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Scottish Parliament

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

Portfolio Question Time

Health and Social Care

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Good afternoon. I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place, and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

The first item of business is portfolio questions. I would be grateful for short and succinct questions and answers in order to get in as many members as possible.

Waiting Times (Conditions other than Covid-19)

1. **Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce waiting times for patients with conditions other than Covid-19. (S6O-00626)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): The First Minister and I launched the “NHS Recovery Plan 2021-2026” in August last year in response to pressures on national health service services that were caused by the pandemic. The plan sets out key headline ambitions and actions to be developed and delivered now and over the next 5 years. That is backed by more than £1 billion of investment over the next five years, of which £80 million has been invested in this financial year to support NHS boards to target the backlog of treatment and care.

Although it is important to stress that recovery and reducing waiting times for patients with conditions other than Covid is the immediate task, the plan is fundamentally about ensuring that the recovery process delivers long-term sustainability and alternative pathways of care that allow people to be treated more quickly and, crucially, closer to home.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The cabinet secretary pointed to the “NHS Recovery Plan 2021-2026”, which the British Medical Association warned on its release contained “worrying gaps”, and towards which little progress was made in the months before the omicron variant emerged as a significant concern.

In many areas, the pandemic has not created new problems but has exacerbated pre-existing

issues. Weekly accident and emergency figures are the worst on record and there is continued poor performance on the 62-day standard for an urgent suspicion of cancer referral to first treatment. Almost 60,000 people have been waiting for treatment or diagnostic tests for more than 12 months.

Can the cabinet secretary tell me how long it will take for the delays and backlogs to be meaningfully tackled, and does he accept that although there might be more NHS staff than there were before, demand is higher? How will the Scottish Government tackle the backlogs without piling considerable additional pressure on existing staff?

Humza Yousaf: Jamie Halcro Johnston is in genuine danger of denying the impact that Covid has had. I am not saying that there were no issues, challenges or problems pre-pandemic—of course there were. However, it would be equally ridiculous to suggest that the pandemic has not had a major impact—rather than a slight or marginal impact—on the NHS and the services that it provides.

I will not rehearse all the targets and ambitions in the recovery plan, but I note that, crucially, we intend to increase NHS capacity by at least 10 per cent to address the backlog of care. We will increase our funding to the NHS. The next financial year will see it getting a record settlement of more than £18 billion. We will continue to ensure that we have record staffing in our NHS and that the staff are the best-paid NHS staff in the United Kingdom.

As I said in my first answer, we want to ensure that there are appropriate alternative pathways that allow people to be treated as close to home as possible.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Getting access to primary care treatment is of fundamental importance. The health secretary will be aware of the challenges that NHS Lanarkshire faces, which are driven by demand and staffing pressures and have resulted in NHS Lanarkshire scaling back some of the services that are provided by general practitioners. I am reassured that that is being reviewed weekly, and I am reassured by the conversations that I have had with the health secretary about the situation. Can he update me on action that the Scottish Government is taking to support NHS Lanarkshire, and general practices in particular, to allow those services to return as quickly as possible?

Humza Yousaf: I thank Neil Gray for raising the issue with me directly. I will host a meeting with Lanarkshire MSPs from various political parties and the health board on Monday. I spoke to Dr

Andrew Buist from the BMA today on the issue. Access to GPs is crucial.

We will support staff across the NHS where we can. Neil Gray will be aware that an exemption exists that allows staff to return when they are a close contact of somebody who has tested positive. That used to require a negative polymerase chain reaction—PCR—test, but I have, based on clinical advice, removed that requirement, which should help with the staffing issue.

No single thing can help with the staffing issue, but we are doing many things. I assure the member that we have regular engagement with NHS Lanarkshire, in particular.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Waiting times were already a significant problem before the pandemic hit. Before the pandemic, 450,000 people were waiting. Now, the number has gone up to 650,000. One of the royal colleges has told me that one significant barrier to catching up with waiting lists—certainly, for operations—is that there is simply no space in hospital settings. In addition to creating capacity, what consideration has the cabinet secretary given to utilising spare theatres, such as those at the Vale of Leven district general hospital?

Humza Yousaf: Jackie Baillie has asked a good question and made an important point. The Government is working centrally to see where we might have theatre space, where we might have nursing and clinical staff, and how we can marry the two. Some of that work has been done.

The Golden Jubilee national hospital plays a crucial role, and I talk to the health board regularly about how to maximise its capacity. However, Jackie Baillie is right that other acute care sites exist, which might have the theatre space but not quite the number of clinical staff. That work is ongoing; I am happy to continue to keep Ms Baillie and other members updated on it.

Minor Injury Units (Reopening)

2. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when it will release its plans for the reopening of minor injury units. (S6O-00627)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): I make it clear that there is no national policy to close minor injury units. Throughout the pandemic, the majority of MIUs have remained open, but I know that in some health boards—NHS Grampian, for example—units have closed temporarily to allow staff to be allocated to areas with the greatest need, such as in Covid assessment centres.

I should also say that we do not have a specific policy on the provision of minor injury units in communities. We leave local health boards to make those decisions at the local level, following clinical advice.

To ensure that everyone can continue to get the right care at the right time, we have invested £23 million this year for the redesign of urgent care. Under the new approach, NHS 24 is now available 24/7 for people who think that they need accident and emergency services, but whose illness is not life threatening. Through that service, people might be offered a virtual consultation, receive care closer to home or receive a scheduled appointment during a safe time at A and E.

Douglas Lumsden: The Turriff minor injury unit provided an essential service to the local community. Without it, Turriff residents have to make long journeys to already crowded A and E departments. Constituents have raised fears about the long-term future of the Turriff MIU, which was shut temporarily 20 months ago.

Can the cabinet secretary commit to the reopening of the Turriff MIU and give a timescale for my constituents who have been deprived of easy access to health care?

Humza Yousaf: I will leave such decisions to be made locally, but I will, of course, raise that point with the health board.

Douglas Lumsden's central point is correct. If minor injury units are not open, first, people might have to travel further, and secondly, they will go to acute sites that are already busy and under pressure.

I completely understand and agree with the member's rationale that minor injury units should remain open where possible; they are open in the vast majority of health boards. However, Douglas Lumsden is right to raise the specific issue. I will raise it with the health board and update him on those conversations.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): Figures that were published yesterday show that for the week ending 9 January only 60.4 per cent of patients who attended A and E in NHS Forth Valley were seen within four hours. I thank all the staff who continue to work immensely hard to try to improve that situation.

Given the pressure that has been placed on A and E departments, has consideration been given to reopening a minor injury unit in NHS Forth Valley?

Humza Yousaf: I am sure that consideration has been given to the matter. I speak to the Forth Valley board regularly, and I know that Gillian Mackay does, too—she and I had a conversation

before Christmas around the specific challenges in relation to NHS Forth Valley.

Although NHS Forth Valley is challenged, I expect improvement. I will not comment on next week's figures until they are published, but we know that the week ending 9 January was particularly pressured because of the high level of staff absences, Covid occupancy and the cumulative effects of the pandemic over the past 22 months.

I assure Gillian Mackay that NHS Forth Valley is leaving no stone unturned in trying to better that performance. I expect it to continue to ensure that local members are kept updated on the improvement plan.

The Presiding Officer: Question 3 is not lodged.

Care Inspectorate (Inspection and Assessment of Care Homes)

4. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting the Care Inspectorate in its role of inspecting and assessing care homes. (S6O-00629)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): My officials and I are in regular contact with the Care Inspectorate to discuss a range of strategic issues including inspections and resources. Under the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010, Scottish ministers are also required to approve the Care Inspectorate's annual scrutiny and assurance plan, which underpins their activity and is reviewed regularly. In 2021-22, the Scottish Government provided the Care Inspectorate with additional and recurring budget of £4 million to meet resource pressures.

Alexander Burnett: The number of inspections of care homes has decreased by 41 per cent, from 1,372 in 2016-17 to just 812 in 2020-21. That decline was happening even before the pandemic. Following storm Arwen, it has come to light that a number of care homes and assisted living sites did not have adequate resilience planning, and that would have been picked up by inspections. Does the minister agree that the reduced resilience is a direct result of the decrease in the number of inspections? What action will he take to rectify that?

Kevin Stewart: I am keen to hear from Mr Burnett the details of those resilience matters. If he wishes to write to me, I will respond accordingly.

During the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak, the Care Inspectorate, with the agreement of Scottish ministers, took the decision

to scale down inspections, recognising that they might put an unnecessary burden on the care sector. It could also have contributed to the spreading of Covid-19 and put its inspectors at risk. That reflected the position of other United Kingdom and Irish regulators. That decision has been criticised, but it was the right thing to do. On-site care home inspections resumed in May 2020.

During the pandemic, it has not been possible for the Care Inspectorate to inspect all adult care home services in the conventional way. Instead, the Care Inspectorate has adopted a more targeted, intelligence-led and risk-based approach to service inspections. That approach has prioritised on-site inspections of care homes for older people and of services where immediate risk is identified.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Last week, it was reported that one third of Scottish care homes are now restricting visits because of the high prevalence of infections in communities and the interpretation of a managed outbreak by public health authorities. Relatives, however, feel that, with a correct testing regime and protective measures in place, visiting should be maintained in line with guidance. Indeed, some have called for the Care Inspectorate to take on the key role of checking that testing is robust, comprehensive and publicly reported in inspection reports to provide confidence and keep homes open to visitors. As we move forward, will the minister look at that role for the Care Inspectorate in monitoring, reporting and ensuring that care homes remain open to visitors?

Kevin Stewart: The Care Inspectorate is already looking at homes in which visiting is not what it should be. I thank the Care Inspectorate for the help that it has given the Government during these times.

I hope that changes to the Public Health Scotland guidance, which will be issued today, will make some differences and ensure that relatives have access to their loved ones in care homes. As always, I am keen to hear from members where there might be difficulties so that we can follow those up with colleagues in the Care Inspectorate in order to get it right for residents of care homes and their relatives.

Social Care (Financial Support for Personal Protective Equipment)

5. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to extend financial support for PPE in the social care sector. (S6O-00630)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): Social care providers can claim back PPE costs over and above their usual

amount. In 2021-22, £862 million has been allocated to help with costs arising from Covid-19, which demonstrates our commitment to supporting the sustainability and resilience of the sector.

A decision will be taken in due course about all financial support measures for social care providers post-March. Support is also available to social care providers, including unpaid carers and personal assistants, through local PPE hubs for emergency PPE supply. We are working with NHS National Services Scotland on how best to supply PPE over the longer term.

Russell Findlay: I thank the minister for that commitment.

The cost of PPE is only one of the increased costs that the sector faces. Will the minister heed concerns and ensure that it is fully funded for the true costs of care through the renegotiations on the national care home contract?

Kevin Stewart: The Government is not involved in the negotiation of the national care home contract. That is a matter for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the care providers—they are the ones that make the decisions on that, not the Government.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I want to ask about access to FFP3 masks in social care. Have risk assessments been carried out by employers if FFP3 masks are not routinely provided? Are those dynamic assessments that reflect increases in the levels of coronavirus transmission? Are individual assessments available for those staff who consider themselves to be at risk?

Kevin Stewart: In November, winter respiratory guidance was published that sets out the appropriate PPE to use in different circumstances. All of that is in line with the World Health Organization guidance.

PPE guidance is developed by infection prevention and control experts on a four-nations basis. The United Kingdom IPC cell is responsible for providing advice and guidance in relation to PPE requirements and IPC measures more generally.

If Ms Baillie requires further detail, I would be happy to respond accordingly, but we are following the updated guidance.

