Findlay for lodging the motion and securing the support to debate an important topic. The success of Whitburn academy’s be herd group has rightly been recognised in Parliament, and by awards that the group has won from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and West Lothian Council. The young people who are behind the campaign to raise awareness and remove the stigma around mental health should be very proud of themselves for their success, and for developing a crucial initiative to support their peers and their classmates. I am particularly pleased to see them in the gallery.

Mental health has rightly become a more mainstream health and social issue. We need more initiatives like the be herd group in order that we can tackle the stigma around mental health. Peer support is a key factor in supporting good mental health in schools, because many young people feel that they cannot speak freely or openly with professionals or adults.

We know that there are significant problems with mental health support from the NHS. Recent figures show that more than 5,000 children and young people waited more than 18 weeks for mental health support. That is simply unacceptable. The statistics are shocking, so action needs to be taken now. Neil Findlay is right to say that we need to stop talking and do something—and we need to do it now.

Statutory services including the NHS and the whole education system must make an effort to improve the mental health of children and young people. It cannot be left to children and young people, as well as the third sector, to fill the gaps when public services fail. Such initiatives and organisations should supplement, not replace, statutory services. As admirable as the be herd group is, it should not be left to young people to take the lead on supporting each other’s mental health.

Research suggests that one in four adults suffers from poor mental health at some point in their life. Improving mental health services for children and young people is preventative spend for the future, just as it is a current priority for children and young people today. I hope that we can, by supporting and encouraging more children and young people, along with better provision of mental health support through schools and the NHS, tackle the pressures that many face. I also hope that more schools can follow the lead of Whitburn academy and encourage pupils to take the lead on peer support of the kind that is provided by the be herd group.

I thank Neil Findlay once again for securing the debate, and I congratulate all the staff and pupils of Whitburn academy on their award-winning success and the fantastic work that they do in breaking down the barriers and stigma of mental health.

13:18

**The Minister for Mental Health (Clare Haughey):** I am pleased to respond to the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government. It is imperative that we have such conversations and that we aim to break down the stigma associated with mental health. That is why debates like this one are important.

I want to thank a few people for bringing the debate to the chamber. First, I thank Neil Findlay for lodging the motion and for his continuing support for the be herd initiative. Schools across the country are doing fantastic work to support our young people’s mental health and tackle the issue of stigma. I thank Mr Findlay for bringing the be herd group to my attention. I was particularly pleased to be able to speak with Fiona Hyslop, whose constituency Whitburn academy is in, and to hear how impressed she has been by the work that is being done there.

Secondly, I thank and praise the pupils and teachers of Whitburn academy who are involved in the be herd group. It has been inspiring to hear how they have changed the culture of the school, so that pupils, staff, parents and the wider community can access support and a safe space in the school in which to talk. I was impressed when I heard about the recognition that the initiative recently received through both a West Lothian Council stellar award and a COSLA gold award for tackling inequalities and improving health.

Supporting good mental health is a priority for the Government. Mental ill health is a significant challenge that requires us to respond in an ambitious and systematic manner. Breaking down barriers to enable our young people to access

appropriate services is crucial, along with removal of the stigma that is associated with mental health. That is why we are taking forward approaches that focus on prevention, early intervention and clinical services. We know that young people often face barriers in reaching out for mental health support, and initiatives such as Whitburn academy's be herd group are helping to reduce the stigma that surrounds mental ill health. Breaking down stigma and discrimination is essential if our policy ambitions in the mental health strategy, the national suicide prevention action plan and the programme for government are to be achieved.

As stigma reduces, more children and young people are feeling comfortable in coming forward for mental health treatment, which shows that attitudes towards stigma are decreasing.

**Neil Findlay:** I do not disagree with anything that the minister has said. However, that is part of the issue. We see more young people and their families coming forward, but, in Lothian, a third are waiting more than a year. That is the nub of the issue. Yes, people are coming forward, but the treatment and the services are simply not there.

**Clare Haughey:** Further on in my speech, I will speak about the actions that we are taking as a Government—and that I am taking as a minister—in conjunction with other agencies and with input from children and young people and their families, which is key to ensuring that those services deliver for them.

We want to make sure that anyone who needs help can access services that are appropriate to their needs. Therefore, we are making significant changes to meet the increasing demand for services and to ensure that everyone gets the right treatment at the right time and in the right place. In 2019, 21 per cent more patients were seen than in 2013. It is really positive to see more young people coming forward for help, but increasing demand puts pressure on services. Therefore, we are rolling out a package of measures to support positive mental health for all and workforce development, as well as to improve access to the high-quality services in CAMHS and psychological therapies.

We all agree that long waits for mental health treatment are unacceptable. That is why, in this year's programme for government, we set out plans to work with NHS boards to improve their performance against waiting times and to reduce long waits. Boards will develop trajectories that will be set out in their annual operating plans, ensuring that performance is tied to funding.

**Jamie Greene:** Will the minister take an intervention?

**Clare Haughey:** I will in a second.

My officials are already in regular contact with boards to support them to produce local improvement plans and robust trajectories that are based on detailed modelling of capacity and demand. The audit of rejected referrals that was published in 2018—which Mr Findlay referenced—contained a range of recommendations to improve the effectiveness of CAMHS, and we accepted all 29 of those recommendations.

As a direct result of the audit's findings, we announced the establishment of the children and young people's mental health task force, which produced its final recommendations on improving CAMHS in July last year. The children and young people's mental health and wellbeing programme board is currently considering the delivery of those recommendations through nine key deliverables, which include the development of a CAMHS service specification, which was published last month.

**Jamie Greene:** Some young people are waiting a year, which is surely unacceptable to all of us, including—I appreciate it—the minister. If NHS boards are not delivering, why has nobody in the chamber yet answered the question of why people are waiting so long? Is it a lack of resource, is it a lack of people, or is it a lack of trained nurses? What are we doing to get under the skin of the problem? Why are the waiting times so long, and what will the Government do with those NHS boards that have the longest waiting times? How will we get those down promptly?

**Clare Haughey:** The member raises a valid point. As the Minister for Mental Health, I want to understand exactly why some boards are underperforming whereas others can meet their waiting time targets and provide services more timeously.

We have committed to developing a community mental wellbeing service for five to 24-year-olds that will offer immediate access to counselling, self-care advice and family and peer support. That will ensure that support is available more quickly and, where possible, will prevent issues that require specialist services. The service will also help to reduce demand and will allow young people and families who need specialist services to receive them more quickly.

I hope that that reassures members that we are continually increasing our investment in CAMHS. In fact, the overall spend on CAMHS in Scotland has increased year on year since 2011 and has increased by 182.7 per cent since 2006. We have come a long way since the 2018 Audit Scotland report on the issue. As colleagues are aware, in our most recent programme for government, we announced a package of measures to strengthen support for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

**Neil Findlay:** Again, that goes right to the heart of the issue. If we are increasing funding but a growing number of people are not being treated, there is a fundamental problem, which might be because of the problems that Angela Constance referred to. If we continue to put money in, as the Government claims that it is doing, but the results are worse, we have a major problem.

**Clare Haughey:** As I said, there is increasing demand for CAMHS year on year, which is why we are developing early intervention and medium-term care packages and options to enable people to access services that are of lower intensity than CAMHS and that are probably much more appropriate for those individuals.

Provision of access to a counsellor is one part of the support that we are putting in place. Through our investment in pupil equity funding and Scottish attainment challenge funding, local authorities and schools are putting in place wider mental health supports that promote positive and nurturing learning environments. We are also commencing work to design and develop a new mental health training resource for all school staff, which will provide our valued school practitioners with the skills and confidence that are required to support and assist young people.

We recognise that schools play an integral part in supporting young people's mental health, but schools cannot do it alone. It is important that all professionals who are involved in a young person's life are able to support and promote positive mental health, to be connected and to collaboratively engage to ensure that the best possible outcomes for children and young people are achieved. That is why we are taking forward essential and crucial work to strengthen wider community services.

I am determined that on-going dialogue with young people will be at the heart of how we develop our policy on mental health. We must provide young people with opportunities to get their views across directly to the Government. We must also work hard to remove stigma. I am committed to acting on what I hear and to providing the advice and support that young people feel they need. The process is on-going, and the partnership working to develop the be herd initiative at Whitburn academy is an important part of it.

I thank all members who have spoken in the debate, and I again thank Neil Findlay for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

13:28

*Meeting suspended.*

14:30

*On resuming—*

## Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Question Time

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame):** Good afternoon. The first item of business is questions to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. Questions 2 and 5 are grouped together, as are questions 3, 9, 10 and 11.

### The Big Lunch

1. **Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what its position is on facilitating the Eden project initiative, the big lunch, in June 2020 to bring people who work at the Parliament together and help strengthen the sense of community. (S5O-04233)

**Ruth Davidson (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body):** The big lunch looks like a really worthwhile event, with a strong message of community engagement. I know that all members and the SPCB would want to be supportive of such an initiative. As the member will be aware, in recent years, we have supported a similar event, the great get together, which is a project that was initiated by the Jo Cox Foundation. As such, I suggest that the Eden project make contact with the Scottish Parliament's events and exhibitions team to discuss the event in more detail, so that it can be considered along with other events, such as the great get together.

**Jeremy Balfour:** I thank the member for that positive answer. Would the SPCB also consider other community initiatives on the back of the big lunch, such as regular exercises or healthy workshops to give all MSPs and parliamentary staff the opportunity to socialise and improve their mental and physical health and wellbeing during work break times?

**Ruth Davidson:** Those are exactly the sort of positive suggestions that the SPCB would consider in the future. Our events team is designed to help members and outside organisations to facilitate such events.

**Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con):** Given the current situation around the coronavirus and in the context of the question on the Eden project initiative and the promotion of other large gatherings of people, what immediate and practical steps will be taken to safeguard building users, such as the disabling of the fingerprint entry system? What further steps will be taken should the virus move beyond the containment phase?



**Ruth Davidson:** Officials have been monitoring the spread of coronavirus over recent weeks and recognise that if the number of cases increases, it may have significant impact on us all, whether we work at Holyrood or in a local office or are a visitor to the Scottish Parliament. At our meeting this morning, the corporate body discussed our approach to pandemic planning and considered the options open to us in limiting exposure to the virus. The corporate body is mindful of its duties and responsibilities, including those under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974, to its employees and those who work at the Parliament.

At present, our focus is on promoting hand and respiratory hygiene as the main measures in preventing the spread of the virus. Hand sanitiser dispensers have now been placed around the building to help with that.

On the two-factor identification system, while we take steps to mitigate the impact of the coronavirus, it is important that we remain vigilant and do not introduce vulnerabilities into our agreed approach to security. The readers used at the entrances carry no more risk of cross-contamination than a door handle, so two-factor identification will not be suspended. For those with concerns about cross-contamination, hand sanitiser is available at each of the main entrances.

On large gatherings, other legislatures, such as the European Parliament, have chosen to stop their engagement activities and, to limit exposure to those who normally work at Holyrood, we may choose to do the same, should circumstances warrant that. The corporate body recognises that that would be done only in the most extreme circumstances and would be informed by advice from officials such as the chief medical officer.

**Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab):** Could the SPCB publish guidance on, and could more attention be paid to, fighting the spread of infection, for example by putting paper towels back into toilets, replenishing soaps quickly, supplying wipes for keyboards and situating hand gels at the public entrance and the entrance to the MSP block? I also ask the SPCB to look again at the fingerprint entry system in the context of infection.

**Ruth Davidson:** I reassure the member that the SPCB will continue to monitor the situation in accordance with our teams and engagement activity with other official bodies, including other UK legislatures and the Scottish Government resilience room.

We have already communicated with members and others on the outbreak and we will continue to do so regularly as the situation develops.

Officials are creating a frequently asked questions sheet on how public health advice can

be followed. The aim is for that advice to be as applicable to members and their staff as it is to staff and contractors at Holyrood. We recognise that mitigation steps may need to be increased in future as risks change or emerge. If required, we will take steps that are in line with the advice from public health agencies.

On the specific issues of hand sanitiser at the public entrance, replacing paper towels and so on, we had a discussion this morning about the work that cleaning crews do and how we can increase what they do as the situation merits it. We will continue to take advice on that from public health bodies.

### International Cyberattacks

**2. Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what assessment has been made of the level of threat to information technology systems from international cyberattacks. (S5O-04192)

**David Stewart (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body):** The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body fully recognises that the importance of cyberresilience for all organisations has never been greater. Digital technologies are vital to the successful operation of all modern organisations, and the corporate body has put in place a variety of tools, technologies and procedures to protect the Parliament from a successful attack.

The effectiveness of our critical cybersecurity controls is regularly and independently assessed. That has earned the Scottish Parliament a cyber essentials plus certification, which is revalidated annually.

In addition to the technical measures and controls that are in place, the Scottish Parliament is a member of the cybersecurity information sharing partnership and is in regular contact with the national cyber security centre and other bodies that provide advice on the current threat landscape and on cybersecurity best practice.

**Mary Fee:** How does the corporate body stay apprised of current cybersecurity developments?

**David Stewart:** The SPCB does that by working with the NCSC and the Scottish Government. We update our technical safeguards regularly while balancing security with ease of use. As I mentioned, the SPCB has recently undertaken an independent assessment of critical cybersecurity controls, which has led to the award of cyber essentials plus certification once again.

### International Cyberattacks

**5. James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what

recent evidence has been received that its information technology systems have been subject to cyberattacks from international sources. (S5O-04194)

**David Stewart (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body):** The SPCB has monitoring systems that are designed to provide early warning of cyberattacks and their origins. Although significant targeted cyberattacks against the Scottish Parliament are relatively rare, we encounter periodic smaller-scale attacks. So far, no attacks are known have been successful.

The distributed nature of the internet means that it is not always possible to attribute attacks to particular nation states, but the origin of some of the attacks is known to be outside the United Kingdom. As network users, we all share a responsibility to protect the security and cybersecurity of the Scottish Parliament.