Social Care (Fife)

6. **Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its discussions on social care provision in Fife. (S6O-00631)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): We are in daily contact

with health and social care partnerships, and we continue to monitor closely the on-going impact of the pandemic and the challenges that that brings for the social care sector nationwide. Health boards and health and social care partnerships have provided assurances that people who are in need of the most urgent care and support will continue to receive it and that its delivery will be prioritised.

The Scottish Government's "Adult Social Care Winter Preparedness Plan 2021-22" sets out measures to address social care provision in all local authorities, including Fife Council, and outlines how we will support people who use services, the workforce and unpaid carers.

Annabelle Ewing: Although I well understand that responsibility for the delivery of social care services in Fife lies with Fife Council, NHS Fife and, of course, the health and social care partnership, given the very great challenges in Fife at this time, notwithstanding the tremendous efforts of our front-line social care staff, what help can the Scottish Government offer so that all those who need social care get the services that they are entitled to on a timely basis?

Kevin Stewart: I thank Ms Ewing for her question. I know that she has been pursuing the matter vigorously. At question time last week, she asked the Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery whether we thought that folk in Fife were straining every sinew to deliver for people locally. Having talked to the chief officer of the health and social care partnership on Monday, I think that that is the case. She has said that the past three weeks have been the most strenuous three weeks in her career, and I believe that staff are doing all that they can.

As for Government support, NHS Fife was allocated £7 million from the additional £300 million of winter funding that was announced on 5 October. That included £2.7 million for interim care and £4.2 million to expand care-at-home capacity. I know that Fife is ensuring that that money is spent wisely and that it is doing its level best.

We fully appreciate the problems that local partnerships are having in providing social care at this time. Yesterday, the Deputy First Minister convened a special meeting with local council leaders, health boards and local authority chief executives, along with representatives from the third sector, to identify further ways in which we can support the social care sector, including in Fife. We will continue to have those discussions and to monitor, and we, as a Government, will continue to do all that we can to support the social care sector across Scotland.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister really should not be satisfied with the

assurance that those with the most urgent needs are having them addressed, because, every single day in Fife, many people are not getting important and essential visits. They are missing out on meals, tuck-ins and medicines. Will the minister realise that the issue has been building up for years and that we should no longer take carers for granted? We need them, we need them now and we should start paying them properly.

Kevin Stewart: We recognise that there needs to be support for the social care sector. On the issue of pay, we have announced two pay increases, funded by the Government, over the past few months. We have a way to go in relation to pay and conditions. One of the reasons why I am so keen to see a national care service is so that we can have national pay bargaining and set the right conditions for folk in the sector.

I agree with Mr Rennie that there are folk out there who are not getting the levels of care that they had previously. However, we are at the most precarious stage in this pandemic. Although I am glad to see the number of Covid cases reducing, there are still a number of Covid cases. There are folk off and winter pressures, and it is fair to say that staff are tired, too.

I know that NHS Fife is doing its level best, and we will continue to support its staff in any way that we possibly can. The daily discussions between the Government and health and social care partnerships will continue. We will do our level best to support them to the utmost, and I know that they will do all that they can to support the folk in their communities to get the right care.

Long Covid (Support)

7. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the support that it is providing to the reported increasing number of people with long Covid. (S6O-00632)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): We continue to implement the 16 commitments contained in our approach paper, which is backed by a £10 million long Covid support fund.

We have launched a long Covid information platform on NHS Inform to help people manage their symptoms, and we continue to support clinicians to access evidence-based information and advice to inform assessments, investigations and referrals.

Finally, NHS National Services is establishing a strategic network, bringing together clinical experts, national health service boards and—most crucially—those with lived experience, to support the on-going development, resourcing and

implementation of services for people with long Covid.

Pam Gosal: In September 2021, the Scottish Government earmarked £10 million for a long Covid support fund. Four months on, what improved or better co-ordinated services are now in place to care for and support the 100,000 Scots suffering with long Covid? Why has the Government decided not to invest in dedicated long Covid clinics?

Humza Yousaf: I thank Pam Gosal for recognising the investment that the Scottish Government has made, which is crucial and important and will help when it comes to the development of our long Covid response. That response is developing, of course, because we are continuing to learn more about long Covid as time goes on. That is why we have also taken the decision to invest in research, which is important, alongside the practical action that I outlined and that our framework outlines.

Of course, there is nothing preventing NHS boards from developing long Covid clinics using, for example, the Hertfordshire model, which I think Pam Gosal and other colleagues have referenced before. There is no barrier to boards doing that, but to suggest or allude to the idea that long Covid clinics are the panacea or solution for those who are suffering from long Covid would be misguided. We let health boards take the approach that works for them locally.

I am pleased that we have invested £10 million. I will continue to keep a close eye on and pay close attention to the issue, and if further resourcing is required, we will continue to explore that.

Breast Screening Programme (Resumption of Self-referral for Over-70s)

8. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the date by which self-referral for over-70s to the breast screening programme will resume. (S6O-00633)

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): Although programme capacity remains challenging due to Covid-19, the pause on self-referrals allows appointments to be prioritised for women aged 50 to 70. However, I recognise the anxiety that the pause is causing, and I have asked officials to accelerate consideration of restart options that would not unduly impact appointment times for the eligible screening population. That will not be easy. Any decision will be informed by clinical advice and the on-going pandemic.

In the meantime, if anyone, of any age, is concerned that they may have symptoms of breast

cancer, they should immediately make an appointment with their general practitioner practice.

Liam McArthur: With cancer diagnosis rates down during Covid and the overall rising trend in the incidence of cancer, many women in my constituency have been concerned about their inability to self-refer for breast screening. As the minister knows, Orkney is one of the areas that are reliant on mobile screening units turning up every three years. Does she accept that, as the screening service returns to pre-pandemic arrangements, there is a case for looking at what more might be done in places such as Orkney to ensure that those who need and wish to be screened can have that opportunity, and can she confirm that there are no plans to move from a three-year to a five-year cycle for screening?

Maree Todd: I fully understand the concern of the women in Orkney and I can assure everyone that women who live on the islands will not be forgotten. Work on options to restart will consider the impact on those who rely on mobile screening solutions, whether on the islands or on the mainland.

On the review of screening frequency and screening age, all those decisions are guided by the United Kingdom National Screening Committee, which will be looking at evidence. I am not aware of a change to five-year screening, but should the committee come forward with that recommendation, we would be inclined to accept it, because it would be based on clinical evidence. The UK National Screening Committee looks at all the evidence relating to screening programmes and gives guidance on a four-nations basis, and all four nations tend to follow that guidance.

The Presiding Officer: I regret that, as we are over time, I cannot take any further questions. There will be a short pause before we move to the next portfolio.

Social Justice, Housing and Local Government

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next portfolio is social justice, housing and local government. If a member wishes to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question, or indicate so in the chat function by entering the letter R.

Inequalities and Child Poverty (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley)

1. **Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is tackling inequalities and child poverty in Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley. (S6O-00634)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Tackling child poverty is a national mission for this Government and we are making considerable investment to increase family incomes and reduce household costs. In 2020-21, we spent £2.5 billion in targeted support for low-income households, including nearly £1 billion to support low-income families with children. This year, through our Scottish child payment and bridging payments, we will put around £130 million directly into the pockets of low-income families across Scotland who need it most, including in the member's constituency. We will further increase the support that is available to families by doubling the Scottish child payment to £20 per week from April this year.

Willie Coffey: I thank the cabinet secretary for her detailed answer.

On 11 January, the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee heard Unison join with the Tories to complain that the Scottish budget will do nothing to reduce inequalities in Scotland. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the Scottish Government has spent £594 million on mitigating the budget cuts that the Tory Government imposed on the poorest people in Scotland, which includes £83 million to pay for the bedroom tax alone? Will she also confirm that we will continue to fund child support payments and expand the school clothing grant and free school meals in my constituency? Will she confirm that those measures are just a few examples of how the Scottish National Party Government is directly tackling child poverty and inequality in Scotland?

Shona Robison: I confirm that, and I confirm that the 2022-23 Scottish budget continues significant investment to tackle poverty and inequality and strengthen public services, including more than £3.9 billion towards benefits expenditure, which will provide support to more than 1 million people in Scotland. We are also investing £831.5 million towards the delivery of affordable housing, £65 million for employability support and the first £50 million of the whole family wellbeing fund. We will continue to fund the expansion of free lunches and the provision of free meals during school holidays to the children who most need them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take a supplementary question. I note that the question related to child poverty in Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley; I also note that both the questioner and the cabinet secretary widened out the subject matter.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Only one in four eligible children will get the Scottish child payment at the £20 rate: 170,000 children will not get the new rate because they are on bridging payments, and 125,000 children will not

get anything at all. Those children need the extra money. Will the cabinet secretary say whether she will double the bridging payment for those families?

Shona Robison: As Pam Duncan-Glancy knows, she and I had an exchange about that at the Social Justice and Social Security Committee last week, when I told her that we are fully committed to rolling out the Scottish child payment to under-16s by the end of 2022 and that, until full roll-out, we will continue to deliver the innovative bridging payments of £520 a year, making use of local authority data to deliver immediate support to around 150,000 children at a cost of £78 million a year.

We have gone as far as we can with the doubling of the Scottish child payment to £20 from April 2022. Of course, if Pam Duncan-Glancy or anyone else wants to discuss amendments to the budget, I am sure that we can do that, but members will have to show from where in the budget the additional money would come.

Unsafe Cladding (Help for Residents)

2. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to help residents in flats that have unsafe cladding. (S6O-00635)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): We are committed to ensuring the safety of people in homes with unsafe cladding. We are progressing with our single building assessment and cladding remediation programme, which is free to home owners, and 25 high-priority residential blocks of flats have already been selected for the initial phase of the programme. Inspections are under way and we expect the first completed reports soon. We expect that the majority of buildings will be shown to be safe. Where issues are found, we will seek appropriate solutions for remediation and urge other parties, such as developers, to play their part.

Graham Simpson: We have been pressing the Scottish Government to take action on the matter for years and it has failed to do so. Thousands of Scots are trapped in unsafe flats, with little hope of ever selling them.

Last week, in England, Michael Gove put developers on notice. They have two months to agree to a funding scheme, or measures could be put into law. What is happening here? Clauses in the Building Safety Bill will allow the United Kingdom Government to introduce a levy on developers of high-rise buildings. What is happening here? Why has flammable cladding still not been banned in Scotland? When will it be banned?

Shona Robison: That is quite a misrepresentation of the position. The single—
[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excuse me for a second, cabinet secretary. I do not want all that shouting from a sedentary position. We want to hear the answer from the cabinet secretary, please. Cabinet secretary, please resume.

Shona Robison: The single building assessment has been an innovative approach, and it is being considered in other parts of the United Kingdom. Our assessments will help us to understand the scope and scale of the cladding issues across Scotland.

To reassure people, while the majority of buildings will be shown to be safe, where issues are found we will seek the most appropriate solutions for remediation. We of course want other parties such as developers to continue to play their part where construction is found to be unsafe.

The member mentioned Michael Gove. I have written to Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, but I have yet to receive any detail on consequential in addition to the £97.1 million. I will continue to press the secretary of state for details in relation to the original £3.5 billion announcement that was made in the UK budget in February last year. In relation to the announcement of an additional £4 billion on 10 January, which we were notified about only on the day of the announcement, we welcome the announcement on making developers pay, but we need to see the detail of what that means for the Scottish budget. We need to go beyond the £97 million, but we need to know what resources will be coming forward.

We will continue to make the progress that we are making through the innovative single building assessment. I would have thought that members across the chamber would welcome that.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): The cabinet secretary has just answered the question that I was going to ask, but I will repeat it. Can she advise us what updates the Scottish Government has had from the UK Government regarding the consequential that it has promised and we are expecting in order to take the work forward?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, you can give a very brief answer if you feel that you have already answered that question.