**James Kelly:** Is the SPCB security budget adequate to protect our systems from those attacks, and has it been increased to ensure that we keep up to date with developments in information technology security?

**David Stewart:** I acknowledge James Kelly's expertise in this area. The corporate body ensures that the level of protection that is offered to our systems meets or exceeds the baseline standards that are outlined in the public sector action plan on cyberresilience. That action plan was developed by the national cyberresilience leaders board and the national cyber security centre. It aims to ensure that Scotland's public bodies have a common baseline of cyberresilience practice in place, and budgets will follow that. Or efforts in this area are independently assessed by the cyber essentials plus certification process.

The corporate body also recognises that cybersecurity measures must continue to evolve as new threats emerge. There are organisational procedures in place to ensure that we are kept aware of emerging threats and that we continue to update our systems while balancing the security of those systems with the flexibility that allows members and their staff to work at any time from anywhere.

If members such as James Kelly have any specific concerns—including about the budget—I am very happy for our cybersecurity expert to meet him for a more in-depth discussion.

### **MSP Staff Cost Provision**

3. **Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body when it will make a decision regarding the level of members of the Scottish Parliament allowances for staff for 2020-21. (S5O-04190)

**Liam McArthur (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body):** With your indulgence, Presiding Officer, I will take a little time to respond to Mr Neil's question in the hope of helping to answer questions that other members have lodged.

The corporate body met this morning, as planned. Among other issues, we discussed the annual uprating of the staff cost provision. I can announce that, with effect from 1 April, the provision will be uprated by 2.96 per cent.

There is an important distinction between MSPs and the SPCB when it comes to employment matters. It is the corporate body's responsibility, under the terms of the members' expenses scheme, to uprate the staff cost provision, which members then use to employ and pay their staff. The SPCB is not the employer in this relationship and it is for individual MSPs to budget for their staff salaries and the cost-of-living award.

The SPCB must uprate the scheme by 1 April each year, having regard to such indices as it considers appropriate. Members will be aware that we have previously used ASHE—the annual survey of hours and earnings—which is retrospectively based on the pay of public sector workers in Scotland. However, members might also be aware that that annual index is currently 1.4 per cent, which is below the current rate of inflation and what we might expect by way of growth for public sector wages in Scotland.

This morning, we agreed that a more appropriate mechanism for the coming year and future years would be to use the average of ASHE and the average weekly earnings index. Both of those indices are wage related and, taken together, will better reflect wider pay conditions in the public sector. The corporate body agreed that that combined use of indices, which results in a 2.96 per cent uplift to the staff cost provision, was fair and affordable.

I would like to move on the wider issue of the overall staff cost provision. The corporate body noted with interest the increase announced yesterday by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to the staff cost provision for members of the House of Commons, which is uplifting it by £21,000 per member. At the start of this session, the SPCB increased the overall staff cost provision by £30,000 per member, in recognition of the increased powers of this Parliament.

As members will be aware, as a matter of good practice, the corporate body has been reviewing the provisions in the current members' expenses scheme ahead of the next session. As part of that review, the SPCB has committed to reviewing the overall staff cost provision. It will do so in the

current session, with a view to implementing any changes at the start of session 6.

I apologise for that slightly more involved response, but I hope that the additional detail and content have been helpful to both Mr Neil and other colleagues who, understandably, have an interest in the issue.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I hope that we can have short supplementary questions after that full statement.

**Alex Neil:** I draw the corporate body's attention to the fact that our staff are the worst-paid staff and our staff allowances are the worst of any Parliament in the United Kingdom. The 13.9 per cent increase at Westminster now means that there is a huge differential between what MPs get and what MSPs get. We owe it to our staff to look after them and make sure that they get fair treatment.

The Westminster rise is based on what other people get in similar jobs throughout the UK. I ask the corporate body to fundamentally review the situation, because it is unacceptable that our staff continue to be so badly paid compared to other staff who are doing equivalent jobs in the rest of the country.

**Liam McArthur:** I thank Mr Neil for his supplementary question, and I would not distance myself at all from the sentiment that he expresses. That is why, at the start of this session, there was an attempt to uplift the amount that is available through the staff cost provision to reflect the additional workload for members and their staff. We are going through the process that I outlined, with a view to putting in place, at the start of session 6, a system that should reflect that additional workload and the expectations that, as Mr Neil rightly said, we place on our staff. We owe them a duty of care in that regard.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** I associate myself with Alex Neil's remarks and say that I am delighted that the corporate body has recognised the unfairness of differential pay rises for staff in the Parliament this year. I welcome the pay uprating of 2.96 per cent.

I also thank the GMB for its intervention—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** No—I am afraid that you have to ask a question.

**Jackie Baillie:** I am just about to.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** No, you should be asking the question—

**Jackie Baillie:** In terms of the future review, will the corporate body—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** No—the question that is on the paper, please.

**Jackie Baillie:** Oh. I thought that you were dispensing with that when you grouped them.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** No.

**Jackie Baillie:** Oh, fine. Okay.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That is a chatty way to address the issue, and I do not know if I quite approve of it. Ms Baillie, start again. We will wipe the slate clean. Begin.

### MSP Staff Cost Provision

9. **Jackie Baillie:** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body whether it will uprate members' staff cost provision in line with the Scottish Government uprating of 3 per cent. (S5O-04232)

**Liam McArthur (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body):** I cannot add much to what I have already said.

**Jackie Baillie:** I was simply trying to save you time, Presiding Officer.

I thank the GMB union for its intervention.

In its future review, will the corporate body ensure that there is a comparison with the Welsh Assembly, where there is a larger budget for staff despite its having fewer pounds?

**Liam McArthur:** In response to the point that Alex Neil and Jackie Baillie have made, I can say that comparisons with other legislatures inform the discussions that the corporate body has and the decisions that we make. Across the expenses scheme, there are differences between the arrangements that the Welsh Assembly has and what we have here, in the Scottish Parliament. However, such comparisons will feature prominently in the deliberations that we have in the run-up to the start of the next parliamentary session.

### MSP Staff Cost Provision

10. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what steps it is taking to ensure that members can appropriately remunerate their staff. (S5O-04231)

**Liam McArthur (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body):** Again, I say that I am not sure that I can add much to my earlier response.

**Bob Doris:** I want to put on the record that I will have to restructure my office and lose head count—that means a member of staff—if I am to pay my staff the appropriate amount that they deserve. Given that, will the SPCB consider a step change, and substantially increase MSP staffing

budgets, perhaps in line with Westminster, before it decides on any future annual increases?

**Liam McArthur:** As I said, the corporate body has a responsibility to uprate the staff and office cost provision in line with indices. It is for individual members to make decisions about employment of staff and the terms that they are on. I encourage Bob Doris to engage in discussions with human resources colleagues on the specific circumstances in his office. They may be able to help him.

#### MSP Staff Cost Provision

11. **Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what discussions it has had regarding the increase in the MSP staffing budget. (S5O-04189)

**Liam McArthur (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body):** Again, I say that I do not have anything to add to my initial response.

**Daniel Johnson:** I associate myself with the comments that my colleagues have made.

The 2.96 per cent increase is welcome. However, the means by which we have arrived at it are not. The voice of trade unions is distinctly lacking, as are the voices of MSP staff. Will the corporate body look at having better union and staff representation in future talks and examinations of pay structures?

**Liam McArthur:** As I said, the SPCB is responsible for uprating staff cost provision in line with indices. We have described the process that we went through in setting the annual survey of hours and earnings as an index: we have moved to using ASHE and the average weekly earnings index. A basket of indices is the measure by which future staff cost provision will be uprated. It is for individual members of the Scottish Parliament to make their own arrangements for employment of staff.

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I echo the general sentiment in the chamber.

I am also concerned that over the coming weeks and months, many MSP staff might have to take sickness leave or be in isolation. Can the corporate body assure us that staff cost provision will be flexible enough to ensure that none of us is in a position in which our staff have to lose pay, or our offices cease to function, and will the same principle apply to corporate body staff and contractor staff?

**Liam McArthur:** I thank Patrick Harvie for raising that issue, which came up during this morning's discussions. I assure him that that is part of the live consideration of an evolving situation. We are very cognisant of the fact that

members, through their staffing arrangements, and other building users, might be affected over the coming weeks and months. We need to be responsive to that, so we will be.

#### MSP Staff (Equality Monitoring)

4. **Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body what equality monitoring of staff employed by members of the Scottish Parliament it undertakes, and what steps it is taking to address any underrepresentation from any section of society. (S5O-04195)

**Ruth Davidson (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body):** The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body does not undertake equality monitoring on behalf of members. As each member is an employer in their own right, the responsibility lies with them to gather data on equalities information on their staff. However, the SPCB provides advice and guidance to members to assist them to monitor the diversity of staff in their offices.

All staff have the option to add their personal equalities information to the electronic human resources system, which is the same management information system that is used for holding payslips and other personal data. If they request it, members can access that information through the human resources office, which can provide a breakdown of the information. That could help members to review diversity in their offices, if there are any barriers for staff or if any groups are underrepresented.

**Elaine Smith:** MSP staff, especially those who work in local offices, are ambassadors for the Parliament and are, in many cases, the only point of contact with the Parliament that some members of the public have. It is therefore vital that MSP staff are representative of the public whom we seek to serve. For that to happen, a targeted recruitment and delivery plan, similar to the SPCB's 2020-21 plan, is required. Will the SPCB look further into that issue, and publicise the fact that it gives advice and guidance on the monitoring of, and on good practice in, equality issues?

**Ruth Davidson:** It is important not only that such advice and guidance exists, but that members know about it. It is also important to say that the HR office is available to provide support and guidance to members on promoting best practice and being an inclusive employer. It can provide advice and assistance to members on recruitment of staff, including drafting job descriptions and vacancy adverts, and placing recruitment adverts appropriately in order to attract candidates from diverse backgrounds.

A range of factsheets and guidance is available to members on their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. I am aware that they have not been updated for some time; they are currently under review.

I take on board Elaine Smith's point that there is work to do, and I hope that that work is being carried out.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes SPCB question time. I apologise to the four members whose questions were not answered. I think that they will understand why we had an extensive list of questions on certain items.

## Portfolio Question Time

14:52

### Finance

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame):** Question 1 has been withdrawn.

### Landfill Tax

**2. Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it is giving to varying landfill tax rates and bands during the extended period before a biodegradable municipal waste to landfill ban. (S5O-04213)

**The Minister for Public Finance and Migration (Ben Macpherson):** Rates and bands for the Scottish landfill tax are intended to support a more circular economy and the delivery of our ambitious targets to reduce waste, increase recycling and cut the amount of waste that goes to landfill.

As confirmed in the Scottish budget, work is under way to explore the role that the Scottish landfill tax could play in encouraging a further shift away from the landfilling of biodegradable municipal waste. A further announcement will be made when that work is complete.

**Maurice Golden:** Will the minister confirm that this Government's woeful record of failure in meeting waste targets, leading to artificially high landfill tax revenues, is more a muddle than a fiddle?

**Ben Macpherson:** As I said, work is under way to explore further changes to the landfill tax. However, in general, we expect local authorities to discharge their statutory obligations using their existing funding. In the case of the transition to the ban on biodegradable municipal waste going to landfill, there are no plans to review or change the arrangements.

As I said in my answer to Maurice Golden's first question, a further announcement will be made regarding our exploration of the role that the Scottish landfill tax could play in encouraging a further shift away from the landfilling of biodegradable municipal waste.

**Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** Landfill tax is one of the many important tools that can be used to incentivise a reduction in waste. Will the minister outline additional measures in the Scottish budget that will support a reduction in waste and an increase in recycling?

**Ben Macpherson:** As part of our response to the global climate emergency, the Scottish budget will continue to support the transition to a circular

economy, as I have said, in cutting waste and carbon emissions, and opening up economic opportunities. That includes the development of a deposit return scheme for single-use drinks containers, which will reduce litter and make high-quality recycled materials available to the Scottish economy, as well as activity to support innovation in reducing waste and developing the circular economy through the circular economy investment fund. We are also committed to introducing a circular economy bill during this parliamentary session.

### **Budget 2020-21 (Scotland Reserve)**

#### **3. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands)**

**(Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to utilise the Scotland reserve in its 2020-21 budget. (S5O-04214)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** For 2020-21, we anticipate utilising £168 million in total from the Scotland reserve, which comprises £30 million of resource, £5 million of capital and £32 million of financial transactions from the existing reserve balance; and £101 million of resource underspend from 2019-20. That total compares with the £143 million originally stated in the “Scottish Budget: 2020-21” document, with the change due to an additional £25 million resource underspend this year, following updated forecasts. Therefore, there is no change to the forecast balance at the end of 2020-21.

**Donald Cameron:** In this week’s meeting of the Finance and Constitution Committee, the cabinet secretary said that

“we should add to the reserve in order to increase the Government’s ability to manage the inherent volatility under the fiscal framework.”—[*Official Report, Finance and Constitution Committee*, 4 March 2020; c 15.]

Given that the Scottish Government faces a black hole of over £500 million in next year’s budget, how does she intend to build up the Scotland reserve further?

**Kate Forbes:** As the member will know, every financial year since 2017-18, the resource, capital and financial transactions underspends have been deposited in the reserve and it is quite right that we build up the reserve. However, the fact of the matter is that the fiscal framework is insufficient to allow the Scottish Government to manage the volatility and the uncertainty that is inherent in our financial position in terms of meeting some of the forecast error challenges that, it is worth remembering, are about Westminster clawing back resource because of forecast error.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** After the delay to this year’s United Kingdom budget, it is clear that more flexibility is

needed in setting Scotland’s budget. Can the cabinet secretary please advise the chamber what engagement the Scottish Government has had with the UK Government regarding increasing the limits on borrowing and Scotland’s reserve powers, given the likely post-Brexit economic turbulence that we will face in coming years?