Shona Robison: As I said, I am happy to keep Parliament apprised of any response that we get from Michael Gove and the UK Government, but it is important that we can give certainty for the remediation programme beyond the £97 million that we have already committed. We are

determined to progress with the single building assessment and to get the works under way and done, but we need the UK Government to give us clarity on the funding that will be available beyond the £97 million.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): This is a Scottish Government responsibility. The minister must understand that flat owners across the country are deeply anxious at the snail's pace that the Government is moving at. When will we get some progress so that we can give flat owners assurance? What is the date by which the work will be done, and what funding will be forthcoming from the Government?

Shona Robison: I do not know whether Willie Rennie heard my first answer, but I said that there is already work under way on the 25 high-priority residential blocks of flats, which were the pilot for the single building assessment, so that we can see what the scale of remediation is likely to be across Scotland. As I said in my initial answer, the inspections are under way, and we expect the first completed report soon.

I would have thought that, when we are getting on and doing something, which other parts of the UK are looking at because it is a good model, that would be welcomed. I am as keen as anyone else in the chamber to make progress, but specific, complex engineering projects have to be undertaken. When we get the completed reports, I will be happy to keep Parliament updated about them.

Covid-19 (Welfare Support for People in Employment)

3. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how its welfare policies have supported people in employment who have been impacted by Covid-19. (S6O-00636)

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson): We have a wide range of support available for people in employment and on low incomes. That includes the majority of our social security benefits: our five family payments, discretionary housing payments and the £500 self-isolation support grant. Local authorities have awarded 56,317 self-isolation support grants, totalling £28.2 million, between October 2020 and November 2021. Our Scottish welfare fund has provided almost £63 million to around 60,000 households since March 2020 to help those on low incomes. By October 2021, around 530,000 households had received our £130 low-income pandemic payment, which was an investment of nearly £70 million to assist people in need.

Marie McNair: Does the minister agree that the level of statutory sick pay, which is set by the United Kingdom Government at one of the lowest rates in Europe, has been found wanting during the pandemic? Will he join me, the Scottish Trades Union Congress and anti-poverty groups in calling for an increase in statutory sick pay, ensuring that it gives the necessary financial support to those who are unable to work due to Covid-19 and other health conditions?

Ben Macpherson: I would absolutely agree, and because employment law is reserved, we will continue to call on the UK Government to increase statutory sick pay to match the real living wage.

Earlier in the pandemic, the then Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to ask the UK Government to make statutory sick pay more responsive. In September last year, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy wrote to the chancellor, asking him to reconsider the closure of the statutory sick pay rebate scheme. We are in agreement that the current level is not fit for purpose, and we will continue to make that point to the UK Government at appropriate opportunities.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): One of the few positives to come out of the pandemic is that flexible working from home has become more mainstream. It suits many disabled people. Will the minister commit to engaging with employers and reporting back to Parliament on how we can continue to foster that inclusive working style post-pandemic, while taking into account issues of isolation, loneliness and social participation?

Ben Macpherson: I thank Jeremy Balfour for raising those important points, and I agree with the sentiment behind his question. I would like to take that suggestion away and engage further with Mr Balfour and the finance and economy ministers to consider the points that he has raised.

Local Authority Decision Making (Support)

4. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it will support local authorities to make decisions on local services based on local priorities. (S6O-00637)

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson): Local authorities are independent corporate bodies with their own powers and responsibilities. The Scottish Government has committed to supporting councils with a finance settlement of over £12.5 billion in 2022-23. That represents a cash increase of £917.9 million, or 7.9 per cent, which is the equivalent of a real-terms increase of 5.1 per cent.

Donald Cameron: Analysis by the Scottish Parliament information centre shows that almost 18 per cent of councils' budgets is ring fenced for Scottish Government initiatives, which is a steep rise from just 4 per cent in 2018-19. Why has ring fencing increased by over four times in recent years? Does the minister acknowledge that that reduces the ability of councils to deliver services based on local needs?

Ben Macpherson: Although ring-fenced funding is meant to increase investment in services such as our schools and nurseries, local authorities have autonomy to allocate 93 per cent—£11.6 billion—of the funding that we provide, plus all locally raised income.

However, the Scottish Government recognises that local authorities have repeatedly called for the removal of ring fencing in the settlement and for a greater focus on trust and partnership working. On that basis, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy, Kate Forbes, has committed to reviewing all ring-fenced funding as part of the forthcoming resource spending review. We would welcome constructive engagement from local government in that process to ensure that the removal of any ring fencing goes hand in hand with achieving our shared priorities and outcomes, while also ensuring maximum value for money.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Social Justice and Fairness Commission, of which I had the pleasure of being deputy convener, reported last year. It recommended an increased use of participatory budgeting in local government to ensure that local people had a greater say in their local communities and felt that there was greater local accountability and that their communities reflected their needs. Would the Scottish Government support an expansion of that?

Ben Macpherson: The Scottish Government certainly does support participatory budgeting as one mechanism for involving people in decision making. In my constituency, I have seen the significant success of participatory budgeting in the Leith Chooses initiative. Our national participatory budgeting support programme has enabled more than 122,000 voters to have a direct say on the disbursement of more than £6.6 million. We will continue to work with the national participatory budgeting strategic group, which has produced the framework for the future of participatory budgeting in Scotland, with a particular focus on health and wellbeing, education, housing and climate change.

Affordable Homes (2032 Target)

5. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans to build 110,000 affordable homes by 2032. (S6O-00638)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Scotland has led the way in the delivery of affordable housing across the United Kingdom and I am proud of our record of delivering more than 105,000 affordable homes since 2007.

We remain committed to our target of delivering 110,000 affordable homes by 2032. To support that aim, our draft budget increase of £174 million for affordable housing brings investment in 2022-23 to £831 million and total investment across this parliamentary session to £3.6 billion. That means that we can continue the important work, started in 2007, of ensuring that everyone in Scotland has a warm, safe and affordable place to live.

Sue Webber: Affordable housing is particularly important in Edinburgh, where the average house price has now surpassed £300,000 for the first time. However, affordable housing statistics that were published last week show that only 822 affordable homes were completed in Edinburgh in 2020-21. That is a drop of more than 35 per cent on the previous year.

Homes for Scotland has warned of flaws in the City of Edinburgh Council's proposed city plan 2030 and says that it will not be able to meet the housing demand in the coming years. Will the Government step up investment in affordable housing? Will the cabinet secretary guarantee that councils such as the City of Edinburgh Council will be able to access the grant funding that they need to meet local housing demand?

Shona Robison: Edinburgh will benefit from investment of £233.8 million towards the delivery of more good-quality affordable homes. That is an increase of £32.4 million on the previous five years.

Sue Webber talked about progress over 2020-21. I point out that, during that time, the affordable housing programme was hit by the pause in non-essential construction from 23 March to 10 June. Construction then resumed in a safer, slower way in line with social distancing guidelines but, of course, that had an impact on the pace of the delivery of affordable homes whether in Edinburgh or anywhere else. I am sure that Sue Webber and most reasonable people listening understand that.

Progress is picking up again. As I said in my initial answer, we are determined to make progress on the delivery of affordable homes in Edinburgh and elsewhere. I make the point that the Government's per capita spending on affordable housing is more than three times higher than the UK Government's. We will continue to prioritise the delivery of affordable homes, which is in stark contrast to the Government south of the border.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): What work is under way with local partners regarding the 11,000 affordable homes that are secured for remote, rural and island communities?

Shona Robison: With £3.6 billion of funding in place for this parliamentary session, we are working closely with partners to plan the delivery of affordable homes in rural, remote and island communities. Our demand-led rural and islands housing fund is supporting community groups and others that are not able to access the main affordable housing supply programme. We have committed to develop a remote, rural and islands housing action plan informed by a wide range of stakeholders, including community representatives, as that will be vital to ensuring that the plan delivers for more remote rural and island communities.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Rent payments are the single biggest cost for many households. Year on year, rent increases from social landlords squeeze already stretched family budgets. What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that affordable housing is truly affordable?

Shona Robison: I welcome Ruth Maguire back to the Parliament. It is great to see her here.

We have a clear interest in housing association rent affordability. That is even more the case given the pandemic, which for many people has caused hardship and increased living costs.

Individual social landlords are legally required to consult their tenants on any rent increases, and to strike the best balance between rent levels and meeting the housing needs of local communities. The Scottish social housing charter requires landlords to take account of what current and prospective tenants are likely to be able to afford, and the Scottish Housing Regulator monitors rent levels and rent affordability.

We are considering how to build on the strong work on rent setting in the social rented sector that has already been put in place as part of the rented sector strategy that we are currently consulting on. Lastly, we have committed to develop a shared understanding of housing affordability that is fit for the future and takes account of the real costs of housing.

Homeless Accommodation (Rural Communities)

6. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to provide homeless accommodation in rural communities. (S6O-00639)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Providing a suitable home for everyone is at the heart of our “Housing to 2040” strategy, and we are providing local authorities with investment of £53.5 million over 2018 to 2024 to tackle homelessness and move people as quickly as possible into settled accommodation with the right support.

Communities will also be supported by the continuation of the rural and islands housing fund, which is backed by £30 million of investment in the current session of Parliament. We have committed to delivering 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, of which 70 per cent will be for social rent and 10 per cent will be in remote, rural and island communities.

Evelyn Tweed: Many of my constituents cannot access homeless accommodation in rural areas at all and are having to move into the city of Stirling, where they are remote from work and family support. How will the Scottish Government support councils to provide homeless accommodation where it is needed?

Shona Robison: As I said, more than £53.3 million of resource planning assumptions have been allocated to Stirling Council’s affordable housing supply programme for five years up to 2025-26, and we are providing up to £30 million in the current session of Parliament for the demand-led rural and islands housing fund.

As I said, we are developing an action plan for remote, rural and island housing. Stirling Council has received more than £430,000 to develop and implement its rapid rehousing transition plan between 2019-20 and 2021-22 and will receive an allocation of £132,000 for 2022-23. That funding helps to prevent homelessness and provide settled accommodation to homeless households.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Last year, there were more than 27,000 households in Scotland assessed as being homeless, while 47,000 homes, valued at £8 billion, lay empty, including in rural areas. Compulsory purchase powers are no use to councils without fair funding.

I welcome the Scottish Government’s “Housing to 2040” proposal to establish a new fund to enable local authorities to bring empty homes back into residential use. Can the minister confirm by what date the fund will be ready to receive applications from councils, and how much it will make available in its first year of operation?

Shona Robison: We are determined to bring as many empty homes as possible back into operation. The empty homes officers, who have been working in local authorities to identify empty homes, have been doing a really good job.

I am happy to keep the member informed once we are in a position to announce the beginning of the empty homes fund, the timeframe that we will be working to and the amount of money that will be in the fund. I will keep the member updated on that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are two more questions listed in the *Business Bulletin*. I am keen to take them both, so I would appreciate succinct questions and answers.

Fire Safety Regulations (Compliance)

7. **Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on whether all homes are on track to comply with the new fire safety regulations by February. (S6O-00640)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): The regulations were introduced to protect lives and property, and to bring owner-occupied and social rented properties into line with the private rented sector and with new-build homes. We encourage everyone to install the alarms. As the regulations are not yet in force, information will be collected in the next Scottish house condition survey. As we have consistently said, the legislation says that work should be done within a reasonable period that takes into account individual circumstances, and no home owner will be penalised if they are unable to do the work.

Sarah Boyack: I thank the minister for her answer, but it is pretty shocking, given that the regulations were delayed by a year because of a lack of publicity about them during the pandemic. If the minister cannot tell me how many homes are now compliant, could she at least tell me how many people have received financial support from the fund that was allocated, given the cost of installing fire alarms in people's homes to meet the regulations and the fact that the Scottish Government underestimated that cost?