**Kate Forbes:** The member is quite right to highlight that. We have been seeking immediate changes to our borrowing and reserve limits, given the volatility inherent in the fiscal framework. My predecessor wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in September 2019 requesting an increase to those limits, but we have yet to receive a formal response to that request. However, we continue to discuss the matter at ministerial level and, as recently as last week, I raised the matter in an introductory call with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and I will follow that up in our bilateral meeting.

### **United Kingdom Budget**

**4. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** At the risk of reiterating things: to ask what engagement the Scottish Government has had with Treasury ministers regarding the impact of the United Kingdom budget on Scotland’s finances. (S5O-04215)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** My predecessor and I have engaged with Treasury ministers on numerous occasions to highlight the challenges caused by a late UK budget—challenges that were recognised on a cross-party basis. Despite that, the UK budget will not take place until 11 March, and I have received no indication of its likely content. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury has agreed to attend a meeting of finance ministers from the UK Government and the devolved Administrations on 10 March but has noted that the information that he can share on the UK budget will be constrained by market sensitivities.

**Bill Kidd:** With Barnett consequentials having to be estimated on commitments made during the 2019 general election, does the cabinet secretary agree that the unnecessary delay has shown a complete disregard for Scotland’s budget process?

**Kate Forbes:** Indeed, I do. It is not just a complete disregard for this Government but a complete disregard for Scottish communities and businesses that rely on the certainty that comes with the information in the budget. In order to combat that, we have presented the budget on the basis of the best available information, including provisional block grant adjustments and the Conservative Party manifesto from last year. However, that increases the financial risk around the budget and the risk of larger fiscal framework

reconciliations in later years. The lack of engagement by the UK Government demonstrates a complete disregard for devolution and the interests of Scottish communities.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** If there are additional consequential from the UK budget, will the cabinet secretary speak to and consult other parties, and, indeed, the whole Parliament, before bringing back spending proposals to the chamber?

**Kate Forbes:** The member will know that any in-year budget changes are taken through the Finance and Constitution Committee; there is scrutiny in that process. There are also autumn and spring budget revisions. Subject to the level of difference between our estimates and what is in the UK Government budget, which will be announced next week, we intend to honour that process, as we have done every year.

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** Has the new chancellor given the Scottish Government any indication that the UK Government's cart-before-the-horse approach will not be taken again in subsequent years? Does the cabinet secretary think that there is an understanding at an official level in Whitehall of the catastrophically chaotic impact of the delay that the UK Government has imposed on us this year?

**Kate Forbes:** I am not particularly optimistic that that has been recognised. At the quadrilateral meeting next week, I, along with ministers from the other devolved Governments, intend to make the case about how much volatility and uncertainty the delayed UK Government budget has introduced. This is about taxpayers, our committees and our public services, which rely on the certainty that comes through the budget.

On engagements between Treasury officials and our officials, we have repeatedly been referred to the Conservative Party manifesto for the best available estimates of what we should include in relation to consequential, which is no way to set a budget.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Question 5 was not lodged.

### East Lothian Council Revenue Allocation

6. **Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government for what reason East Lothian Council's provisional revenue allocation per head is the fourth lowest in Scotland. (S5O-04217)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** The local government finance settlement is distributed in full using a needs-based formula. That is discussed and agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. All local authorities, including East Lothian, receive their formula share

of the total funding available. In 2020-21, East Lothian Council will receive an above-average increase in support for revenue services of 6.5 per cent, or £11.5 million.

The Scottish Government is always open to suggestions to improve the funding formula, and should the member, or the council, wish to propose a change to the current formula, that would need to be raised with and through COSLA in the first instance.

**Iain Gray:** I understand that there is a formula, but the problem is that it is not working for East Lothian. Not enough account is being taken of East Lothian's almost unique rate of population growth. That growth is being fuelled by the building of more than 10,000 houses, which are required of the council's local development plan by the Scottish Government. Will the Scottish Government not find some way to reflect that, so that the council can fund the infrastructure that is needed for that expansion, which is demanded by the Scottish ministers?

**Kate Forbes:** Of course, we are supporting population growth through a range of measures, including our ambitious affordable housing building programme, for which £843 million will be included in this year's budget.

I repeat the point that, if the member considers that there should be a change in the methodology, that would have to be agreed with all 32 local authorities. All would have a case to make on their own unique circumstances. Therefore, the matter should be raised with and through COSLA. If the member does that, I would be happy to speak to COSLA.

### Local Authority Funding

7. **Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what strategy it has to ensure that local authorities are sufficiently funded. (S5O-04218)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** The Scottish Government works in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on behalf of all 32 local authorities to negotiate a financial settlement that ensures that local authorities can continue to provide the high-quality front-line services that the people of Scotland expect and deserve.

As I confirmed at stage 1 of the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill, the Scottish Government is providing local government with a substantial funding package worth £11.4 billion in total, which includes an increase to support for spending on core revenue services of £589 million, or 5.8 per cent, in 2020-21.

**Michelle Ballantyne:** Figures released by the Scottish Government last week show that local authority debt has risen by nearly 15 per cent in just five years. It now sits at more than £18 billion, while Scottish councils run a deficit of £53 million, prompting COSLA to call for more funding in this year's budget.

The amount of money pledged by the Scottish Government to councils this year is £6 billion less than their debt alone. When central funding is so low, how does the Government propose to help councils to conclude that without relying on additional council tax increases?

**Kate Forbes:** The fastest way to end austerity is to ensure that it is ended at source. That means ending Tory austerity. Chancellors have promised an end to austerity in 2018 and in 2019 and failed to deliver. We will wait and see what happens next week.

In terms of how local authorities use their resources, our policy is to ensure that local authority spending allows them the financial freedom to operate independently. They must use their resources as efficiently as possible and deliver services effectively to ensure that taxpayers get the best possible value. In this year's budget settlement, we are ensuring that local authorities receive a total funding package of £11.4 billion to do that.

**Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** Scotland's annual budget has fallen in real terms by 2.8 per cent over the past decade. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, when it comes to ensuring sufficient funding for local authorities, Tory members of the Scottish Parliament should join us in calling for that UK Government cut to be reversed? The hypocrisy of Tories in this Parliament is astounding.

**Kate Forbes:** I agree with Richard Lyle and call on all parties in the Parliament, including the Scottish Conservatives, to call for an end to UK austerity. Any influence that they might have on their colleagues in London to ensure that the UK budget next week delivers for Scotland would be welcome. Ensuring that they deliver on their manifesto promises would be a good start.

### Scottish Government Budget

8. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government which measures in the draft budget aim to boost economic growth, improve productivity and support improvements in innovation. (S5O-04219)

**The Minister for Public Finance and Migration (Ben Macpherson):** The Scottish budget includes a range of measures that will foster inclusive economic growth, raise productivity and improve innovation. For example,

we have pledged £201 million of funding for city region and growth deals during 2020-21. There will be £220 million of fresh seed funding for the Scottish national investment bank, contributing to our commitment to invest £2 billion over 10 years, and the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland will receive £26.5 million of funding.

**David Torrance:** The minister will be aware that Energy Park Fife in my constituency supports the renewables sector. How much investment is being made in hydrogen technology as an alternative source of fuel?

**Ben Macpherson:** We are undertaking a wide-ranging assessment of hydrogen, its various applications and how it may contribute to achieving our ambitious target of net zero emissions by 2045, and also how it can provide social and economic value for the country. Informed by the outcomes of that assessment and other companion pieces of work, we will publish a Scottish Government hydrogen action plan in 2020. The potential contribution of hydrogen in Scotland's transition to a low-carbon economy was further recognised in the recent Scottish budget, which committed £10 million for hydrogen for heat demonstration projects.

**Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** How does the Scottish Government measure the return on its support for innovation centres and will centres that offer exceptional returns, such as the Data Lab, receive additional support?

**Ben Macpherson:** We recognised in the Scottish budget that innovation improves productivity, competitiveness and growth. We will therefore continue to support business investment in research and development with a target to double the spending of £870 million that happened in 2015 to £1.7 billion in 2025, meeting our commitment to increase support for business research and development from £22 million to £37 million per annum in the three years 2018 to 2021.

The specific point that the member raised would be better directed to the Minister for Trade, Investment and Innovation. I encourage Alexander Burnett to take it up with the minister directly.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** That concludes portfolio questions on finance. There will be a short pause before we move on.



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

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-21113, in the name of Kate Forbes, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill at stage 3.

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

I call the cabinet secretary, Kate Forbes, to speak to and move the motion in her name.

15:09

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Kate Forbes):** As this is the final stage of the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill, I am sure that everybody is delighted to be nearing the finish line. I know that all communities will be grateful for the certainty that the bill will give when it is passed at 5 o'clock today, subject to its being agreed to by Parliament.

I would like to thank all subject committees and political parties for their deliberations on the budget. I fully appreciate that the challenge that was faced in ensuring that there was appropriate scrutiny within a shortened budget process meant that everybody had to participate in a slightly different way, and I recognise the value that everyone has added to the process.

In particular, I thank the Finance and Constitution Committee for its carefully considered report on the budget, to which I responded on Tuesday, and for its recognition that the Scottish budget is managing significant uncertainty and that the fiscal framework presents challenges for the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. I agree, which is why I am continuing to press the United Kingdom Government for urgent change to give this Parliament the fiscal firepower that it needs to meet the challenges that we face, not least that of the economic fallout of Brexit.

This budget is one that delivers for all of Scotland: it delivers stability and certainty; it delivers investment in our economy and our public services and in tackling child poverty; and it delivers on our commitments to respond to the global climate emergency. All of that contributes to our collective wellbeing, guided by the national performance framework, and recognises that, for Scotland to become

“a more successful country, with opportunities for all ... to flourish”,

we must make progress on delivering our national outcomes—our economic outcomes, our social outcomes and our environmental outcomes.

Taking a wellbeing approach means prioritising investment for the greatest impact on improving lives across Scotland now and creating the conditions to ensure the wellbeing of future generations. Crucially, that includes addressing deep-seated inequalities. What we choose to measure really matters, because it drives political focus and public activity. We need to look beyond narrow gross domestic product measures if we want to have an inclusive society and a sustainable future. Economic growth will remain an important objective of the Scottish Government, but to build the kind of country that we want, that growth must be sustainable and its benefits must be widely shared.

As we look ahead to the challenges of the climate emergency, increasing automation and an ageing population, the argument for a broader definition of what it means to be successful as a country becomes more compelling. That is why, in 2018, the Scottish Government took the initiative to establish a new network, the wellbeing economy Governments group, which brought together as founding members Scotland, Iceland and New Zealand. Its purpose is to assemble like-minded countries to challenge the narrow focus on GDP and to shape a vision for enhancing wellbeing through our approach to the economy.

The circumstances of the budget have been challenging, and it is important that we all recognise the risks that have been created by the UK Government and its delayed spending plans. Members will be well aware that we faced an unprecedented context for the Scottish budget, with significant uncertainty being caused by the UK Government's decision not to hold its budget until 11 March.

The context for next week's UK budget is, of course, now also being influenced by the response to coronavirus. Although our most immediate concern will always be the direct risk to people's health, over the year ahead, the economic and fiscal impacts will be important factors for our public services, our economic output and public spending. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport provided a substantive update to Parliament on Tuesday, and constructive engagement is taking place with the UK Government and other devolved Administrations to support an effective overall response. For my part, I am engaging constructively with UK and devolved finance ministers on the fiscal and budgetary implications. Last week, I raised Covid-19 with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and I will discuss the

issue again with him and my counterparts from Wales and Northern Ireland next Tuesday.

We will also work across Government and with delivery partners to assess the potential cost implications within Scotland. Although the Scottish budget includes significant increases in funding for health and local government and a range of support and reliefs for businesses, it will be important to keep those matters under close review.

**James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab):** Does the cabinet secretary think that this is a fair budget if someone who earns less than the living wage will pay an above-inflation increase of 4.8 per cent in council tax while a Government minister earning £90,000 and above will pay less in income tax?

**Kate Forbes:** The Labour Party used to attack the council tax freeze, and now it is accusing us of giving local authorities more freedom to determine how to increase it. What is fair is ensuring that local authorities can use those levers to determine how their resource is spent.

To come back to the budget, it will be important to keep matters related to it under close review, not least because we might have an update next week, with the UK Government's budget. We need to ensure that we are as well equipped as possible to respond to the potential challenges that lie ahead.

I return to our wider approach. The delayed UK budget meant that we had to use the Conservative general election manifesto as the basis for our assumptions on consequential, and use provisional block grant adjustments that are based primarily on economic forecasts from March 2019. In setting the budget, the Government has taken a prudent and carefully measured approach that is based on the best available information. The Government is leading action to provide certainty for local government and other vital public services. I have made a judgment call. I believe that it is the right one, that it protects Scottish interests and that the range of risk factors has been carefully considered. The country needs certainty, the people of Scotland need this budget and we must deliver for them.

On reflecting on the circumstances under which we are setting the budget, I am certain of the need to bring forward early updates to the fiscal framework. The Finance and Constitution Committee and the Scottish Fiscal Commission have highlighted that the Scottish budget faces the prospect of significant reconciliations in coming years. It is obvious that the borrowing and reserve powers that are available to the Scottish Government are insufficient to manage the volatility that is inherent in the fiscal framework, and I am seeking immediate changes to those

powers from the UK Government. The powers must be reviewed in full as part of the wider review of the fiscal framework that is due to take place in 2021 and 2022. In that review, I will seek to ensure that the fiscal framework is fair, effective and transparent, in line with the Smith commission's principles.

Increased devolution and the fiscal framework have fundamentally changed the context for the Scottish budget. More than ever, we need a more strategic approach. I am pleased to share with members that I have written to the Finance and Constitution Committee and the Scottish Fiscal Commission to announce my intention to publish the medium-term financial strategy on 21 May 2020. The MTFS is an integral part of an improved Scottish budget process, and is a good example of Parliament and Government working together.

Given the circumstances in which we have found ourselves this year, the MTFS will be an opportunity for us to reflect on the implications of the UK budget and to take stock of the Fiscal Commission's forecasts for the next two budget years. It will also be an opportunity to make the case for the changes that we need to make to the fiscal framework if we are to be able to manage the new levels of risk and volatility.

The passage of the Scottish budget today will provide almost £50 billion of investment in public services and the economy to benefit the people of Scotland. In approving this year's budget, we make the investments for Scotland now and for our future. Parliament is at its best when all parties engage constructively. The public finances and the decisions that we make about our public services deserve serious engagement. That is why I invite all members to support this budget, and I am proud to commend it to the chamber.

I move,

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

15:19

**Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** As the cabinet secretary noted, we are in the final lap of the budget process. As we approach its culmination, I thought that it would be appropriate to begin by reflecting on some of the positives of the past couple of weeks. I welcome the fact that the cabinet secretary sought to engage with all parties, including the Scottish Conservatives, in the process. I also welcome the fact that she has accepted some of our budget asks, including additional funding for councils and extra resource funding for our police. Those are positive developments but, sadly, that is where the good news ends. In terms of both process and

substance, I suggest that the budget has been deficient.

I will first consider process, and forgive me if I dwell on the matter slightly longer than might be expected, but the technicalities matter here. I acknowledge that the cabinet secretary introduced the budget in difficult circumstances, and I accept that it is a draft budget, which is always subject to small tweaks here and there. That does not negate the lack of transparency on what money was ultimately available in her negotiations with other parties. In many respects, that is simply a repeat of what happened with Scottish National Party budgets of the past.

The cabinet secretary presented her budget and repeatedly stated that every available penny had been allocated, much like her predecessor used to do. In her statement to Parliament, she said:

“In allocating those resources, we have used every fiscal lever that we have to the fullest extent. Every penny is accounted for”.—[*Official Report*, 6 February 2020; c 76.]

In the Finance and Constitution Committee, she said:

“When I say that I have deployed every penny on the face of the budget, I mean that I have deployed every penny”.—[*Official Report, Finance and Constitution Committee*, 12 February 2020; c 40.]

One week later, she said:

“My key line is that we have deployed every penny”.—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 19 February 2020; c 40.]

In anyone’s mind, that is a clear and unequivocal position. Yet, if we fast forward to the stage 1 debate last week, miraculously, an extra £173 million appeared from nowhere. How can any committee of the Parliament do its job of pre-budget scrutiny when the figures that it is looking at can change at whim?

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** Donald Cameron knows that the money did not appear from nowhere; he seeks to mislead members in the chamber. He had a clear explanation from the cabinet secretary yesterday as to where the money came from, after the stage 1 process.

**Donald Cameron:** I do not accept that for one minute.

For example, how can the Local Government and Communities Committee do its job properly when allocations that it must scrutinise can change to the tune of almost £100 million? I am not talking about the merits of that funding, simply the procedure by which it happens. I will give some other specific examples. As was noted yesterday during the debate on the rate resolution, there is a major concern surrounding the near £1 billion budget black hole that is facing the Scottish

Government over the next three years in terms of budget reconciliations. That is not simply a question of the fiscal framework; it is an issue that has been bubbling away for some time.

As the Scottish Fiscal Commission notes in its forecast, the Scottish Government has chosen to borrow resource funding for the first time to cover the £207 million-worth of reconciliations for this year. That means that a future Scottish Government will be saddled with the debt and decisions of the current Administration. We also know that, in next year’s budget, the Scottish Government will have to find an estimated £555 million-worth of reconciliations, and a further £211 million-worth the following year. In total, that is almost £1 billion to find, plus borrowing to be paid back.

**Kate Forbes:** Is Donald Cameron therefore agreeing with me that the fiscal framework needs to be reviewed and early? Ultimately, it is about Westminster clawing back money because of independent forecasting errors.

**Donald Cameron:** The cabinet secretary is still borrowing the money; she still has to pay it back.

Next year, the cabinet secretary may well have to deal with a far more challenging financial picture, and I contend that she will have to commit to a more transparent and flexible approach if she is to gain the support of any party in the chamber.

I will turn to the £173 million deal with the Scottish Green Party. The funds for that are shrouded in mystery. We have a curious reprofiling of non-domestic rates, in respect of which, with some creative accounting, we seem to be producing money from income that is not yet earned, and shuffling that money from year to year. Quite apart from the large £670 million increase over the next three years for hard-pressed businesses, it is yet another example of how the Government is scrambling about to claw out extra cash.

What is even stranger about the reprofiling is that the Government knew about that source of cash not just three weeks ago, when it appeared in the draft budget, but last year, when Derek Mackay planned to reprofile £100 million for his budget. Why could the cabinet secretary not have been open earlier about that source of funds?

**Kate Forbes rose—**

**Donald Cameron:** Sorry, I want to carry on.

Further consequentials from the United Kingdom Government also form a major part of the deal’s funding. We know that, in terms of the block grant, the Scottish Government’s budget from the UK is rising by more than £1.5 billion this year in real terms—that is the Scottish Government’s own estimate. It is higher in real

terms than it was when the SNP took over in 2007. The fiscal transfers from the UK to Scotland are worth a union dividend of nearly £2,000 for every individual in Scotland.

The cabinet secretary has said again and again that there is uncertainty and a lack of clarity around consequentialists from the UK Government. How can she complain about uncertainty around consequentialists when she has already done a deal with the Scottish Green Party that is funded by additional consequentialists?

I turn to some of the broader points in the budget. I endorse what the cabinet secretary said about coronavirus and the need to keep a watching brief. Scottish Conservative members will do what they can to assist in that.

Most political parties chose to engage in negotiations with the cabinet secretary during the budget process. We approached those negotiations in good faith, with serious, reasonable requests. Our position on tax was debated at length yesterday, and I do not intend to repeat the points that I and others made then. However, we also called for £15.4 million specifically for drug rehabilitation beds. That figure was not plucked from thin air. We backed calls from Faces & Voices of Recovery UK, which said:

“If the Scottish Government are serious about tackling drug deaths, £15 million for drug rehabilitation beds is the absolute minimum we expect from this budget.”

Since the Government came to power, the number of beds has fallen dramatically and, as everyone knows, drug deaths have increased dramatically in that time, so we remain bitterly disappointed that that specific commitment was not accepted.

We also backed the call from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities for £117 million to make up for the cuts to the capital allocation for our cash-strapped local authorities. Even after the agreed budget deal, Scotland’s local authorities have stated explicitly that the agreement only makes good the underfunding of new and existing commitments, and does nothing to address inflationary or demand pressures. According to COSLA, the settlement still represents a 2 per cent, or £205 million, cut in real terms in revenue funding for local government.

We made reasonable demands, but the cabinet secretary chose instead to do a deal with the Greens. Never before in the history of the Parliament has an Opposition party asked so much for its support, and happily received so little in return.

To sum up, we cannot support the budget. It is another pay more, get less budget. It underfunds our public services, especially councils. It fails to tackle Scotland’s drugs crisis. Most of all, it does

not meet the priorities of the people of Scotland. I urge the Parliament to vote against it later today.

15:27

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):**

This year, Scottish Labour entered into discussions with the Scottish Government in the hope, if not in the expectation, that we could push the Government to invest in Scotland. After 13 years of mismanagement, our country and citizens desperately need real change. The money that the Government has wasted on vanity projects and poor decisions, had it been invested properly, would have helped build our economy. Instead, the Government squanders the public purse and it refuses to invest. It refuses to increase income tax for the wealthy and it cuts services to the poor. Poverty is on the rise and it will not abate without action from the Government.

**Kate Forbes:** Will the member confirm for the record that, at 5 o’clock today, her party will vote against £1.4 billion to mitigate poverty and support low-income families?

**Rhoda Grant:** We will be voting against cuts of over £200 million to the public sector, which will damage every family and reduce more people to poverty. We cannot vote for a budget that does that.

The Government boasts of not increasing income tax but, as James Kelly has said, it heaps inflation-busting rises on to the regressive council tax, which it promised over a decade ago to abolish—a promise that it reiterated to the Greens in last year’s budget negotiations, and for which the Greens backed that budget.

We are still holding talks about the council tax, which we agreed to take part in again more in hope than in expectation. Our fears have been confirmed. Those talks are not about replacing the council tax; they are about simply tinkering with bands and revaluation. It is clearly a process of treading water to keep the Greens satisfied. Frankly, it is a waste of our time, and we need to re-evaluate whether those talks are worth proceeding with. The Greens must see that, yet they have fallen for the same old trick again, only this time with young people’s free bus travel. They have been sold short. The same ploy was used when promising sustainable ferry funding for the northern isles, which was another sop to mislead parties to back the budget. Frankly, those promises were a waste of the very breath that was used to make them. I know that the SNP does not like that, but it is the truth.

We asked that the Government provide young people under the age of 25 with free bus travel. That policy would have helped young people become more independent while making family

travel more affordable. It recognised that young people are more likely to be low paid, and it would have helped them get to work and gain the experience that they require to earn higher salaries. In addition, it would have helped us all by forming among young people the habit of using buses, which would have been good for them and the planet.

Instead, the Greens settled for talks about introducing free bus travel for young people aged 18 and under. That short-changes young people because, on past performance, it is highly unlikely to happen. However, if it does happen, it will end around the time when young people can hold a driving licence, so the policy could, in fact, have the impact of encouraging them to buy a car. That wrong-headed compromise will incentivise the very behaviour that we seek to change by encouraging young people towards the car rather than away from it.

We wanted fair funding for local government, but it is now facing a £205 million cut in real terms. How does that counteract dropping educational standards? How does that provide additional support for children with learning difficulties? How does that provide care in our communities, where we can keep people well at home instead of their being held prisoner in hospital, to their distress and at greater cost to the public purse? That is totally irresponsible—and yet it continues.

We asked for a budget that dealt with climate change and was tested against the national performance framework, yet what we have is smoke and mirrors. The Fraser of Allander institute said:

“it is disappointing that the government has not done more to produce comparable numbers for previous years, as the failure to do so inhibits scrutiny of spending changes, and does little to improve overall transparency”.

The cabinet secretary said that this is a budget for wellbeing but, frankly, with the Government’s promises, I am not willing to take its word for it. We cannot track through the budget document where it would improve wellbeing, so we cannot see that it is a wellbeing budget. What is clear, however, is that the cuts that the budget makes to local government will damage the wellbeing of people who depend on those services.

Our final ask was to invest in further and higher education. We face a changing workplace with robotics and digitisation. Our existing workforce, and young people who are coming into that workforce, are ill prepared, yet our education standards are falling and budgets have been cut. That does not augur well for our economy, and this is a timid response from Government when we need a response that prepares our workforce for the brave new world.

The cabinet secretary referred to the fiscal framework that was negotiated by the SNP, and which means that our budget will be cut by £200 million this year and will face a black hole of up to £1 billion over the next three years. That is mismanagement on a unprecedented scale. *[Interruption.]* The Government has wasted £198 million on delayed discharges since Jeane Freeman took office; it is wasting £1.4 million on the sick kids hospital every month, without one child receiving care there; and it could have replaced the whole ferry fleet for the money that it is going to squander on two ferries that will never sail. It has consigned 33,000 people to the dole—*[Interruption.]*—yet this is a Government that thinks that it can negotiate independence. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order, please. If someone wants to intervene, they can stand up and ask for an intervention; otherwise, I ask members to be polite. Half the chamber is simply making noises.

**Rhoda Grant:** The budget is damaging, it does not invest in the future of Scotland or its people and it does not deal with mismanagement, and that is why we cannot support it.

15:35

**Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** I start by thanking Kate Forbes, because it is fair to say that the spirit of compromise that she brought to the negotiating table in her first-ever budget rescued negotiations with the Greens this year. I am sure that it will not be her last deal with the Greens in Parliament.

From next year, more than 700,000 young people and their families across Scotland will benefit from free bus travel for under-19s. The policy is so bold and transformational that Opposition parties are still rubbing their eyes in disbelief. They cried, “Fake news! It doesn’t exist!”—but it does.

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Will the member give way?

**Mark Ruskell:** I was just coming on to Mr Fraser: I will let him intervene in a minute. Even he will be able to leave his beloved classic car in the driveway, quietly rusting away, while he gets a cheap family bus ticket to the next climate strike in Perth.

**Murdo Fraser:** Sadly, I have to tell Mr Ruskell that I am probably too old to benefit from his policy.

I have a serious question for him. Perth and Kinross Council, which is in the area that we represent, currently spends £7 million a year on school transport to carry pupils who live more than

3 miles away from their school to school. Will the council be able to save that money when his new policy is introduced?

**Mark Ruskell:** Absolutely. Schools and youth groups around Scotland that organise trips will be able to use scheduled public transport services and will be able to benefit directly from the policy. Of course, Perth and Kinross Council will get an additional £2.6 million as a result of the budget deal, which will ensure that cuts that have been proposed by Perth and Kinross Council can be taken off the table and reversed.

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** Will Mr Ruskell take an intervention?

**Mark Ruskell:** I need to make progress.

As well as benefiting Mr Fraser, the policy of free bus transport for under-19s will tackle poverty and isolation and will give young people the mobility and freedom that they need in order to access learning and job opportunities—not to mention the social benefits. That is why the Poverty Alliance has warmly welcomed the policy, and has noted that affordable public transport is essential in

“loosening the grip of poverty on people’s lives.”

The measure will make school trips cheaper, and so widen educational opportunities. Furthermore, buses will be busier and footfall on them will increase, particularly in rural areas, which will make services more viable. The policy will be transformational and will build the case for even more public transport to be free. Maybe one day we will even be as wild as Luxembourg and make all public transport free.

The Scottish Greens are, of course, the party of local government. We want strong and well-funded councils that provide valuable services, and which fairly raise revenue locally using a wide suite of new powers. Since the beginning of this session of Parliament, the Scottish Greens have delivered more than £0.5 billion in total for local services. Across Scotland now, councils are making decisions about where to invest those vital additional funds. For example, Glasgow City Council has, in the past week, confirmed that the Green budget deal means that the Blairvadach outdoor education centre has been saved.

**Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** The Greens voted against that.

**Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab):** The Greens voted to close the centre.

**Mark Ruskell:** Members are welcoming that. I hope that North Lanarkshire Council follows suit and saves the Kilbowie outdoor centre.

As I pointed out to Mr Fraser, as a result of the budget deal, councils that are in the process of

approving damaging cuts, including Fife Council, now have sufficient funding to go back and reverse the cuts. Tory austerity might not be over, but we in the Green Party will not rest until we have restored democratically accountable powers to councils to protect the services that we all value.

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Mark Ruskell:** I will give way briefly, if I can get the time back, Presiding Officer.

**The Presiding Officer:** You will get the time back.

**Graham Simpson:** Is Mark Ruskell seriously claiming that no council will have to make cuts on the back of this so-called deal?

**Mark Ruskell:** I am not claiming that. I am saying that we have made a significant contribution; we have closed the £95 million gap that COSLA identified. As Graham Simpson knows, in order to fix the problem we need a new fiscal framework for local government, and we need to restore powers. I thought that the Tory party was the party of localism, but it appears that the Tories do not want to give powers to local councils to restore investment in local services.

I will move on to other areas of the deal. There is a lot to get through.

We need safer streets to live in. For the first time ever, Scotland’s budget for cycling and walking infrastructure has reached £100 million. Cycling UK has welcomed that, and has said that it shows that

“Scotland’s ambitions to cut emissions and get more people active is not just hot air.”

That is real action and real investment.

If we are to reduce reliance on the private car, we need to make rail more attractive than road. That is why we have secured an additional £5 million funding to advance rail projects to the next stage. Vital projects such as the Milngavie line re-dualling and the Alloa to Dunfermline extension can now be taken to the next stage of development. Abandoned communities will be reconnected to the rail network and services will be improved beyond recognition.

As part of our deal, the Scottish Government has also agreed in principle to align investment decisions with climate targets—specifically, to review controversial plans to spend £120 million on a flyover at Sheriffhall. That is just the start, and the infrastructure commission’s advice must be heeded: every project that increases road capacity must be tested to destruction. There should be no public money wasted on projects that lock in congestion and climate change for

generations to come, while sucking up all the money that is available for repairing roads.

I am delighted that an additional £25 million will be invested in making Scotland's homes more energy efficient. That is a win-win-win: warmer homes that are low carbon and cheap to run. Critically, the cash that has been secured by the Scottish Greens will be given to councils to spend on the low-income households that most need it.

There is no doubt that we need to do much more to tackle the climate emergency, to deliver wellbeing and a strong economy and to end child poverty. The budget is a step in the right direction—bodies including the Poverty Alliance, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, Friends of the Earth Scotland and WWF agree.

Every day that we are in Parliament is an opportunity to drive change for the good; there is no end point and no moment when we can say that the job is done.

The Scottish Greens will vote for the budget today; we will celebrate the wins, but we will stay hungry for the change that is yet to come.

15:42

**Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** This budget was inevitable. Just as night follows day—probably as certain as Stewart Stevenson making a speech later on about his ancestors—there was no doubt that this was an inevitable budget. Councils were always going to face cuts. That has been the Scottish Government's approach to budgets for a number of years now.

**Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Willie Rennie:** I will not, just now. I had hoped that Stewart Stevenson would tell me about one of his ancestors. Alas, that will come later, I am sure.

Although the Government says that the budget is a generous deal, it is cutting £200 million from local government budgets. That is not generous. I suppose that it was inevitable that more money would be found, despite the protests from the new finance secretary. The Government said that there would be no more money, but later said that there would be reprofiling of the non-domestic rates pool and that there were emerging underspends. It was either very naive to take an approach that included no money for flexibility to account for other parties' priorities, or it was extremely reckless. It was rather naive even to suggest that in the first place.

It was inevitable that the Greens would back the budget. After their fabricated jig that has been going on for a number of years now, they have been duped by promises of a review about the

possibility of maybe having free transport for young people. The council tax talks have been going on for a year now, which Rhoda Grant rightly alluded to, and have made little progress, with no proposition whatsoever being forthcoming from the Government. We need real progress on that—if it is not yet more duping of the Green Party.

The budget was inevitable, but some things have changed. Once, the Government could claim—it tried to claim—that it was competent on capital projects, but now it is wholly incompetent. It is mismanaging project after project: the Aberdeen western peripheral route is over budget, the ferries have doubled in cost, the farm payments information technology system is way over budget and the Aberdeen hospitals are the latest catastrophe in the mismanagement of capital projects. This is a Government that is not capable on capital projects, which is why we should be reluctant to endorse a financial strategy from it for the next financial year.

The Government has failed in a number of areas. In relation to councils, which I have already mentioned, the Scottish Government began the budget process without even baking into the budget the promises that it had already made on behalf of local government. Those were promises that were imposed on local government. Some of them were good. However, a Government should never propose to improve public services unless it is prepared to fund them in the first place. To start off with a negative is wholly irresponsible. The Government has made promise after promise. In the future, it should make funding promise after funding promise, rather than leave councils to pick up the tab.

The Government has also failed the police. We have heard repeatedly about leaking roofs, fungus growing in police stations, the broken down cars and—[*Interruption.*]

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice should listen to this very carefully. We have heard repeatedly about the stress and strain that ordinary hardworking police officers are under. Remember: one in three police officers turns up to work mentally unwell. We should be funding the police force properly. We should not be asking them to look after us and keep us safe while failing to fund them.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Humza Yousaf):** The budget is providing an extra £60 million for Police Scotland. Can Willie Rennie tell us how many times he made representations to Danny Alexander, the Liberal Democrat former Chancellor of the Exchequer, who pinched £125 million in VAT from Police Scotland?

**Willie Rennie:** This Government got itself into a mess of its own making. [*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Willie Rennie:** This Government centralised the police when it did not have to. The Government ended up with a VAT bill of its own making. That is why the Scottish Government cannot be trusted to manage Scotland's police. The justice secretary should be ashamed of himself for making that intervention.

The Government has failed—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** I ask members not to make remarks directly to the member who is speaking. I ask all members to show a little more respect. The noise in the chamber is bordering on rude, rather than just being political interruptions.

**Willie Rennie:** Thank you, Presiding Officer. These are important matters and they deserve to be considered incredibly carefully. It is a matter of trust in the Government. The Government has failed our public servants repeatedly and should be ashamed for doing so.

**The Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning (Kevin Stewart):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Willie Rennie:** I will not, just now.

The islands of Orkney and Shetland were promised two whole years ago that their interisland ferries would be funded in full. A package of £16 million was the price. The islands are still £5 million short—two years later. Yet again, that is a promise that was made by the SNP Government that was not kept.

The Government has failed on the councils, the police and the ferries. It has also failed by keeping money back from public services. We all know that there will be no independence referendum this year, but the finance secretary has told me that she is keeping money back for that possibility. That is not something that we should be doing when our police are short of money, when councils are short of money and when ferries in the northern isles are short of money.

The Government has the wrong priorities. Only when it has the right priorities will the Scottish Liberal Democrats support the budget.

15:49

**Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP):** In the stage 3 debate on the budget, I am going to try to bring at least a bit of what I hope is reasonable perspective to the deliberations—albeit, on this occasion, through SNP eyes.

Let me begin by looking at the settlement for the coming financial year—with the caveat that we will

not know the actual numbers until the UK Government sets its budget. As the Scottish Parliament information centre says in its budget briefing:

“the total budget will grow in cash terms by 14.4% in 2020-21 (12.4% in real terms). This large increase reflects the devolution of Social Security spending responsibility as well as a new budget line for Farm payments (which were previously EU income). With both of these areas stripped out, the growth in the Scottish budget is 4.9% in cash terms and 3.0% in real terms.”

So, yes, there is a 3 per cent real terms increase, but that figure includes both capital and resource spending.

Although those figures tell the story of the next financial year, they do not reflect the longer-term picture in real terms. That picture tells a very different story. Scotland's discretionary resource budget allocation is now 2.8 per cent—£850 million—lower in real terms than it was a decade ago. That tells us that the 2019 spending round has not ended a decade of austerity in spending on front-line services other than in providing some relief to health services.

I do not know how closely each member was listening to what the Cabinet Secretary for Finance was saying during last week's stage 1 budget debate. I was certainly listening very carefully, and I will quote just one small part of the finance secretary's speech, which I believe was of particular significance. On the funding of additional commitments, she said:

“That is not without risk, forced as we are to set our budget in advance of the United Kingdom Government's budget and with very little clarity on the block grant adjustments.”—[*Official Report*, 27 February 2020; c 68.]

The cabinet secretary mentioned that risk again today, and I congratulate her on the candid nature of that statement.

The budget is not without risk, and it is entirely possible that it might not work out as planned, because Kate Forbes has been required to set it in the most unusual of circumstances. She has had to set a budget without a great deal of the relevant financial information, data and policy direction that should have been available from the UK Government. I think the right balance has been found between meeting the extra demands that have been placed on her by the Opposition and exercising budget responsibility, but let us make no mistake: the risk is there.

Despite that, the Opposition parties—apart from the Green Party, of course—would have had the finance secretary increase that risk with their long list of demands for additional public spending commitments. I am glad that Kate Forbes has been prudent, has seen off those demands and has not created an even greater risk to the Scottish budget. If the projections and



assumptions that the Scottish Government has had to make do not match the decisions taken by the UK Government in the forthcoming budget, let us remember that it was the Opposition that cried out for even more public spending.

We will all have to grapple with further risks in the future. In the next financial year, the Scottish Government and this Parliament will face around £555 million of negative income tax reconciliations because of how the fiscal framework works. To reach a budget agreement next year, when flexibility has all but been removed because of over £500 million of reconciliations before the budget negotiations have even begun, will be a real challenge.

First, to help the Parliament, its committees and the Opposition parties to navigate these difficult waters, I urge the Scottish Government to be as clear as possible about the scale of the challenge. Secondly, I ask the Government to clearly set out its strategy for tackling that challenge, so that the parliamentary committees can subject its proposals to appropriate scrutiny. Thirdly, I suggest that the Scottish Government enter into discussions with the Opposition at the earliest possible date in order to find agreement on the way forward, if that is achievable.

The Opposition parties need to play their part, too. They simply cannot go on asking for more and more additional public spending, because it is not going to be available.

**Neil Findlay:** Will Mr Crawford take an intervention?

**Bruce Crawford:** I am in my final minute, so I will do a Willie Rennie and say, "Not at this stage, thank you."

If we are going to enter into more spending commitments, we must have a more mature and responsible debate about where the money is coming from to fund such commitments and how the negative income tax reconciliations are to be managed. To do otherwise would mean that we would not be prepared to face reality and, more worryingly, would expose the Scottish budget to even greater risk than is necessary.

I commend the budget that Kate Forbes has brought to the Parliament.

15:54

**Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** One always tries to be scrupulously accurate in one's contributions to these debates, but I fear that I made an error last week. In my contribution to the justice debate, I said that the SNP could give proper funding to the police, because the

"block grant will grow by more than £1 billion in real terms—a 2 per cent real-terms increase".—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2020; c 33.]

However, it appears that I was wrong. In fact, compared to 2019-20, the Scottish Government's budget will increase by around £1.6 billion in real terms—and all thanks to the UK Government's spending decisions. My "mea culpa" might lead Kate Forbes to review her own position, because on 6 February she said to Parliament:

"Every penny is accounted for".—[*Official Report*, 6 February 2020; c 76.]

Indeed, she told Parliament no fewer than 12 times that every penny had been deployed—even though, as Murdo Fraser pointed out at the time, very few people were entirely persuaded. Miraculously, she produced more than £170 million only days later.

**Kate Forbes:** If the member is so unhappy with my spending sources, what would he have recommended that we cut in order to support the Conservative Party's proposed tax cuts and spending increases?

**Liam Kerr:** The answer is simple. We would end the uncertainty, boost businesses, support workers and grow the economy—all the things that the SNP has failed to do for 13 years.

Despite maxing out the country's credit card when we are poised to receive the largest block grant in years, the cabinet secretary will still not properly fund our public services or our cash-strapped local authorities. Yes, the block grant is going up. It is the largest in years, so let us imagine what she could have spent it on.

At stage 1, I heard John Mason brazenly defy Unison and say that it was perfectly legitimate to offer only £60 million to the police. Members should bear in mind that that is £36 million less than the £96 million that is coming to Scotland in Barnett consequentials from police spending. Oh, how the Cabinet Secretary for Justice crowed last Wednesday—but that was before the chief constable told the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee the very next day that

"The budget figures that were announced yesterday will still leave an operating deficit in the Police Scotland budget for 2020-21. For revenue, the deficit is in the region of £36 million."—[*Official Report, Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee*, 27 February 2020; c 38.]

Wait—£36 million is exactly the same amount that the finance secretary is not passing on. But, hey; spending choices.

Kate Forbes could have put a mere £15.4 million of the £1.6 billion into drug rehab beds, to increase their number from the 70 that there are now back to around the 350 that there were when the SNP got in, which might have started to make

a genuine difference to the record number of drug deaths in Scotland—but she did not.

She could have recognised that local authorities across Scotland will still see a real-terms cut of £117 million in capital spending, leading to their having to hike council tax and still make massive cuts—but she did not.

Instead, she bought off the Greens with a bus scheme that is allegedly worth £15 million—or did she? Let us look at what was actually offered: free bus travel for those aged 18 and under,

“subject to the completion of the necessary preparations, including research and due diligence”.

That ability to promise without promising borders on art. If I was back lecturing at university, I would put that wording in the negotiating skills section of the chapter titled “How to offer the world while committing to absolutely nothing”.