Shona Robison: In my statement, which is the next item of business, I will outline the publicity that there has been on the issue and, indeed, the awareness that is out there. I will cover that in some detail.

We have put £1.5 million into care and repair and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to support homeowners who might have struggled to put those appliances in place. From the most recent figures, I think that around 2,000 people have been supported in one way or another through the care and repair service, but I will go into more detail on that in my statement.

Scottish Child Payment (Kirkcaldy)

8. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how many families in the Kirkcaldy constituency have received the new Scottish child payment. (S6O-00641)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): We do not publish statistics on the Scottish child payment by constituency. However, we have data at local authority level which shows that just over 8,700 applications from clients in Fife had been approved for the Scottish child payment between the opening of applications in November 2020 and September 2021. The statistics are published quarterly and those figures are based on the most recently available official statistics, which cover the period up to the end of September 2021. Doubling the payment to £20 from April 2022 underlines our commitment to deliver on the national mission to tackle child poverty.

David Torrance: The Scottish child payment has already made a huge impact and the doubling of the payment shows that the Scottish Government is committed to using the limited powers that it has to tackle child poverty. As we look ahead into 2022, can the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government will provide further financial support to people with the roll-out of new devolved benefits?

Shona Robison: We are committing over £3.9 billion for benefit expenditure in 2022-23, providing support to over 1 million people in Scotland by March of next year. That includes doubling and extending the Scottish child payment, which is forecast to benefit 334,000 children by the end of 2022; our new low-income winter heating assistance, which will guarantee a £50 payment to around 400,000 low-income households from next winter; and replacing the United Kingdom Government's personal independence payment with the new adult disability payment from next summer, benefiting around 20,000 people in 2022-23, rising to over 400,000 in 2024-25.

Fire Alarm Standards

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Shona Robison on strengthened fire alarm standards. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement. There should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:58

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): The law on fire alarms is changing from 1 February in Scotland. There have been calls for a further delay to the legislation but, having considered the balance of risks, I am clear that it is not right to delay legislation that is designed to protect and save lives.

Ensuring that people are safe from the risk of fire in their homes is a key priority for the Scottish Government. The improved standards will reduce the risk of injury and death from house fires. One death from fire in Scotland's homes is one death too many.

Following the tragedy at Grenfell, the Scottish Government carried out a public consultation in 2017, which showed strong support for a new minimum standard for fire and smoke detectors across all housing, regardless of tenure. The legislation brings all homes to the same standard. For example, it ensures that social rented homes have the same fire safety standards as those that have already been in law for nearly a decade for the private rented sector. It also ensures that owner-occupied homes have the same safety standards as those that new-build homes have had for nearly 15 years.

The standard means that, from 1 February, all houses should have interlinked alarms, with one smoke alarm in the living room, one in each hallway and on each landing, a heat alarm in the kitchen and a carbon monoxide detector in each room that has a carbon-fuelled appliance, such as a gas boiler or fire. The alarms will support greater fire safety and prevent avoidable death.

Having interlinked alarms means that, when an alarm goes off in one part of the house, the rest also go off. For example, if someone is sleeping in a bedroom away from the kitchen where a fire starts, they will be alerted to the danger because all the alarms will go off. Interlinked alarms are very similar to the fire alarms that people already have, but the important interlinking provides extra safety. Although they can be wired into homes, most are battery operated, like the fire alarms that people have now, and they can communicate with one another.

Figures from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service show that, from 2020 to 2021, there were 44 deaths due to house fires in Scotland. In the four years from 2014 to 2018, for situations where fatalities were recorded, on average, 30 per cent of fires started in the living room and 15 per cent started in the kitchen. In 52 per cent of domestic fire incidents, a smoke alarm alerted occupants to the fact that there was a fire, which gave people a greater chance of escape. Interlinked fire and smoke alarms increase the chance of people being alerted more quickly, because they all go off simultaneously, regardless of where the fire starts. That is why we have introduced the same standards for all properties.

We are asking the social rented sector to make the change for its tenants and we know that that work is well progressed. We are also asking people who own their homes to take the step. The Scottish Government has already made more than £15 million of loan funding available for social landlords to procure and install the necessary alarms, which should help to ensure that social tenants are safe in their homes.

At an expected average cost of around £220, and sometimes less, I hope that the new fire alarm standard will be viewed as part of on-going improvements for people who own their homes. The improvement will protect their property and, importantly, can save lives. However, I know that people are feeling the cost-of-living squeeze right now and might feel that they do not have the money available, so I will make two points.

First, for those who own their home and are at high risk of fire or are elderly or disabled, we have provided £1.5 million, through the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and Care and Repair Scotland, to support home owners to have appropriate alarms fitted.

Secondly, local authorities have the duty to ensure compliance with the standards in their area, and they will be taking a proportionate and measured approach to compliance. They will take individual circumstances into account and reflect the evolving situation with the Covid-19 pandemic. I can be absolutely clear that there are no penalties for non-compliance and that no one will be penalised if they need more time, although I strongly encourage all home owners to make the changes and benefit from the improved protection against loss of life and property in the event of a fire. We progressed a full awareness-raising campaign through 2021, and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has confirmed that there will be a measured and proportionate approach to compliance.

The changes, including the change to the timing of implementation, have been carefully considered and consulted on over a number of years.

Following the Grenfell tower fire, the Scottish Government undertook a review of Scotland's building and fire safety regulatory frameworks. As part of that work, we prioritised a consultation on fire and smoke alarms. The consultation went ahead in 2017, with a wide range of respondents. There was very strong support for a new common minimum standard for fire and smoke detectors across all housing. People told us that they were in favour of swift action, with a proposed one-year period for the introduction of regulations but, in response to specific concerns from some stakeholders about the time that was needed to carry out the work, ministers agreed that the regulations should allow a period of two years for compliance.

The regulations introducing the new standards were unanimously supported by members of the Scottish Parliament's cross-party Local Government and Communities Committee on 19 December 2018. The regulations were set in law on 16 January 2019 and were intended to come into force on 1 February 2021.

However, in the light of the impact of Covid-19 during 2020, there were concerns about how the pandemic would affect home owners' ability to make changes to their homes in time for the original deadline, so a delay of 12 months was sought by ministers and agreed at the Local Government and Communities Committee meeting on 16 December 2020.

As was stated at that time, a longer delay was not right, as any delay to the regulation would be a delay in a measure to protect lives. That is why we remain committed to bringing in the new standards from 1 February 2022.

I hope that I have already provided reassurance on the need for the measures to improve fire safety in all types of home and to protect lives. Let me address other issues that I have heard raised.

I am aware of concerns about the validity of home insurance policies if compliance with the new legislation is not met, but I assure people that that is not the case. Throughout the legislative process, we have engaged proactively with the Association of British Insurers, which has ensured that its members are aware of the changes. It has stated that, although insurers might ask customers questions about whether their property is fitted with working fire alarms, they are not likely to ask questions about specific standards. Anyone who is unclear on their policy terms and conditions in relation to the new law should speak to their insurer.

Public awareness of the changes to the regulations is now high. Over five weeks in the summer of 2021, the Scottish Government ran an intensive awareness-raising media campaign

across television, radio and digital platforms. It reached 95 per cent of all adults across Scotland, with 85 per cent of them seeing the campaign and its vital public information message at least three times. In addition, more than 96,000 printed leaflets have been supplied to libraries across Scotland, we have regularly updated our dedicated website with information and advice, and we distributed an electronic toolkit of resources to key stakeholders.

The campaign was shown by independent researchers to have engaged the target audience, driven awareness of the new legislation and encouraged people to take action. Further research that was carried out in December 2021 showed that 88 per cent of home owners were aware of the new legislation.

We have also made materials available so that MSPs can inform their constituents about the important changes to fire alarms from February this year. Last autumn, I wrote to all MSPs with further information and frequently asked questions. Following this statement, I intend to write again to all MSPs to provide the most up-to-date information in order to support them in responding to questions from constituents.

The increased level of awareness has led to significant public interest in complying with the new standard, which is welcome, but I am aware that there have been challenges in meeting demand, exacerbated by global supply shortages of component parts, and in the supply of suitable tradespeople to carry out work in people's homes.

My officials have confirmed that, as of this morning, fire alarms are currently available for purchase and delivery where the manufacturer has a United Kingdom supply chain. Some manufacturers of fire alarms continue to have supply chain issues with imported components, which limits the availability of their alarms for immediate purchase. However, as I have said before, the legislation makes allowance for the reasonable additional time that is needed in such a situation.

It is really important that I reiterate that, in setting a new standard for fire alarms for home owners and social landlords, bringing standards in line with those for other types of home, our foremost goal is to protect life and prevent avoidable deaths in the event of a fire.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. Any member wishing to ask a question should press their request-to-speak button or type R in the chat function.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. However, there is nothing new in it, which will be of concern to many householders across Scotland.

The cabinet secretary spoke about the awareness campaign and claimed that public awareness of the regulations is now high. However, the Scottish Government's own evaluation report, which was published this week, shows that one in 10 households—a significant number—is not aware of the new legislation. The regulations were postponed a year ago, which was a welcome step given the outcome of Covid-19 for home owners, particularly elderly and vulnerable home owners who did not want workmen coming into their homes.

Given that the Covid restrictions will not be lifted until Monday, why has the cabinet secretary not heard the call for a further delay? How many households in Scotland does the cabinet secretary believe still need to have the devices fitted? It is important to know, because the regulations come into force in just 13 days.

Shona Robison: The important thing here is to get on with supporting and encouraging home owners to put in the devices that could potentially save lives. I hope that we all agree on the importance of doing so.

With regard to people's awareness of the changes, as I said in my statement, the independent analysis shows that, at the end of last year, 88 per cent of home owners were aware of the new legislation. From my own mail bag, and from the number of people asking questions about the regulations, I know that awareness is high.

On the question about how many households require to have devices fitted, as I said in my response to Sarah Boyack's portfolio question, we will not know the answer until we have the Scottish household survey, which will ask that question. As I said in my statement, the recommendation had huge backing from the public. The duty is on us to do what we can, because one death from a preventable fire in a home is one too many. If those devices can help to save lives, we should surely all support their installation.

I reiterate that it is an important measure for home owners to take, and we are talking only about home owners here. Private and social tenants will have had the device provided already or will have it provided by their landlord. It is important that home owners prioritise getting a device installed, because it could literally save lives.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): We support this vital fire safety improvement, but, if home owners cannot comply, the measure will not

save the lives that we hope it will. A pensioner who called me yesterday, panicking that their insurance will be invalidated, was the latest person I have spoken to who wants to comply but cannot get the kit until March. The Association of British Insurers said that

"Insurers will expect that households and businesses are compliant with any legislation"

but that they are

"not likely to ask questions about specific standards. It will be for individual insurers to decide how they respond to the new standard".

Does the cabinet secretary accept that insurers will have every right to interpret the legal enforcement date and the standards as those that are in law and that relying on their not being likely to ask questions does not give home owners the assurance that they deserve? Letting that happen when many home owners cannot get access to the alarms is bad policy, so will the cabinet secretary instruct a formal delay and give home owners more time to source the alarms and comply?

Shona Robison: No, that would not be the right thing to do, because there has already been a delay. We are talking about devices that have the potential to save lives. If I delayed further, questions would rightly be asked of me. Given that they are potentially life-saving devices, it would not be right to delay the regulations coming in, but I recognise the issues that the member rightly raises.

I reiterate the work that we have done with the Association of British Insurers, which understands those issues very well. It has discussed those issues with its members and is ensuring that they are aware of the changes. It has stated clearly that, although insurers may ask customers whether a property is fitted with working fire alarms, it is not likely that they would ask about specific standards. That is the practice in the insurance industry. As I said in my statement, anyone who is unsure or unclear about their policy's terms and conditions in relation to the new law should, in the first instance, speak to their insurer.