In an extraordinary irony, if we do, indeed, see the introduction of free bus travel for under-19s, it appears that it will be funded through reductions in council budgets, which will presumably have a knock-on effect on councils’ climate change spending and make them unable to repair the very roads that the buses are supposed to run on.

At stage 1, last week, I was in the chamber and listened as Alex Neil waxed lyrical about the bus travel promise. I intervened on him, and, as he sat, he quipped, “It gets easier.” At the time, I assumed that he was deploying his characteristic wry sarcasm as he braced himself for my inevitably incisive and challenging intervention, but now I realise that he was simply taunting the Greens. He was reflecting on how, each year, it gets easier for the SNP’s finance secretary to make the Greens’ red lines vanish.

I cannot finish without noting that business tax income will rise from £2.75 billion to £3.42 billion by 2023-24—a 25 per cent hike in only three years. That will drive away growth and help Scotland’s competition.

Let us finish the scene where we started. Last week, Donald Cameron suggested that Kate Forbes had played the Greens “like a fiddle”. He might wish to reflect on that, because not only has she called the tune and made them dance; she has produced a finished work that lacks dynamic quality, is full of wrong notes and is ultimately disappointing to those who are forced to listen. For those reasons, I shall not support this budget at decision time today.

16:00

**Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** Liam Kerr said that I “waxed lyrical” in the speech that I gave last week. I can honestly say that I cannot

make the same claim about the speech that he just made.

I say to all the Opposition parties, except the Greens, that we are living in very unusual circumstances because of the threat of the coronavirus. Therefore, uniquely this year, to consider voting against the budget—a budget that contains £15 billion for the national health service next year—in the middle of what could become a pandemic is absolutely irresponsible. I say to the Tory party and the Labour Party that anyone who does that is not fit to govern.

**Neil Findlay:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Alex Neil:** Of course—as always.

**Neil Findlay:** I thank my friend Alex Neil for taking an intervention. He knows that, when he was in opposition, he voted against a number of budgets. He knows that, as the SNP group is in opposition at Westminster, it votes against budgets. In local government, SNP groups vote against budgets all the time. It is a nonsense to suggest that, because a member votes against a budget, they are voting against every element of it. He knows that, and everybody else knows it.

**Alex Neil:** I do not remember when we did that in opposition because it has been so long since we were in opposition, and we never did so in the middle of what could become a pandemic. We need to get the message out across the country about the great possible threat that we face.

Let us suppose that Opposition parties, other than the Greens, got their way tonight and we had to dump this budget. What impact would that have on the NHS and hospitals, on schools and on a whole range of public services, including the police and prisons? There would be mayhem, and those parties would be responsible for bringing it about. If ever there was an occasion on which it is irresponsible to vote against a budget, it is today.

The circumstances faced by this budget are the £1.5 billion of UK Government cuts that we have faced in the past 10 years. Labour Party members have said practically nothing in opposition to the Tories about those cuts, because of their loyalty to the better together campaign. It is because of the £1.5 billion of cuts that we have faced the problems that we have faced in the past 10 years.

I heard those on the Tory benches crying crocodile tears about what they describe as large cuts to local government. Their party has cut local government budgets in England by 40 per cent. They cannot tell us about cuts to local government—we are protecting local government.

**Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD):** I thank the member for giving way. I like listening to his speeches: they are always entertaining.

The member will know—because he was an MSP alongside me at the time—that when an SNP budget fell because people felt that it was right to vote against it, the SNP Government went away and produced a better one, and the next week we all voted for it.

**Alex Neil:** By that time we already had the UK budget and we knew exactly how much money we had to spend in the following year. This time, there is utter chaos in Westminster, so we will not get to know how much money we have to spend even after the budget next week—it will probably be the end of the month before we get to know that.

**Murdo Fraser:** Does Alex Neil accept that the current fiscal framework was negotiated at a time when UK budgets always took place in March, just in advance of the new financial year? Therefore, there is nothing unusual about this year's situation; it is just that, in the past two years, we have got used to budgets taking place earlier in the fiscal year.

**Alex Neil:** Murdo Fraser has missed the point, which is probably why he was sacked as the Conservative finance spokesman and Donald Cameron has taken his place. One can understand Jackson Carlaw's methodology—there is no doubt about it.

I will get back to my speech, Presiding Officer. After those interventions, I do not think that I will need injury time.

We have an excellent budget from Kate Forbes. One of the reasons for that is the new emphasis on increasing infrastructure expenditure in Scotland in line with the kind of percentage of GDP that is spent on infrastructure around the European Union, for example. That will lead to an additional £1.6 billion by the middle of the 2020s.

The Tories are quite rightly saying that we need economic growth. If any of them knew anything about economics, they would know that the best way to achieve economic growth is to spend money on infrastructure. All the evidence shows that every 1 per cent increase in infrastructure spend leads to a 1 per cent increase in the growth rate of the economy, but that every pound that is cut in income tax has only half that impact on growth. Further, that economic growth is often elsewhere, because it leads to increased imports, rather than a circulation of the money in our own economy.

The economic illiterates who are arguing against the budget would cause damage by putting money into tax cuts for people who do not need them, rather than spending the money on growth-creating infrastructure. It would be a huge mistake if we went down that road.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance also referred to “fiscal firepower”.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Please close shortly.

**Alex Neil:** I heard and was delighted by what the finance secretary said about the renegotiation of the fiscal framework. Can I also say to her—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** No, Mr Neil. Would you finish, please?

**Alex Neil:** My final point is that members should read the Smith commission report, because now that we are out of the European Union, the reason has gone for us not to control VAT in Scotland. We should argue for that, as well.

16:08

**Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** It is disappointing that this budget will only continue cuts to hard-working local authorities, forcing them to make difficult decisions and risking the reduction of essential services.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Excuse me, Ms Beamish. When members leave the chamber, please do so quietly.

**Claudia Beamish:** Thank you, Presiding Officer.

With a full and fair local government settlement, climate opportunities could have been seized and there could have been changes for those who are living in the grip of poverty. That is why we will vote against the budget.

The Government seems to underestimate the impact that annual budgets have for decades ahead and therefore just how vital it is that this budget is fit for the climate emergency. It has been Labour's ask throughout the budget process that the budget be made fit for purpose for tackling climate change and delivering a just transition for Scotland's workers and communities.

The budget should have put an end to the past decade of mismanagement, with £898.8 million lost to local authority revenue budgets since 2013-14 under the SNP Government. However, the budget has not done that, and the next decade will not be nearly as forgiving.

I turn the focus on to local government, where there is still a cut of £205 million. COSLA states that its

“ambitions to tackle climate change are at risk when core budgets are under threat”,

and it emphasises that

“To address climate change we need ... Fair funding for revenue and capital budgets”.

Local authorities are perfectly placed to act on climate change and against fuel poverty, transport poverty and food poverty and to tackle flooding, bringing a better quality of life for our rural and urban communities while creating local, skilled jobs throughout our country through the just transition framework. Failure to take on climate change in this decade means failure to take on climate change—full stop. With the 26th session of the Conference of the Parties—COP 26—this year, we need to hold our heads up high with a climate-aligned budget.

The publication of the “Just Transition Commission: Interim Report” gave us a welcome reminder of the importance of the steps and the urgency of the implementation required. With more ministerial intervention and mutually reinforcing environmental and social policies, there are huge opportunities in innovation, progress and co-operation to seize. The SNP’s approach has not worked, and it has failed to engage in many ways: renewables jobs have been lost, going abroad; yards are left idle; and sectors such as energy and agriculture are rudderless and without direction.

Key to a positive future for our children and grandchildren will be the development of skilled and unionised jobs in communities across Scotland. There are many examples of courses across Scotland, not least in my South Scotland region. I will highlight but two. Dumfries and Galloway College offers courses for installers of solid biomass, heat pumps and more, and Heriot-Watt University offers an MSc in marine renewable energy through, importantly, distance learning. There is much to build on.

The “Just Transition Commission: Interim Report” recommended

“Development of a Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan”, recognising the commitment to that in the programme for government. The commission stated that it

“would expect to see assessment of workforces most likely to be affected by the transition (including those indirectly affected through supply chains), and the most immediate and pressing skills ... needed.”

The commission also invited the Scottish Government to work with it over the year ahead to help inform the action plan’s development. That is surely also a precious opportunity to focus on how to support women into science, technology, engineering and mathematics courses as the skills action plan is developed.

However, how can the necessary opportunities for skills for a new green deal be developed across all sectors of the economy at the strategic and institutional levels given the successive cuts to our colleges and universities, which Iain Gray laid out in his speech at stage 1 of the budget bill?

All sectors will face strategic challenges for decades to come, and all spending decisions must be climate proofed from here on in.

Moving beyond this budget, we must also ensure that the updated climate change plan is robust and transformative. It is profoundly important that the reviews of climate assessment for future budgets deliver effective recommendations for action that lead to transparency and accessibility so that we can go forward together. The SNP Government must also do better to tackle the nature emergency that is intrinsically linked to the climate crisis. Nature solutions are real. We hear warm words from the Government about how it values nature, but the facts do not support that. Since the SNP assumed office in 2007, Scottish Natural Heritage has faced a real-terms cumulative loss of as much as £302 million.

Inevitably, where there are cuts, there is a serious impact. For example, 11 per cent of species found in Scotland are threatened with extinction; the Scottish Government is on track to meet only seven out of 20 of the Aichi biodiversity targets; and there have been radical reductions in site inspections, meaning that SNH’s responsibility for monitoring wildlife and habitats has been jeopardised. Further, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has also had a real-terms cumulative cut in its budget of as much as £38 million since the SNP came to power.

Both those public bodies play crucial roles in maintaining and enhancing the health of our environments, the sustainability of industry and the living standards of communities. The Scottish Government should invest in those issues. They are quality-of-life issues that are rooted in the just transition principles across all sectors, and they are fundamental to the international, historic labour movement and Scotland’s future.

16:14

**Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Scottish Government’s budget proposals for 2020-21. I am very conscious that the Scottish budget has been prepared against a backdrop of chaos and uncertainty in Westminster. We are in quite an unprecedented situation as we are uncertain how much of our tax money will be returned from London to fund vital services in Scotland.

The easy option would have been for the Scottish Government to have introduced a standstill budget that simply replicated last year’s budget, pending information on what Scotland’s handout might be. It is to the Scottish Government’s credit that it did not do so; instead,

it chose to move forward in key areas that the people of this country value and support.

The budget includes a record £15 billion investment in healthcare and care services, which will deliver an essential child poverty payment, and expand early learning and childcare support by £645 million.

The Government pledged to deliver 50,000 new homes in this session of parliament, and it is investing £800 million in this budget to do so. In addition, the Government is committing an additional £300 million to ensure that momentum is maintained and the target is reached. There is nothing more important than providing a family with a home, a roof over their heads; it is a fundamental right.

Some £220 million has been committed to the Scottish national investment bank. That is a real opportunity to provide burgeoning young companies with patient capital, which is so lacking in the present market.

My experience as an MSP is that mental health is a significant issue that I have to deal with in my constituency. The investment of £117 million in mental health for people of all ages and at all stages of life represents a significant step forward, and I hope that that investment will be spent wisely.

I am pleased with all the investment and progressive steps forward that this Government is taking, and that income tax levels have been held so that no one will pay more this year than they paid last year. It is really important to note that more than half of Scottish taxpayers continue to pay less than they would if they lived south of the border. Our tax system in general is fair and progressive—it is probably the fairest in the UK.

All that investment and solid commitment to progress is in spite of the brutal Tory policy of austerity. After 10 years, the evidence of its failure is indisputable. Indeed, Scotland's discretionary resource budget has been cut in real terms by £840 million over the past decade. The SNP Government has repeatedly called for an end to the austerity programme. It has been ignored. Although there are some fine words in London about ending austerity, the reality is that it lives on, and there is no indication that the UK will signal an end to that state of affairs.

Before I continue on the Scottish budget proposals, I make a small plea for my constituency. As part of the arrangement with the Green Party, there is a proposal to review the current initiative for Sheriffhall roundabout. The Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city deal means that plans are in place to upgrade the roundabout in order to help businesses and residents cope with the volumes of traffic. The

Green Party has asked for a review of the upgrades, which would delay the process. A review is not in the interests of my constituents, and the considerable reaction from them to the Greens' proposal has been overwhelmingly negative.

**Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):** The member will be aware that, on the day that the proposed roundabout is due to open, congestion will be 5 per cent worse than it currently is. Does the member really think that that is a good spend of £120 million? That money could make a difference by transforming the gridlock, the pollution and the congestion that blights our communities.

**Colin Beattie:** I cannot agree with the member's assessment. Perhaps, if I can continue, I will be able to explain a few of the points.

**Alison Johnstone:** It is not my assessment; it is Transport Scotland's assessment.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** I share the concerns of my SNP colleague. I represent the other part of Midlothian. What I, and I think my colleague, would say to the Greens is that the changes to the Sheriffhall roundabout will be useful to the buses, because we have no trains in that area; separately, there were walking and cycling facilities, but those had been got rid of.

**Colin Beattie:** I can only agree with my colleague Christine Grahame on that point.

The benefits of putting in place a solution to that long-standing choke point on the Edinburgh city bypass are multiple. I will list one or two of them. First, safe cycling and pedestrian routes will be put in place for the first time. That is an excellent first step in making the route greener and more sustainable. Many of my constituents have been waiting for those routes, so that they have alternative ways of travelling safely. Delaying the upgrades would prevent access to a green means of travel.

Secondly, instead of there being a significant traffic build-up at the Sheriffhall roundabout, traffic will be distributed to a variety of points, which will produce marginal traffic build-ups, as opposed to the significant traffic jams that currently happen. That will minimise idling traffic and longer car journeys as a result of delays.

**Neil Findlay:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Mark Ruskell:** Will the member take an intervention?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani):** Mr Beattie will be finishing very shortly.