In relation to access to alarms, I recognise that there have been issues over the past few months, but I have asked my officials on a regular basis to check availability in Scotland online through United Kingdom suppliers and through well-known do-it-yourself retailers, and they have told me that the availability of devices has improved and that the cost is around £200 if the home owner fits the alarms.

I also understand that some people might struggle, which is why Care and Repair Scotland has dealt with just short of 2,500 inquiries about

fire alarms since September last year and has supported people by installing the devices and through the provision of subsidised alarms to make sure that people who might be struggling can get them.

I will make a final point. Through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, local authorities have said they will take a light-touch approach to the enforcement of regulations. Local authorities will not be knocking on people's doors to check whether they have newly installed fire alarms, because we recognise that some people will take a bit longer, and they will have a reasonable period of time to comply. We have a duty, as elected members, to reiterate the importance of home owners fitting the alarms as quickly as they can.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind all members who wish to ask a question to check that their cards are inserted and that their request-to-speak buttons are pressed.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary said in her statement, the law has come about because of the tragic disaster at Grenfell, which led to the deaths of 72 people. Can the cabinet secretary outline what evidence the Scottish Government used to determine that the regulations will protect lives?

Shona Robison: We have considered the expert advice that has been provided to us. Interconnected alarms were recommended on the back of work that was done post-Grenfell by the expert group on improving fire safety.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Age Scotland has highlighted for much of the past year the continued anxiety among the public—particularly among older people—regarding letting trades people into their homes, due to the spread of the new strains of Covid.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that the prevalence of the virus for much of the past year means that it is simply not reasonable to expect people to meet the February deadline?

Shona Robison: I appreciate the concerns that Alexander Stewart has expressed. In some circumstances—when someone does not feel comfortable, as the member has cited, or when someone has been shielding—it is reasonable that people would not be able to meet the deadlines. We understand that point, and I have said throughout that local authorities—which, at the end of the day, are the enforcement agency—understand it too. They will therefore take a light-touch approach to ensure that it is accepted that people might need a bit more time to get the alarms installed, for those reasons or any other reasonable ones.

I hope that the Q and A that MSPs will get, with information that I will provide, will help to answer some of those constituent inquiries.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): How many lives is a full implementation of this specific measure expected to save in a year?

Given the current number of installers and their uneven spread across Scotland, and given the number of people who are unable to install the alarms themselves, how long does the Government anticipate that it will take to install alarms in every owner-occupied house in the country?

Shona Robison: As I said earlier, in 52 per cent of domestic fire incidents, a smoke alarm had alerted occupants to the fact that there was a fire, which gave people a greater chance of escape. Interlinked fire and smoke alarms increase the chance of being alerted more quickly by going off simultaneously regardless of where the fire starts, which undoubtedly will mean that more people are alerted earlier and more lives will be saved in Scotland each year, but it is hard to put a figure on that. That is the advice that experts have given.

With regard to the number of people who will comply and how quickly people will get those alarms fitted, I suspect that the vast majority of people will have alarms fitted before the 1 February deadline. We will know that number as we get the results of the household survey, which will be carried out over the next period. We recognise that a small number of people will require longer. As I said in a previous answer, it is important that people are given a reasonable period of time in which to comply. We will, of course, monitor the situation.

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): The Scottish Labour freedom of information request revealed that funding of £500,000 for care and repair services to provide the installation has helped barely 800 people. How many people have been supported so far—not at the end of the financial year—in Edinburgh, and can the cabinet secretary give an estimate of the number of households in Edinburgh who are still to comply with the regulations? Can the cabinet secretary ensure that funding will be given so that all low-income, disabled and pensioner households can comply?

Shona Robison: In my previous answer, I said that care and repair services across Scotland have supported around 2,500 people in one way or another. I do not have the specific figures for Edinburgh, but, if that would be helpful, I am happy to write to the member if that information exists at that level of detail.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): As was previously mentioned, the standards for those

interlinked alarms were set nearly 15 years ago for new builds and nearly a decade ago for the private sector. I agree that all houses should have the same standards. Why did the regulations take longer to introduce?

Shona Robison: In 2013, the Scottish Government published a sustainable housing strategy with a commitment to developing a new cross-tenure standard for housing. Since then, we have engaged with stakeholders to develop our proposal for a new housing standard for Scotland, based on housing as a human right, and we will seek views on that in a public consultation later this year.

Following the tragic fire at Grenfell in 2016, the Scottish Government made a commitment to accelerating the fire alarm elements of that new standard. The regulations, which were introduced to Parliament in 2018, will achieve that aim.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister really must stop saying that the alarms can be installed for £220 or less, because the figures are often far higher, and she knows that all too well.

Is this not a prime example of the Government's ability to talk a good game but inability to deliver? The Opposition even gave the Government an extra year to get this done, but it was still not possible. Lives could be at risk, so what has the Government got so badly wrong with this installation programme?

Shona Robison: I do not accept that characterisation of the situation at all. There was a delay because of Covid, and that was a good reason—it was supported by members across the chamber.

I have made it clear that the £220 is for the purchase of the alarm system and that the installation costs will be on top of that. However, most households will be able to install the alarms themselves. However, given that disability or age or whatever other issues might mean that people require support, we gave £1.5 million to Care and Repair and to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service so that they can help more vulnerable people to get their alarms installed. I would have thought that Willie Rennie would support that.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): A number of constituents have raised concerns about understanding the alarm requirements, and their availability and cost. Although I welcome the assurance that council enforcement will be light touch, how will the Scottish Government track progress on meeting the standard?

Shona Robison: As I said earlier, the Scottish house condition survey collects information on

homes and minimum standards for housing. The legislation will add adequate provision of fire alarms to that minimum standard, so that future iterations of the survey will collect data on compliance with that element of housing standards.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I do not know where the cabinet secretary's officials shop, but I have just checked and every B&Q in Edinburgh has no availability until after the relevant date. Perhaps the cabinet secretary could ask officials where they shop.

I am interested in the cabinet secretary's definition of "a bit more time" and "reasonable time". What do they mean in practice? Is it days, weeks or months?

Shona Robison: In a previous answer, I was clear about online retailers with UK supply chains and DIY retailers. I take Jeremy Balfour's point about Edinburgh, but there are online retailers available with UK supply chains that can supply these devices. My officials check that regularly—they checked it this morning.

I would have thought that Jeremy Balfour and other members would want to focus on supporting people to comply when they can, and to make sure that, in our dialogue with constituents, we reassure people that, if they need more time and if they are struggling to get a device because of availability issues in their area, that is a reasonable reason for having more time.

A "reasonable period" in legislation is never defined, as Jeremy Balfour will know. It is a reasonable period in the individual's circumstances. I would, however, hope that Jeremy Balfour and other members will reassure people that they will not be criminalised and hounded by local authority enforcement but we expect that, when they can, at the earliest opportunity, they will prioritise putting in these potentially life-saving alarms.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for providing advance sight of her statement, and I welcome the introduction of the regulations next month. Everyone should have at least that level of protection in their home, regardless of tenure.

Could the cabinet secretary say a little more about the implications of non-compliance, as there are no penalties for non-compliance, other than missing out on potentially life-saving measures? What are the key issues that people need to be aware of if they do not follow the regulations?

Shona Robison: The key issue is that the safety of such people will not be as enhanced as that of those who have interlinked fire safety devices. We know, because the experts have told

us, that having such devices could save lives. Therefore, I would have thought that the message from all of us, first and foremost, would be that people should comply as quickly as they can.

However, the member is right—there are no penalties, as such, for non-compliance. Local authorities have a duty to ensure compliance, but they will not do that by knocking on people's doors. That said, we are expecting people, as home owners, to make this a priority and to put the installation of such fire alarms above other things.

We understand that there are issues that will mean that people will require to have more time to have such devices installed. In response to a number of questions, I have explained what reasonable excuses, or reasonable reasons for needing more time, would be. The message to people is that they should do it as quickly as they can, because it could be life saving for them and their families.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): Many local authorities, including West Lothian Council, have removed care and repair services. Some constituents tell me that installers are scarce and that component shortages are delaying delivery of alarms that they had already ordered. In addition, cost-of-living pressures are causing practical and financial challenges.

Are there any other proactive actions that could be taken to help to resolve the real challenges that are being faced by some but by no means all home owners in getting private sector dwellings up to the same, important safety standards as other sectors? An example of such an action would be a public statement of assurance by the Association of British Insurers about where delays in the installation of such devices will leave people in the coming weeks.

Shona Robison: All local authorities have broad discretionary powers to provide assistance to home owners where work is needed to look after homes or to meet statutory standards. Local authorities are best placed to decide what assistance is provided to meet local priorities using local resources.

The additional support that we have provided to Care and Repair is targeted at assisting owners who are least able to fit alarms themselves. It is not intended to be a substitute for local initiatives by local authorities.

As regards any statements by the ABI, I understand that it has been communicating actively with its members to make them aware of the situation. I am happy to have regular dialogue with the ABI as to whether there is anything more that it can do in providing public-facing messages in the lead-up to the requirements coming into force on 1 February.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: After Christine Grahame, Graham Simpson will be the last MSP I am able to call. I ask for succinct questions and answers, so that I can get both members in.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary is aware, I wrote to her last year to raise many of the concerns that have been iterated today, so I welcome her statement. However, £200 is an optimistic figure, even for just the kit. Some people are paying £500 for supply and fit for a two-up, two-down property.

How can vulnerable and elderly people access the financial support from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service that the cabinet secretary mentioned? I was not aware that it was providing such support.

Shona Robison: I will make sure that that information is included in the circular that goes out to members. Care and Repair and the Fire and Rescue Service are providing practical advice and support to vulnerable people. We have had very good feedback on that support.

For brevity, as I said, I will make sure that the relevant information is included in the circular that is provided to members.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The penalty for non-compliance will come if people have insurance claims turned down because they do not have such alarms. Is the cabinet secretary seriously saying that that will not happen?

Shona Robison: I ask the member to remember what we are talking about here. We are talking about the installation of devices that the experts have told us could potentially save lives. I would have thought that that would have been the overriding concern and priority for every member of the Parliament.

On insurance, I could not have been clearer about what the ABI has said. It is a requirement to have working fire alarms. However, it does not specify the standards for those. It has been clear—that is what industry has told us. However, at the end of the day, everybody should make sure that they get in touch with their own insurance company if they have concerns.

I would have thought that some members—whether Graham Simpson or anyone else—would at least have welcomed the fact that this measure could potentially save lives. I find it extraordinary that members seem to be against these measures being brought in. I would hope that, in their communication with constituents, the first part of their communication is to reiterate the importance of complying, because this could be a lifesaving measure. That is what I would ask them all to do. The information that I will provide after the

statement will help them to ensure that they provide that accurate information to their constituents.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement. There will be a very short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Local Government Funding

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-02838, in the name of Miles Briggs, on protecting local government funding in Scotland. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button or enter R in the chat function now or as soon as possible. I advise the chamber that we are very tight for time. I would therefore be grateful if members could stick to their time allocation and note that we will probably have to accommodate any interventions in those allocations.

I call Miles Briggs to speak to and move the motion for around seven minutes.

15:32

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I open today's Scottish Conservative debate on local government finance by thanking all those who work in our local authorities across Scotland. It is incredibly important that we thank them for what they have done during the pandemic in going the extra mile to support all our communities.

Today's debate is an important one for Parliament to consider, because this Scottish National Party-Green budget is not acceptable and will not help services to recover from the pandemic.

After 15 years of this SNP Government underfunding local government in Scotland, there is increasing concern over the long-term financial sustainability of local government finances and the problems facing our Scottish councils that have been allowed to build up under this Government with no reform or leadership shown by SNP ministers. Put simply, council leaders across Scotland have nothing else that they can cut to save money and balance their books.

How we adequately fund local government is vitally important, which I think we all agree on. For many individuals and families, the local services that they depend on are delivered by their council. SNP ministers have underfunded councils for many years. From 2007 to 2019, the Scottish Government's budget increased at more than double the rate of the grant that SNP ministers passed on to local councils.

The question today is therefore a simple one: why have SNP ministers delivered such a poor financial settlement again this year?

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy (Kate Forbes): I respect Miles Briggs's position on supplementing the local government budget. Where would he take it from?

Miles Briggs: We have been absolutely clear. The finance secretary has seen £3.9 billion of additional Barnett consequentials from the United Kingdom Government. That should be handed on to local government—that is where we on this side of the chamber stand. We want to see a fair deal for local authorities, whereby the funding that the Scottish Government receives is adequately handed on to local authorities.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Miles Briggs: Very, very briefly.

Neil Gray: Miles Briggs will note that the Scottish Fiscal Commission has said that, year on year, the Scottish budget is down 5.2 per cent accounting for inflation. I want to see a fair settlement for local government that is also inflation proof. However, for him to be consistent, does he not reckon that the UK Government needs to make sure that the Scottish budget is inflation proof, too?

Miles Briggs: The member needs to understand that the Government that he supports has not handed on to local authorities the money that it has been given in Barnett consequentials—and it is not just Barnett consequentials; if we look at the national insurance contributions compensation, we see that that has not been passed on either. When the member raises those concerns in the chamber, he needs to speak to his own ministers to make sure that they have passed on those Barnett consequentials.

In bringing forward this debate today, I hope that it will give the SNP-Green Government the chance to think again and look at how to provide a fair deal for councils and the resources that they need to deliver vital local services. I fully respect that the Government might not want to hear this from me, but maybe it should listen to its own council leaders.

I welcome this week's U-turn by Nicola Sturgeon and the finance secretary, which means that they will now meet council leaders after a furious backlash in response to the SNP-Green Government's real-terms cut for local authorities. It is clear that, as things stand, the budget settlement will see a real-terms cut of around £371 million to the core local government budget, which has been frozen in cash terms.

In addition, analysis by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities found that additional policy obligations placed on local government in 2022-23 have been underfunded by around £100 million.

SNP-Green ministers have repeatedly said that they respect and want to work in partnership with our local authorities. When the budget comes back

to Parliament next week, we will see what that looks like. In the Government's amendment, no answers have been put forward. All that we see is that ministers are offering a citizens assembly to look at sources of local government funding. SNP ministers do not need a citizens assembly to tell them that they are short changing local government—they simply need to pick up the phone to SNP council leaders.

We need to see a sea change and a new partnership built between the Scottish Government and local authorities. That is why Scottish Conservatives are proposing a new fair funding formula to make sure that councils receive their fair share of funding when the Scottish Government does. Although the Barnett formula ensures that the Scottish Government's budget is linked to UK Government spending, there is no such protection for local government and the services that it provides.

The new fair funding formula would help to deliver a new financial framework that ensures that councils automatically receive a set percentage of the Scottish Government budget each year, mirroring the relationship that the Scottish Government has with the UK Government. That would prevent SNP ministers from consistently asking our councils to do more with less and it would prevent the situation that we see today, where SNP-Green ministers ring fence council budgets for their Scottish Government priorities on the one hand and cut council funding on the other.

I hope that all parties will unite today to support our councils. SNP-Green ministers cannot continue to simply pass the blame for their cuts to councils. The SNP-Green budget has yet again put council leaders the length and breadth of Scotland in the position of having to make huge cuts to services or dramatically increase council tax at the very time that ministers have received record levels of funding from the UK Government.

SNP-Green ministers need to think again. The Scottish Government must provide the resources that are needed to fund our good schools and social care services, and it must properly fund our councils to help to build stronger, safer and more prosperous communities. That is something that we should all unite around. I hope that, as the cabinet secretary listens to the debate, she understands that she has to look again at the Government budget that she has provided.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the calls made by COSLA and all council group leaders for the Scottish Government to deliver a much better financial settlement for the next financial year; further notes that COSLA states that the funding cut to the core revenue budget is £371 million in real terms, and calls on the Scottish Government to commit

to fair funding for local councils by delivering a new financial framework, which will ensure that councils automatically receive a set percentage of the Scottish Government budget each year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister to speak to and move amendment S6M-02838.2.

15:39

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): I welcome the debate. As Miles Briggs has done—and I am sure that many others will do—I recognise the crucial role that councils play in delivering public services and supporting communities, and the part that they play in delivering a national recovery. We might disagree at times, but I hope that we can all agree on that.

Ultimately, today, we are talking about difficult budget choices. Core to this afternoon's debate is the fact that the Scottish budget in 2022-23 is lower than it was in 2021-22. That is not my conclusion and nor is it that of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy; it is the conclusion of the independent Scottish Fiscal Commission, which said in its report "Scotland's Economic and Fiscal Forecasts":

"Overall the Scottish Budget in 2022-23 is 2.6 per cent lower than in 2021-22, and after accounting for inflation the reduction is 5.2 per cent."

The point was made in the intervention by my colleague Neil Gray.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Can the minister give us a comparison with the budget two years ago, given that last year, of course, we had a huge increase because of Covid spend?

Tom Arthur: I note that it was about two years ago that my colleague Kenny Gibson raised in the Parliament the issue of a new virus that had been detected in China—I think that that was the first mention of the virus in the Parliament. The difference between now and two years ago is that we are still in the teeth of a global pandemic. I appreciate that Mr Lumsden's colleagues in Westminster might be waving their masks in the chamber because they think that the pandemic is over, but the reality is that the pandemic is certainly not over and that a huge amount of recovery work will have to be undertaken. That has to be taken into account in the settlement that this Government is given from Westminster.

Despite a 5.2 per cent reduction, the Scottish budget delivers record funding of £18 billion for health and social care, doubles the Scottish child payment and introduces free bus travel for everyone under the age of 22. It delivers an overall settlement to local government that is

worth more than £12.5 billion—an increase of £588.2 million in real terms.

Miles Briggs: Will the minister give way?

Tom Arthur: I will give way to Mr Briggs in a moment.

In the context of a 5.2 per cent real-terms reduction in the overall budget, the local government settlement has increased by 5.1 per cent, again in real terms. The growth in the overall settlement was acknowledged by the COSLA resource spokesperson in evidence to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee last week.

Having taken the decision to pass on all front-line health and care consequential in full, we protected local government by providing a flat-cash core budget, alongside a further £1.4 billion, which is transferred from other portfolios, for joint priorities. By definition, a flat-cash core allocation does not take account of inflation. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy has acknowledged that we cannot inflation proof any part of the Scottish Government budget, such is the nature of inflation right now. We do not underestimate the challenges that the allocation presents, but it is simply not possible to inflation proof all budget lines when the overall budget is not inflation proofed.

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

Tom Arthur: I am afraid that I need to make a wee bit more progress; I will take an intervention from Mr Briggs in a moment.

In acknowledging the challenges, we must also be honest about the fact that pay increases and changes in the design of national insurance are themselves inflationary pressures. It is therefore not correct to claim that there is a real-terms cut to the local government budget while claiming that no account is taken of pay inflation or increased employer national insurance contributions.

Liam Kerr: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: I said that I would take an intervention from Miles Briggs, as he requested one first.

Miles Briggs: I thank the minister.

I have two things to ask. First, COSLA highlighted that the Scottish Government has not handed on national insurance contributions compensation of around £70 million. Why is that?

Secondly, if this budget is as wonderful as he makes out, why has Iain Nicolson, the leader of Renfrewshire Council and a fellow SNP member,

had to write to the First Minister to ask for the settlement to be looked at again?

Tom Arthur: I recognise that the challenges that we face in our budget are ultimately a reflection of the challenges that we face as a consequence of the UK Government's settlement to the Scottish Parliament.

Let us get to the core point. Funding that is handed on to local government is funding that is not handed on elsewhere. I recognise that some members might disagree with the Government's decisions to pass on the front-line health and social care consequential in full, to help to tackle child poverty and inequality by doubling the game-changing Scottish child payment, to provide more than £500 million to councils to support investment in health and social care, to allocate £145 million extra for additional teachers and support staff and to support the expansion of free school meals, with an extra £60 million in revenue and £30 million in capital funding.

We take the view that those are not just Scottish Government priorities but joint priorities with local government, and I believe that they attract cross-party support in this Parliament. However, if Opposition parties do not agree with those investments, they are fully entitled to propose alternative—but balanced—funding proposals ahead of consideration of the Budget (Scotland) Bill next week.

The budget also provides councils with a number of flexibilities, including over council tax rate setting, as they requested, and we have reaffirmed our commitment to developing a local government fiscal framework in partnership with COSLA. I want to be clear that any framework must be developed in partnership with local government. It must be workable and must learn lessons from the implementation of the broader Scottish fiscal framework. Crucially, it cannot put funding for the national health service at risk.

It will be important for local government to bring forward fiscal framework proposals that can be explored in partnership. There is no reason why those proposals need only come from local government, however. In that regard, I note the Conservatives' motion. I welcome the contribution that Miles Briggs is making. I hope that other Conservative members—perhaps Mr Briggs or Ms Smith in summing up later in the debate—can provide more detail about how what they propose would work in practice. Clearly, there would be significant consequences elsewhere in the budget.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must now conclude.

Tom Arthur: I again welcome the debate, and I am looking forward to the contributions of members from across the chamber.

I move amendment S6M-02838.2, to leave out from "calls made" to end and insert:

"key role that councils play in their communities and their part in delivering a national recovery; recognises that the independent Scottish Fiscal Commission has stated that overall the 2022-23 Scottish Budget has reduced in real terms by 5.2%; notes that this is in spite of continued COVID-19 and inflationary pressures on public services; welcomes the Scottish Government's Budget for 2022-23, which, despite these challenges, includes record funding of £18 billion for Health and Social Care, doubles the Scottish Child Payment, introduces free bus travel for everyone under the age of 22, and delivers a fair settlement worth over £12.5 billion of funding to local authorities; recognises that the total local government settlement has increased by £588.2 million, or 5.1% in real terms, including specific funding for social care, education and employability support, and welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to developing a fiscal framework for local government and delivering a citizens' assembly on sources of local government funding."

15:46

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Here we are again: another debate about local government budgets, another SNP budget, another devastating raid on council budgets that provide absolutely vital local services, another £371 million gone from the core revenue budget in real terms and a further 4 per cent being ring fenced. The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth and many of his ministerial colleagues have stood up and said how much they value local government and local government workers. I think that it was President Biden who said:

"Don't tell me what you value. Show me your budget, and I'll tell you".

Local government workers and people who rely on local government services hear what it values loud and clear from the Government.

Kate Forbes: I assume that Mark Griffin wants the local government settlement to go up. Every penny is allocated, so where would the money come from in the budget?

Mark Griffin: It is clear that the Scottish Government's budget has increased. We are asking for the—

Kate Forbes: Where would he take the money from?

Mark Griffin: We are asking for the Scottish Government to respect local government. I grant that the Accounts Commission has said that, since 2013-14, Scottish Government budgets have reduced by 0.8 per cent. At the same time, however, the Scottish Government has hammered local government by cutting its budgets by 4.7 per cent, thereby magnifying every single budget cut that it has been passed by the Tories and hammering local services.

We will support the motion, because we believe that it is simply unsustainable for the SNP to continue cutting council budgets to the bone. Services are already at breaking point.

Tom Arthur: Will the member give way?