**Colin Beattie:** I need to make progress.

The traffic jams resulting from the inadequate traffic-flow system mean that vehicles are often idling and producing high emissions and pollution. That is to the detriment of the surrounding villages and my constituents. The emissions could be lowered through better traffic flow, and the upgrades would enable that.

It makes every economic sense to have an efficient transport system in order to encourage businesses to move to or remain in the area. Efficient transport links reduce pollution and sustain jobs. Public transport and cyclists alike depend on them. I ask the Scottish Government and the Green Party to reconsider that potentially damaging and deeply unpopular review.

That was my small moment of dissonance in otherwise unequivocal support for what I consider to be an excellent budget. I extend my congratulations to the cabinet secretary on constructing it.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Will you close now, please?

**Colin Beattie:** In recognising the benefits of the Scottish budget, I also feel a sense of frustration when I consider what we are not able to do because the powers are not currently within our grasp. It has been made abundantly clear that Westminster is not going to reinvigorate Scotland—only we can do that.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You must close now, please.

**Colin Beattie:** With limited powers but huge ambition, we are achieving much more than anyone could expect. I urge support for the budget.

16:21

**Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):** This is a strange situation. We are debating the budget again and nothing has really changed since last week. Our very reasonable demands have still not entirely been met. The Greens have been conned, or perhaps they just rolled over as they always do—the wee nats doing the big nats' bidding.

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** Oh, grow up!

**Graham Simpson:** Local government has been hit, as always. Council tax bills are going up and services will be poorer. Jobs will be lost, the grass will not get cut and Christmas has been cancelled in North Lanarkshire. Music tuition is being pared back, which is not good for the culture of Scotland. Nothing has changed since last week.

Earlier today, I asked the First Minister how she responded to Citizens Advice Scotland's

statement that council tax arrears is now its number 1 debt issue. She spoke some words but did not really give an answer. When I spoke in the debate last week, I said that we have seen council tax rise year after year and suggested that we would see council tax poverty if we had not already done so. It seems that I was right.

The citizens advice bureaux network in Scotland is seeing more and more people struggling to pay council tax due to general pressures on household budgets. Last year, it helped more than 2,000 people with council tax debts totalling nearly £7 million. That works out at around £3,000 per person.

**Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green):** Does Mr Simpson agree that the council tax is a regressive tax and that the debt problems that he cites will always be exacerbated by that simple fact? Does he also agree that the Conservatives have brought forward no proposals for scrapping the council tax and seem to want to maintain that regressive tax?

**Graham Simpson:** We have never argued that the council tax should be scrapped. My point is that the level of council tax increases, year after year, is hitting people in the pocket. There are lots of reasons for council tax poverty, but it cannot have helped that council tax bills have rocketed by 21 per cent in the course of this Parliament. Why is that? Because the Government has been starving councils of funds, forcing them to increase bills and make cuts to services at the same time. This budget is no different.

Council tax poverty is serious. Falling behind on council tax can lead to the removal of someone's right to pay in instalments, being charged the whole council tax bill for the year and, ultimately, enforcement action by sheriff officers to recover the debt. It is striking that around 88 per cent of debt enforcement actions by sheriff officers relate to summary warrants for council tax. When council funding is cut, that is what happens.

Citizens Advice Scotland also raised concerns about the fall in the number of claims for council tax reduction. Since 2013, when that scheme was introduced to replace council tax benefit, around 85,000 fewer homes have applied for the reduction. Figures for the last quarter, released this week, continue to show a fall.

Citizens Advice Scotland believes that fall to be due to a lack of awareness among people, combined with the fact that council tax reduction requires people to make a claim, whereas access to the previous council tax benefit was joined up with receipt of other benefits.

**Kevin Stewart:** Will Graham Simpson give way?

**Graham Simpson:** Not at the moment.

I asked the First Minister whether she would join CAS in promoting the scheme, but she did not answer that, either.

Another of our reasonable asks was on homelessness. The draft budget makes £50 million available for the ending homelessness together fund, but as the Salvation Army pointed out last week, Scottish councils have submitted proposals for spending on homelessness that would cost £130 million. We asked for a rather modest £10 million extra. Even though that was a modest ask, sadly, the cabinet secretary has not gone for it. Ultimately, spending on homelessness saves the public purse. That is undoubtedly why we had a protest at First Minister's question time.

Spending on energy efficiency comes into the same category. The draft Scottish budget included a small increase of £18 million, taking the total spending that is dedicated to energy efficiency measures, such as the provision of insulation, new heating systems and advice and information for renters and home owners, up to £137 million. However, that falls more than £100 million short of what the Existing Homes Alliance says is required—a doubling of investment to £240 million. Therefore, the £25 million for investment in local energy efficiency projects that was announced last week is pretty small beer.

Failing to invest properly in energy efficiency will drive up the cost of heat decarbonisation, and it risks undermining efforts to alleviate fuel poverty. At the current level of improvement—which, according to the most recent Scottish house condition survey, is just 2 per cent a year—it will take 25 years for the vast majority of our homes to reach the standard of energy performance certificate band C.

The draft budget misses a critical opportunity to capitalise on existing programmes to reduce fuel poverty and respond to the climate emergency before it is too late. The Greens cannot possibly say that that is good. Like much of the budget, it is a con.

16:27

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** I am delighted to take part in another budget debate. We covered quite a lot of ground in last week's stage 1 debate, and some of the same ground has been covered today. In between times, the Finance and Constitution Committee had a fairly thorough session with the cabinet secretary yesterday.

There are a few issues that I want to focus on. First, I warmly welcome the plan for free bus travel for under-19s. I had initially assumed that it would be exactly the same as the current scheme for those of us who are over 60, but it was good to

hear Kate Forbes say yesterday that all options will be explored and, specifically, that what young people themselves want will be considered. I imagine that that discussion might include use of the ferries and the Glasgow subway.

**Liam Kerr:** Does Mr Mason think that it is appropriate to spend £15 million on bus passes rather than on residential drug rehabilitation beds?

**John Mason:** As I think I heard one of my colleagues saying, those are two different areas. If Mr Kerr listened to my speech last week, he will know that one of my themes was that we would all like to spend more money on a whole range of areas. If we had the money, we would all like to spend more on health, local government, the police and so on and so forth, but the reality is that we must choose priorities. One thing that disappoints me about the Conservatives, some of whom I know can add up, is that they make more and more spending demands without telling us where that money would come from.

**James Kelly:** Will the member take an intervention?

**John Mason:** No. I would like to make a few points first; I might come back to Mr Kelly later.

In the short term, as well as helping young people and their families to save money, the bus passes plan will allow young people to travel more and might assist those young people who have been unable to afford to travel at all. In addition, I hope that, in the longer term, it will get young people into the habit of using public transport, which can only be a good thing as we seek to reverse the decline in bus usage, especially in Glasgow and the west of Scotland.

Secondly, I particularly welcome the £3.4 billion in social security assistance. The Scottish child payment, which is due to start by December, could help 170,000 children under the age of six and eventually 410,000 in all, lifting some 30,000 out of poverty. The Glasgow Centre for Population Health reckons that about one third of children, or 37,000 in Glasgow, live in poverty; in some neighbourhoods, that rises to 41 per cent. Such measures are therefore extremely welcome.

Next, I was very impressed by Bruce Crawford's speech last week—his speech today was also okay—on the need for reserves. That formed part of the Finance and Constitution Committee's budget report, but Mr Crawford emphasised it, and rightly so. As I understand it, councils have a target for reserves of 2 per cent, although some may be below that. For example, I understand that Glasgow has 1.6 per cent in reserves. Given our budget of £40 billion, 2 per cent in reserves is £800 million.

In one sense, that is not a huge figure given the risks that we face. On the other hand, if we had £800 million in reserves when health, the police and local government all need money, some people would feel that that was too much as we could be spending that money on vital services. We need to have that debate and ideally we would have cross-party agreement on the principle of holding reserves, and at least rough agreement on the figure required.

Another point that came up in last week's debate was preventative spend. That was mentioned by Sarah Boyack, and was mentioned again yesterday at the Finance and Constitution Committee by Alex Rowley with regard to the Christie commission recommendations. If I am not mistaken, all parties agree on the principle of preventative spending, which is that we spend earlier in any process in order to prevent bad things happening later on, whether that be children growing up in ill health or young adults ending up in prison.

If we were in a time of growing budgets, we could use the extra money to invest in new preventative spend while carrying on with reactive spending for a period. However, in a time of tight budgets such as the present one, we would need to cut reactive spend first and disinvest in order to finance more preventative spending. That could mean cutting new prisons to keep young people out of trouble, or cutting hospital budgets to put more into primary care. We should be having the debate, but I fear that Opposition parties would be quick to criticise if reactive spending were to be cut and short-term problems arose.

Another issue that appeared in the committee report, to which the Government responded this week, was European Union funding. That might not be part of the Scottish budget per se, but it has been a vital part of our nation's overall spending of both revenue and capital nature, affecting the public, private and third sectors. The committee report mentioned the common agricultural policy, structural fund support, common fisheries policy funding, research and innovation funding and loans from the European Investment Bank.

Those are crucial issues, which have been discussed by the Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee, the Finance and Constitution Committee and the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, not to mention the cross-party group on industrial communities, which is ably chaired by Colin Beattie. Yesterday, the cabinet secretary made it clear at the committee that we are making slow progress, if any, on this topic. She hopes that there will be clarity in the Westminster budget next Wednesday, and I certainly hope that there is. Our farmers, older industrial communities and many others really

need to know as soon as possible whether there will be replacement funding, how much, and how that will happen.

Whatever happens, we have to live within our means. There will always be areas on which we want to spend more money. We are a democracy and we can only raise the amount of tax that people are willing to pay; that, in turn, limits what we can spend. Allocating that money between needs will never be easy. However, we have a reasonable budget before us today and I hope that all parties will support it.

16:33

**Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green):** As in previous years, parties have to make a choice to develop proposals, to cost them, to negotiate and to come away with some wins. I do not know how much effort was made by each of the Opposition parties but, before they criticise us, they could review their own approaches because they do not appear to be leading anywhere.

Opposing the budget means reverting to last year's budget, and the Greens do not find that acceptable. That is why I find the Conservatives' approach disappointing. Like those of many of his colleagues, Liam Kerr's contribution was out of tune with the challenges, which were well set out by Alex Neil.

It was also disappointing to hear Colin Beattie rehearse long-outdated ideas about what road improvements actually achieve. Congestion will be increased by 5 per cent by the proposed Sheriffhall works. Congestion is tackled by taking vehicles off the road, which is why free public transport is so important.

Therefore, the Greens are pleased to have achieved a budget deal that reverses many cuts that were proposed by councils and secures concessionary travel for young people and investment in public transport. In a Parliament in which no one party has a majority, a coalition has to be built to secure such support.

**Neil Findlay:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Andy Wightman:** I am happy to do so briefly.

**Neil Findlay:** Based on Mr Wightman's contribution so far, he is making the argument that, if Labour votes against the budget, we are voting against the whole budget and all the good things that are in it. If we take that argument a step further, if Mr Wightman votes for this budget, he is voting for roads expansion and all the negativity that comes from it.

**Andy Wightman:** Budgets are always finely judged. I accept that voting for a budget en bloc



does not mean that we support everything in it, just as voting against a budget does not mean that one supports nothing in it. My point is that we have a Parliament of minorities and we have responsibilities to try to achieve a budget that has broad support. I think that we have done so. We have filled the £95 million hole that was identified by COSLA and we continue to implement the longer-term measures to improve the local government finances that were agreed last year.

I sit with Willie Rennie and Rhoda Grant in the cross-party talks that we secured, and I genuinely hope that if we make the requisite efforts in those talks, we will be able to reach agreement with the Government on scrapping the council tax. However, whether we do so will depend on our own efforts.

Parliament has instigated a new approach to budget scrutiny, which is very welcome. However, as I mentioned last year, and as Kate Forbes mentioned in her opening speech, we need a more strategic approach. Last year, I suggested that we might do better and that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance could convene roundtable talks in September, to be followed by more detailed discussion and negotiation. Building on that progress and trust, parties could then enter into detailed negotiations that would lead to the budget bill. That approach might even involve parties submitting their own proposals to the Finance and Constitution Committee. In other words, there are a lot of things that we could do to make a Parliament that is composed of different parties, such as it is at the moment, work much better.

This is not the budget that a Green Government would have delivered, but it is a better budget than was originally presented by the Government. We will be pleased to support it tonight.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** We move now to the closing speeches. It is disappointing to note that not all members who took part in the debate are here as they should be.

16:37

**James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab):** We are at the final stage of the budget process. I have no doubt that Kate Forbes is glad to be nearing the finish line, having picked up the reins of the budget process in very difficult circumstances.

Bruce Crawford made some interesting points about the budget process that should be taken seriously. They should certainly be taken seriously by the Government, which was criticised by the Fraser of Allander institute over transparency and the amount of information that it put in the public domain to facilitate budget discussions.

It is time that the Government started to be more open about the process. When the budget was published, we heard that there was no money left—all the coffers had been emptied and every penny had been spent. Kate Forbes might be new to the job, but, as with previous cabinet secretaries going back to John Swinney, lo and behold, there was a change in the forecast and new assumptions. As a result, hey presto, £173 million was found down the back of the sofa. *[Interruption.]* In the Scottish Parliament's version of groundhog day, the Greens then suddenly appeared and said that they would support the budget after all. If we are really serious about having a proper and transparent budget process, then the Government must let us know at the point at which the budget is published what money is available and not change the amount half way through.

Rhoda Grant and Claudia Beamish made very strong points about cuts to council services. The fact is that, in real terms, there have been £898 million-worth of cuts since 2013, and £205 million-worth this year. That shows that, at the heart of this Government, there is a policy of penalising local councils. It is not only about the figures; we just need to look at the analysis—

**Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP):** The member referred to 2013. Can he indicate what other budget lines he would have cut, as he puts it, instead of local government—for example, health, or measures to mitigate Tory welfare reforms? What would Labour have done differently over the past seven years?