Mark Griffin: I would normally take as many interventions as members would like to make, but I have only five minutes.

Today the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has said that tax rises are inevitable and that cuts are inevitable, unless, as the motion asks for, the Government delivers an improved financial settlement. Those are not choices; they are SNP cuts that have been forced on local government as part of a sustained campaign that has been going on for a decade and has cost services £937 million since 2013.

Were the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill to be enforced, the Government would clearly be in breach of it.

There are a couple of differences this year compared with what has happened in the previous decade. The minister's and the cabinet secretary's SNP council colleagues have finally said in public what they have been saying behind closed doors for a decade: they cannot cope with any more cuts.

We know that the Greens, who are in the Government, have signed off on the cuts, so the cabinet secretary has no chance to find that extra couple of hundred million pounds for a deal.

Most concerning of all is that we are in the grip of the biggest cost-of-living crisis in years. Inflation is at its highest level in five years, and the cabinet secretary took to the radio this morning to say that she could not inflation proof budgets, and that it is inflation's doing that ring-fenced spending has increased, having jumped from 58 per cent to 62 per cent this year. That is what she said, but she could not say who caused the portion of the budget with which councils have maximum flexibility for delivering local priorities to fall. It is worth knowing that, in 2013, controlled spend was just 25 per cent. It is almost as if the SNP Government wants us to forget that local councils are democratically elected and are accountable to their voters.

The cabinet secretary also said that only 7 per cent of the budget is ring fenced for grants for SNP Government projects, but even by that count—which I dispute—the amount has, according to the Scottish Parliament information centre, grown from 0.1 per cent of the budget in 2013, or by 70 times.

We agree that local government needs a fiscal framework in order that it can make the decisions

that are best for local communities, but we are alive to fears that that could bake in a decade of cuts. Our amendment seeks to qualify the percentage that the Conservative motion proposes, because we cannot accept continued pernicious ring fencing to take place within that set proportion of the Scottish budget.

Finally, the issue of local government staff pay must be heard. The budget is disastrous for the tireless army of local government workers. Not only do they have the task of implementing yet more cuts, but they are doing so in spite of the exhausting task of having kept the country moving through two years of the pandemic. Youth link community workers, carers, cleansing staff, teaching assistants, street cleaners and so many more have worked flat out to keep going the services that we have all relied on and clapped for. However, 55 per cent of them earn below £25,000 per annum. In the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee last week, Johanna Baxter of Unison told us how angry and frustrated they are, and that councils will see a "difficult industrial landscape ahead".

I ask the Government to reconsider and to deliver a budget that can deliver a fair pay increase for staff and a fair settlement for local authorities.

I move, as amendment to motion S6M-02838, to insert at end:

"; believes that this set percentage of the Scottish Government budget each year should be for essential and non-ringfenced services to afford local councils maximum flexibility in delivering local priorities; notes that the 2022-23 offer comes on top of the damaging effects of a cumulative Scottish Government cut to local authority revenue budgets of £937 million between 2013-14 and 2021-22, and agrees that the heroic effort of local government workers to keep the country going during the COVID-19 pandemic must be recognised in the 2022-23 financial settlement from the Scottish Government, giving local authorities the opportunity to offer a fair pay settlement to their staff."

15:51

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We have learned something new today, which is that Kenny Gibson discovered Covid.

We already knew that local government has been on the rough end of the SNP Government's priorities for years. This year's budget is no different from all the rest, as Mr Gibson knows. We get the usual conjurer's trick from ministers, who send ring-fenced parcels of money to local councils for new tasks and claim that that money is for old tasks. The money goes up, but the costs of the new responsibilities go even higher, which leaves councils to cut other services.

This year's funding settlement is harsher than most, with hundreds of millions of pounds of cuts.

That is why councillors of all political persuasions, including the SNP, are so angry this year. While other services across the UK have been compensated for the national insurance increase, local government in Scotland has been left with a big hole in the finances.

Neil Gray: Will the member give way?

Willie Rennie: I have only four minutes, although I would have loved to take an intervention.

When the roads are full of potholes, the streets are covered in rubbish, schools do not have the funds that they need and community services are shut, there is just one place where local government should look, and that is the SNP Government sitting in St Andrews house.

Meanwhile, the SNP's 15-year-old plan to scrap the unfair council tax has not moved 1 inch forward. I have attended endless Government talking shops on that. If hot air could scrap the council tax, we would have a new tax every year. However, that is all going to change now: I have a new great hope, because the Greens are in Government. I am looking forward to the forthcoming bill to scrap the council tax, led by Patrick Harvie. We all live in great hope of new times.

Today we have a rehash of last year's Conservative motion. They have not learned from their mistakes. We all remember that, in the past, when the UK Government has allocated Barnett consequentials for health, the Scottish Conservatives have wanted it to be guaranteed for health. Well—not any more. In 2018, Prime Minister Theresa May said that she would increase national health service funding, which would mean £2 billion of consequentials for the Scottish Government by 2023. Back then, the Secretary of State for Scotland, David Mundell—remember those glory days?—said, "I urge" the First Minister and

"the Scottish government to invest this extra money in improving health services".

With the motion, all of that would be out of the window. Under the Conservatives' plan, between 2018 and 2023 more than £600 million would be automatically removed from the NHS Scotland annual budget.

People expect their Parliament to judge different needs and not just to remove hundreds of millions of pounds from a budget because the Conservatives' computer tells them to do that. Instead, we need a fair funding settlement for councils, based on the good judgement of MSPs.

I want councils to be able to raise the majority of the money that they spend, just as Holyrood does. If councils control the purse strings, they are free

to determine their own future, in partnership with the communities that they serve. If the councils or the voters did not like the decisions on tax and spend, they could chuck them out. We need a framework that nurtures that relationship. That is why we cannot support the Conservative motion.

15:55

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Like all budgets, the budget for 2022-23 is about choice and prioritising how best to invest in services, infrastructure and people at a time of financial challenge. With fiscal rectitude, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy and the wider Scottish Government have made their choices and set out their priorities.

As we know, the Scottish budget is limited by the forecasts of the independent Scottish Fiscal Commission, beyond which the finance secretary cannot go. I, too, would like more resources to be allocated to local government—who would not?—but this year the Scottish Fiscal Commission has made it clear that Parliament will suffer a real-terms cut, courtesy of Miles Briggs's Tory bosses at Westminster. It is worth quoting again what the SFC has said, and which was mentioned at the Finance and Public Administration Committee. It said:

"Overall the Scottish Budget in 2022-23 is 2.6 per cent lower than in 2021-22, after accounting for inflation the reduction is 5.2 per cent."

Miles Briggs and his colleagues should tell us how much additional resource should be allocated to local government from actual Scottish Government resources, not from the mythical funds that he mentioned. He did not tell us that. From where should the extra resources that are being demanded be found, given that the Scottish ministers have such limited room for manoeuvre? Should we raise taxes? If so, which ones? Who should pay and how much should they pay? If money is to be reallocated from other Scottish budget portfolios, which ones should it be reallocated from? Should it be health, transport or net zero? By how much should each portfolio budget be cut to provide additional funding for local authorities? When answers are not forthcoming, that just sounds to me like hot air and posturing.

Miles Briggs: Mr Gibson will be aware that the Scottish Government budget has increased by 7 per cent. That is more than inflation, so that is exactly where the funding can come from. I will make another suggestion. Why not stop spending £7 million on ministers being ferried around and give that to local authorities?

Kenneth Gibson: I wonder how much Whitehall spends on ferrying ministers around.

The mythical figures are nonsense, which is why the independent Scottish Fiscal Commission has dismissed them. We are talking about reality.

I am also curious about how genuine the Tory MSPs' concern for our local authorities is. If local government is so important to the party that Miles Briggs supports so devotedly, will he tell us why the Tory Government south of the border has eviscerated it so viciously? According to the Institute for Government, the UK Tory Government cut resources to English and Welsh local authorities, including retained business rates, by an eye-watering 37 per cent in real terms between 2010 and 2019-20—from £41 billion to £26 billion at 2019-20 prices. While funding from previous UK coalition—we clearly recall the Liberal Democrats' role in that—and Tory Governments was slashed, rates of council tax were increased and English local authorities raised 25 per cent more council tax in real terms in 2019-20 than they raised a decade earlier.

If we compare Scotland to England and Wales, we see that there is simply no relationship between, on one hand, the solid support that the Scottish Government has provided to our councils post the financial crash and through austerity and, on the other, the devastation that has been wrought on local authority services down south. The reality is that no one takes seriously the Tories' claims that they are advocates for local government.

The Labour Party, of course, just wants to drone on about alleged SNP cuts, which it seeks to blame on the Scottish Government rather than on its better together allies. However, when its former leader, Jeremy Corbyn—do members remember him?—was asked about the depth of the cuts that have been imposed by Labour in Wales, he meekly said that the party had no choice but to pass them on from Westminster. Labour members bleat about 7 per cent of the budget being ring fenced. I recall that 60 local government budget lines were ring fenced when the Lib Dems and Labour were last in power here, and that Wendy Alexander called for full ring fencing of local government budgets.

Willie Rennie was right to say that it is a bizarre idea that councils should, as the Tory motion suggests, automatically receive a set percentage of the Scottish Government budget each year. Why local government and not health, education or justice? With the impending 5.2 per cent cut, that daft Tory proposal would be guaranteed to deliver less funding to our councils.

All Governments need flexibility—they do not have a crystal ball to enable them to see where unexpected financial shocks might arise in the future. For instance, who saw, in 2019, the

financial impact of a pandemic coming down the road?

Through methods ranging from resource borrowing to the less-palatable fiscal drag, the Scottish Government is delivering local government tax flexibility in the best possible settlement within a financial straitjacket that has been imposed on us by the Tories at Westminster. Only with independence will the Scottish Government have the ability to deliver the budget for local government, and for every other portfolio, that we all want to see—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude now, Mr Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson: Members should support the Scottish Government amendment.

16:00

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Kenny Gibson might be a world-leading epidemiologist, but he cannot make his sums add up.

I thank my Scottish Conservative colleagues for bringing this important debate to the chamber. Before I begin, I draw attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a serving councillor on East Lothian Council.

The financial crisis facing Scotland's local authorities is stark, and entirely of the SNP's making. As a councillor who represents a ward in East Lothian, which is in the South Scotland region, I am only too well aware of the gravity of the problem that our councils all face. Let there be no doubt about it: the SNP's austerity agenda for local government continues, with—*[Interruption.]* No, I will not give way.

East Lothian Council is set to lose out on £4.5 million this year. The Government has starved that council, and every other council, for years, and the situation is now serious. The picture that it paints is so bad that it now looks vindictive.

Despite a record settlement from Westminster, the Scottish Government has cut East Lothian's budget by £1 million in real terms next year, and the council will be a further £3.5 million worse off as a result of changes to the floor-based funding formula, with funding being pooled with other councils. It is simply unfair that one of the fastest-growing areas in Scotland is being repeatedly penalised by the SNP. I urge the Scottish Government to stop short-changing the residents of East Lothian.

It is not only the people of East Lothian who are losing out; the picture is the same across Scotland. As Miles Briggs pointed out, COSLA estimates that £371 million of core funding for Scottish councils will be cut in real terms during

this year alone. That is £371 million of cuts to roads, social services, education, housing and refuse collection across Scotland.

While the SNP Government starves communities of funding, it is forcing councils to raise taxes for millions of Scots—

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: No, I will not give way—I have only four minutes, sadly.

The SNP Government is forcing councils to raise taxes just as the cost of living is rising. That is why the Scottish Conservatives are proposing a clear solution to the crisis, which is a crisis of the SNP's making. We want a permanent settlement for Scotland's councils that ring fences a percentage of the overall Scottish budget for councils' funding. We need a fair deal for our councils, and we need it now.