**James Kelly:** For a start, people such as Tom Arthur and I should be paying more tax.

As I was going to say, if we look at the analysis in *The Herald on Sunday*, we see cuts to library services. Some councils will have to close libraries. Meanwhile, MSPs and Government ministers will, this year, actually pay less in income tax. That is totally unfair. *[Interruption.]* It is not nonsense. Members should look at the analysis by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre. It is totally unfair—

**Alex Neil:** Will the member take an intervention?

**James Kelly:** No, I will not take an intervention at this point. Mr Neil should read the SPICe blog.

As *The Herald on Sunday* also pointed out, support for children with additional needs will have to be cut in a number of council areas. That is totally unacceptable. We face a situation where, all across the country, local councils will have to make cuts. When will SNP MSPs start standing up for the communities that they were sent to the Parliament to represent?

**Stuart McMillan:** Will the member take an intervention?

**James Kelly:** No, thank you.

Some of those MSPs will not even be standing for re-election next year, so they do not have to worry about reselection. For once, they should discover a backbone and stand up for their constituents. At 5 o'clock, Scottish Labour will oppose the budget, because of its inherent unfairness.

Government ministers, in the Holyrood bubble, in their chauffeur-driven cars—both Mr Neil and Mr Crawford have been there—who will not be paying the same amount of income tax, cumulatively over the year, should compare their situation with that of single parents in communities across Scotland who will be paying 4.84 per cent more in council tax this year. If that single parent wants to send their kid to a library, the service might be cut or it might be closed. If their kid needs additional support, that will be cut as well.

There is an inherent unfairness at the core of this budget. For that reason, Labour will oppose it at 5 o'clock.

16:43

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** The debate is our third in a week on the budget and related matters. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, and Opposition spokespeople need a stamina award for the effort that they have put in.

It is always a challenge to find new issues to raise at this stage, but I want to sum up a number of points that members have made.

It is worth reiterating that the backdrop to the budget is a 3.7 per cent real-terms increase in the resource budget that is available to the Scottish Government, thanks to increases in spending at Westminster. That translates into around an extra £1.6 billion in real, hard cash at the Scottish Government's disposal. However, one consequence of the budget decisions that have been taken by the Scottish Government—backed up by the Greens, as we know—is that we are still seeing real cuts to local council services across Scotland. Graham Simpson and James Kelly have made that point.

**Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Murdo Fraser:** I want to finish my point.

We have only to pick up local newspapers to see that councils across the country are having to reduce services. They are having to look at reducing teacher numbers; to look, as Fife Council is doing, at potentially reducing the length of the

school week; to look at laying off school crossing patrollers, as Perth and Kinross Council is having to do; and to look at reducing the opening hours of libraries and leisure centres. That is the consequence of the deal that has been struck between the SNP and the Greens. Mark Ruskell lives in a parallel universe if he does not recognise that that is what is happening across Scotland.

**Keith Brown:** Murdo Fraser and a number of his colleagues have expressed concern about local authority budgets. Given that, will he condemn the huge increase in the cost of Public Works Loan Board borrowing that applies to all councils, because of what the UK Government believes is spendthrift behaviour by some English local authorities? It is an easy thing to do—will he condemn it?

**Murdo Fraser:** Mr Brown has not been listening—an extra £1.6 billion is coming to this Scottish Government. That more than compensates for any increase in the Public Works Loan Board interest rate.

The centrepiece of the Greens' budget deal is a supposed commitment to free bus travel for the under-19s. We know that that is no commitment at all. It is an allocation of only some £15 million towards an estimated annual cost of £80 million, and it will be introduced in January of next year only "if possible". We know that there has been no consultation with bus companies and no consultation with local authorities, and that no thought has been given to the impact on the school transport that is currently provided and funded by local authorities. Whether it will ever be delivered as a policy remains to be seen; however, given the lack of any serious, rigorous work in preparation, it would be a reasonable bet that it never sees the light of day.

A lot has been said in the debate about the question of uncertainty due to the UK budget being in March, after the Scottish budget. I gently remind members that there is nothing novel about that. Historically, UK budgets were always delivered in March; only for the past two years has there been a shift, with the UK budget being moved to November. Indeed, the current fiscal framework—which was agreed by the Scottish Government—was negotiated on the basis, and based on the assumption, that budgets would be in March. Historically, Scottish Governments would produce their budgets in September of the previous year. As such, we need to hear a little less faux outrage from the SNP benches about uncertainty being caused by the timing of the budget, because, historically, that was always the case.

On the question of process, Donald Cameron and a number of members reminded us about the issue that we raise in budget debates every year.

When the finance secretary produced her budget on 6 February, she was very clear that all the money had been allocated. She told Parliament:

“In allocating those resources, we have used every fiscal lever that we have to the fullest extent. Every penny is accounted for”.—[*Official Report*, 6 February 2020; c 76.]

As we pointed out at the time, that was familiar rhetoric, because it was exactly the same language that was deployed by her predecessor as finance secretary. However, over the years, he was able to find substantial extra funds down the back of the sofa. True to form, the new finance secretary has pulled off exactly the same trick, producing £173 million from thin air in order to sweeten her deal with the Greens. It would substantially aid transparency and assist budget negotiations if the full extent of the resources available to the finance secretary was made clear at the time that the budget was presented to Parliament. Donald Cameron made that point earlier, and it is a serious one.

Of the additional sums that have been found, £50 million has come from a reprofiling of non-domestic rates income over the period 2020 to 2023. Although it does not like the term, that means that the Scottish Government is, in effect, borrowing against future income from business rates in order to increase its budget in this year. Given that next year, due to an overforecast of income tax receipts, we face an estimated black hole of some £555 million before we even start, I question the prudence of dipping into income for future years at this point. Presumably, the Scottish Government is once again relying upon a Boris bailout to fill that gap, just as it has done in this year.

**Bruce Crawford:** In that case, will Murdo Fraser explain why so many speakers from the Conservative benches, in speech after speech, asked for additional spending upon additional spending, which would only add to the risk to the Scottish budget in future? The Tories have really lost their way on this one.

**Murdo Fraser:** If Mr Crawford had been paying attention during all the budget debates that we have had in the past week and the previous years, he would know that, if we could match Scottish economic growth even to the UK average, we would have billions of pounds extra to spend on Scottish public services and we would not have to increase taxation. Mr Crawford should know that.

My final point about the budget is that Scotland’s entire fiscal position is underpinned by the union dividend—a fiscal transfer that is now worth almost £2,000 for each man, woman and child in Scotland. Without that fiscal transfer, we would have none of the additional spending that is being announced today. Without that support, Scotland’s notional deficit stands at some £12

billion. Yesterday, during the debate on the rate resolution, the Minister for Public Finance and Migration, Mr Macpherson, let the cat out of the bag when he confirmed that a loss of £12 billion from the Scottish budget would be, in his words, “catastrophic”. There we have it from a minister in the SNP Government: independence for Scotland would be catastrophic for the public finances of Scotland and for the public services that its people enjoy. I could not put it in better terms myself.

For that reason, and all the other reasons that we have outlined, Parliament should reject the budget this afternoon.

16:50

**Kate Forbes:** The debate has once again allowed Parliament to reflect on the 2020-21 budget. I am sure that it will not be for the last time, not least because our decisions in the budget will, in my opinion, have a hugely positive benefit and will make a difference to people in our communities.

The budget provides investment of around £645 million in the revolutionary expansion of early learning and childcare, which is improving the life chances of our children; £220 million of fresh seed funding for the Scottish national investment bank, with its mission to drive the transition to a net zero economy; increased investment in health and care services by more than £1 billion, taking total spend on the health service to £15 billion for the first time; funding to establish the game-changing Scottish child payment, which, when fully rolled out in 2022, will help an estimated 30,000 children out of poverty; and £1.8 billion of investment in low-emission infrastructure, including a package of more than £500 million of investment that is specifically designed to increase our efforts to respond to the global climate emergency.

All that sits alongside a progressive income tax system, with 56 per cent of income tax payers in Scotland paying less than they would if they lived elsewhere in the UK, while we are raising the revenue that is needed to support investment in the Scottish economy and our public services. To vote against the budget tonight is to vote against all of it. It is to vote against more than £1.4 billion towards tackling poverty, a cash increase of £589 million to local authorities and a £60 million uplift to the police.

**Liam Kerr:** Why will the SNP Government not hand over the full £96 million in Barnett consequential to the police?

**Kate Forbes:** Why will the UK Government not hand over the VAT payments that it has not returned to the police service?

Most of the other parties have criticised the budget because it does not spend vastly bigger sums of money on the particular areas of their choosing, but they have not had the courage to identify what they would deprioritise in order to do that. The truth is that, despite the uncertainty and the risks of producing our budget before the UK Government's budget, and despite a decade of Tory-imposed austerity, we have set a balanced budget that prioritises investing in the economy, tackling climate change, reducing poverty and delivering certainty for taxpayers.

We are doing that within a fiscal framework in which the UK Government will claw back more than £200 million this year and more than double that next year because of forecast error in independently determined forecasts. The UK Government is doing that while keeping one of our hands tied behind our back, because borrowing powers to deal with forecast error are limited to £300 million. That demonstrates why we need an urgent review of the fiscal framework to allow us to respond properly to the volatilities and uncertainties that we face.

We have taken a prudent approach to the budget and have made wise assumptions to deliver a balanced budget and give ratepayers and public services the certainties that they need. We have tried to spread the risk and spread our exposure to the promises that the UK made in the December election campaign.

Murdo Fraser said that we have gone before UK Government budgets in the past, but the fiscal framework envisaged that block grant adjustments for the next financial year would be based on forecasts in the autumn statement, before the Scottish Government budget in December. No UK autumn statement has been published, so the Scottish budget has had to be based on provisional BGAs rather than on new, up-to-date Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts. That has inevitably increased uncertainty around the Scottish budget. If the chamber is agreed on how important the budget is, surely we can all be equally amazed and astounded that the only assurances that the UK Government could give the Scottish Government on the block grant was to refer us to estimates from March 2019—a year ago—and to its election manifesto. The consequences of the UK Government not delivering on its promises could have serious repercussions. We will hold the Tory Government to account for the promises that it made.

Labour's position on the budget is somewhat wearying. It called for a climate change budget, and we have delivered that, but still it moans. It talked about inequality, and we are investing £1.4 billion in tackling poverty, including the first child payments later this year, but I did not hear a single

comment on that from Rhoda Grant. Labour called for an extension of free bus travel to young people, but when that is delivered, it is not good enough. If the Labour Party votes against the budget at decision time, it will be voting against £15 million to extend free bus travel, £21 million for the Scottish child payment, continued investment in the Scottish child poverty fund and increases in the Scottish welfare fund. It cannot claim to champion the many and not the few while voting against those increases.

This year, through negotiations, the Greens have delivered something. They have made changes and they have left a mark and a legacy. All the parents who have been in touch with me in the past week to talk about the difference that extending free bus travel will make to them and their families appreciate that. As for the Lib Dems, Willie Rennie talked about certain inevitabilities, but what appears inevitable is that the Lib Dems never achieve any of their asks, because they set up absurd constitutional red lines.

**Patrick Harvie:** I am sorry to have to correct the cabinet secretary, but the one time that the budget fell, the Liberal Democrats achieved the astonishing consequence of voting for exactly the same budget without a single amendment in exchange for two letters written by the Scottish Government. That was their budget price—two postage stamps. Was that not impressive?

**Kate Forbes:** That was hugely impressive, and I am glad that I allowed that intervention.

Bruce Crawford talked about the importance of being honest and up front about the inherent risks in the fiscal framework and making prudent judgments on tackling those economic challenges. It is one thing for Opposition parties to call for greater spending—that is easy. The real test is how they take responsibility for the economic challenges that we face.

I enjoyed listening to a number of speakers who made excellent points, including Alex Neil and John Mason.

I am proud to present the budget tonight, which delivers for our communities and businesses, despite the uncertainties about our block grant and the decade of Tory austerity that we are contending with. Murdo Fraser talked about exactly how much he thinks is coming to the Scottish Government next week from the UK Government. We will hold the Tories to account for that. We will hold them to their promise of ending austerity and their election promise of levelling up spending. We will hold them to that, because they have not just subjected the Scottish budget to unacceptable levels of uncertainty; they have subjected all our public services, taxpayers and businesses to that uncertainty. Despite that, we

have provided certainty and ensured that this budget delivers for all Scotland. This budget ensures that we are tackling climate change and poverty and I am proud to commend it to the Parliament.

## Parliamentary Bureau Motion

16:59

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S5M-21136 on a committee substitution. I invite Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament agrees that Ruth Maguire be appointed to replace Richard Lyle as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee.—[*Graeme Dey*]

## Decision Time

17:00

**The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):** There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S5M-21113, in the name of Kate Forbes, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 4) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

**Members:** No.

**The Presiding Officer:** There will be a division.

### For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)  
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)  
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)  
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)  
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)  
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)  
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)  
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)  
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)  
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)  
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinrossshire) (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)  
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)  
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)  
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)  
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)  
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)  
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)  
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)  
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)  
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)  
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)  
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)  
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)  
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)  
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)  
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)  
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)  
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)  
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)  
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)  
 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)  
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)

Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)  
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)  
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)  
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)  
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)  
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (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

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)  
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)  
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)  
 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)  
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)  
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)  
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)  
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)  
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)  
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)  
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)  
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)  
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)  
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)  
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)  
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)  
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)  
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)  
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)  
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)  
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)  
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)  
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)  
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)  
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)  
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)  
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)  
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)  
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

**The Presiding Officer:** The result of the division is: For 63, Against 55, Abstentions 0.

*Motion agreed to,*

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

**The Presiding Officer:** The second question is, that motion S5M-21136 in the name of Graeme Dey, on a committee substitution, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament agrees that Ruth Maguire be appointed to replace Richard Lyle as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee.

*Meeting closed at 17:01.*





This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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