The situation that is emerging in front of us is starker and more serious still. After years of failing to fund our councils, the SNP is stepping up its assault. The Scottish Government's plan for the creation of a national care service is an assault on local government and an attack on local accountability. What started with the Feeley review of adult social care—arguably an area in need of funding, reform and new thinking—is fast becoming just the latest in a long line of SNP power grabs. It is perhaps the greatest power grab in the history of devolution.

Let us look at the words of COSLA president Alison Evison; she described the national care service plan as “an attack on localism”. On the latest cuts to local councils, all 32 Scottish council leaders have written to the First Minister to tell her that “enough is enough”. We know that the SNP does not do dissent, but even council leaders from the First Minister's own party are worried. John Alexander, who is SNP council leader for Dundee, has described the recent Scottish budget as

“perhaps the toughest in recent memory”.

After years of hollowing out councils, the SNP is now mounting a direct assault on local government. The SNP wants to scrap local accountability and impose total ministerial control on care, and it is continuing to raid council budgets to pay for pet projects.

When it comes to the SNP and our cash-strapped councils, COSLA is correct: enough is enough.

16:04

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): The events of recent days have once again highlighted the hypocrisy of the Tories. Perhaps they have

already forgotten the waste of public funds in awarding personal protective equipment contracts to their pals and the writing-off—only yesterday—of an incredible £4.3 billion for fraudulent business Covid claims; perhaps they were instead focusing on their penchant for partying.

Even as the Tories were lodging the motion for today's debate, their Home Secretary, Priti Patel, was launching an outrageous and ill-informed attack on Scotland's councils in Westminster this week, so forgive me if I am a little cynical about Tory support for Scotland's councils.

The motion is defective. I will focus on just a few of the issues, given the limited time available. The single ask in the motion is to create a funding settlement that is entirely fixed to a percentage of the Scottish Government budget. That proposal is flawed because it does not allow flexibility for the Government to deal with unforeseen shocks, as was mentioned earlier. The current pandemic is a good example; the fallout from the 2008 economic crisis is another.

Had the Tories put down a sensible economic motion seeking to support the calls by many for increased borrowing powers, that would have been a motion which we could all have rallied around.

The motion is also at serious fault in failing to consider the current economic uncertainties. For example, during 2021, forecasts by the Office for Budget Responsibility, the Scottish Fiscal Commission and independent forecasters were all subject to considerable change. The forecasts that were published in the lead-up to the Scottish budget failed to take account of the then unknown and arguably unanticipated omicron variant, which is likely to lead to further significant downward changes in forecasts. To fail to understand the consequence of such uncertainties for Government funding is simply not realistic.

Of course, there is one other shock, this time deliberately created by the Tories. The word that dare not speak its name is Brexit, which has had serious implications for local authorities. For example, in response to information requests from the Finance and Public Administration Committee, Scotland's local authorities have raised very serious concerns about the UK Government's plans for the replacement of European Union structural funds. Those concerns include the questioning of a seriously flawed methodology that does not respond to Scottish conditions and the failure by the UK Government to fund the resources required to operate the replacement funds, yet nowhere in the motion is the UK Government called out for the harms that it is inflicting on Scottish councils.

Of course, the Scottish Government and our local authorities will be constrained by the operation of the Tory-inspired United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and the Subsidy Control Bill that is currently going through Westminster.

The Tory motion fails to recognise that, despite all those challenges, uncertainties and constraints, the Scottish Government has come up with an overall settlement in excess of £12.5 billion, representing a real-terms increase of some 5.1 per cent.

As has been pointed out, the Scottish Government has already committed to working with COSLA to develop a rules-based fiscal framework to support future funding settlements for local government. I hope that all parties can support that.

Finally, no lectures, please, from a Tory party that rewards its own, attacks our local authorities from Westminster and blocks at every turn the need to enhance this Parliament's financial and economic powers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Paul O'Kane, who also joins us remotely.

16:08

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I remind members that I am still a member of East Renfrewshire Council, where I have been a councillor for almost 10 years. It has been—and continues to be—one of the most fulfilling roles that I have ever had the honour to have. Indeed, to be a councillor representing the community you grew up in is an honourable thing.

As a councillor, I have been the convener for education and deputy leader of the council, and I have seen first hand over the past decade how the SNP Government has worn down local government, forcing those in charge to cut services as the budgets are continually cut, year after year.

It has been incredibly challenging to be a local representative when we are consistently faced with budget processes that bring more and more cuts. Indeed, I think of the anxious wait that councillors have every year as we await the settlement from the Government; the long meetings to discuss how to plug some of the gaps using reserves or council tax; and the painful consultation processes as we try to decide on the least worst option in a sea of unthinkable options.

I am not sure whether colleagues in the chamber who have not had to do any of that can fully understand the sleepless nights that it causes, thinking about people's jobs, people's services and the communities that we care about.

It is not just councillors who feel like that; it is also the staff, who work so hard in local government. Nobody seeks a career in a local authority in order to make cuts, but Government choices have made many of our dedicated local government officers managers of cuts. I have watched the stress of hard-working officers in education, social work and environment, when they have to spend so much time coming up with unthinkable options, just to square the budget.

I have also seen our workers stretched thin, as they are asked to do more and more to plug the gaps that have been created by cuts. Every Thursday night during the pandemic, the First Minister and Cabinet applauded our key workers, but stress is being piled on to those workers, 55 per cent of whom are paid below £25,000 a year. That is shameful.

Every day in my ward, I see how cuts that have been forced down from Government are hitting our communities and the most vulnerable. Pupil support assistant numbers have been cut, road budgets have been reduced and social care is on its knees. The reality of all that is that people across Scotland are being failed, and there is no sign of it getting better.

We hear from the Government that it has delivered initiatives, such as free early learning and childcare and free school meals, but there is not nearly enough funding to deliver that on the ground in reality, and to ensure that the core infrastructure can be maintained in order to make those things happen.

Of course, the Government is always keen to hold up its manifesto commitments, but what is the reality on the ground when local government has to deliver them? The reform to council tax never appeared; funding to refurbish every play park in Scotland was barely a fraction of what was required; and the proposal to give a free bike to every pupil who cannot afford one was consigned to a pilot that does not scratch the surface. Those are empty words and broken promises from the SNP.

The future holds even more cuts to local government budgets. The budget that was published last month saw a core funding cut of £371 million. That budget makes no provision for pay, inflation, increased demand for services or—as we have heard—the increased burden of national insurance contributions.

To place those cuts in a wider context, that is all happening as we see one of the biggest increases to the cost of living in decades. Such is the scale of the problem that there has been an unprecedented reaction from all 32 council leaders in Scotland, who are calling for the Government to

meet them to discuss the settlement, because enough is enough.

It is clear that the SNP Government has failed local government and those who live in our communities. Cuts to councils are cuts to communities and, if the course does not change, the very fabric of our communities will be irreparably damaged.

16:12

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): It has been a pattern for years in this Parliament that members on the Tory benches utter not a word of concern or objection when their Westminster colleagues cut Scotland's budget, but they rush to this chamber to condemn every perceived cut that is made under the Scottish Government's budget and to make spending demands that exceed the money that is available. As has been mentioned, this year, they are going so far as to claim that a 5 per cent real terms cut from Westminster is somehow an increase. We are all guilty of picking and choosing the figures that suit our position best in these debates, but that claim goes beyond that. It is actively misleading to claim that a cut is a significant increase and, as the Government amendment notes, it is contrary to the Scottish Fiscal Commission's analysis.

In this debate, not one Conservative member has so far been able to explain how the Scottish Government is expected to sustain the costs of the pandemic from core funds without that impacting on other services. However, that is the result of Covid consequential being withdrawn when Covid and its effects are still very much with us.

For example, bus and rail use are down by a third in Scotland and that is not expected to change significantly in the next financial year. It will require significant subsidy to keep essential services operating but, without last year's Covid consequential being repeated, the choice is either to provide those subsidies from the core transport budget, which will put pressure on other areas, or to let our transport system collapse overnight as the operators withdraw. I presume that the Tories do not want to see its collapse.

Miles Briggs: Will the member take an intervention?

Ross Greer: I would be delighted to accept an intervention from Mr Briggs, but I repeat the question that others have asked him. Today, the Conservatives have repeated COSLA's ask for £371 million but, since all the money that is available to the Scottish Government has already been allocated, from which budget would he cut £371 million in order to fulfil what COSLA is asking for?

Miles Briggs: I have been absolutely clear that the Government has £3.9 billion in additional consequentials. It is this Government's decision to cut funding. We have not yet had an answer from ministers about the national insurance increase. Ministers sitting on the front bench, whom Ross Greer supports, have £70 million that they have not passed on to local authorities for the national insurance compensation. Why is that, and will he and his Green colleagues ask the ministers to do that at the upcoming budget?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you back that time, Mr Greer.

Ross Greer: Thank you, that is much appreciated.

First, there is no specific consequential for the national insurance increase.

Miles Briggs: Yes, there is.

Ross Greer: There are broad consequentials, but, yet again, Mr Briggs has failed to answer the question. Every penny that is available to the Scottish Government has been allocated. There is no money sitting unallocated, but the Conservatives will not explain where they will cut £371 million. COSLA's point is entirely legitimate, but it is disingenuous of the Conservatives to pretend that it can be fulfilled without significant impacts elsewhere.

Despite the pressures on the Scottish Government, the budget delivers a real-terms increase of more than £0.5 billion to councils. That includes an additional £145 million for teacher recruitment, which is enough to fund 2,500 additional posts. There is £30 million in capital funding to facilitate the expansion of free schools meals, and £60 million for the meals themselves.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the member take an intervention?

Ross Greer: No, not at this point.

There is £175 million to fund the pay increase for care sector workers, and £200 million more for health and social care. I am not suggesting that everything is rosy—COSLA has a perfectly legitimate case to make for more funding, but it is not the only one. The budget represents the fairest possible distribution of extremely limited funding in extremely challenging circumstances.

I have yet to hear from where the Opposition would cut £371 million to fulfil what COSLA is asking for, or what changes it would make to tax policy to raise the funds. The only income tax policy that I can recall the Tories bringing to the Parliament since that power was devolved was the proposed cut for the top 15 per cent of earners, which would have cut a further £0.5 billion from our budget.

Back in 2018, the Greens made changes to income tax to make it more progressive and raise additional funds for public services. This year, a further change was made, freezing the higher and top-rate thresholds, which will raise a further £106 million. I happen to be of the view that we will have to raise significant additional amounts of money from a variety of sources, both existing and new, over this session if we are to meet the objectives that we all share, particularly around child poverty reduction and reaching net zero. Achieving those targets will require a significant increase in funding for local government. That is why the shared policy programme agreed by the two parties of Government commits to delivering both the fiscal framework for local government and a citizens assembly on local government funding. I have my concerns—including those outlined by Willie Rennie—about the Conservatives' proposal, but I welcome that they have at least brought to the chamber a specific proposal for once.

Both the fiscal framework and the citizens assembly will be transformational in the long term, but I accept that they do not ease the pressure on councils in this financial year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude now, Mr Greer.

Ross Greer: The Scottish Government has done what it can to ease that pressure. If the Tories are serious about removing it completely, they should look to their colleagues in government at Westminster, because the situation is of the Conservative Party's making.

16:17

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am still a councillor at Aberdeen City Council.

Throughout the pandemic, our local authorities have been on the front line of providing essential services to our communities. They have gone above and beyond, organising food parcels, online learning, emergency assistance and support to resilience groups—the list goes on and on. They have done so while continuing to provide all their usual essential services, such as caring for our most vulnerable, fixing our roads, emptying our bins and providing community support. They deserve our thanks, praise and, more important, financial support to enable them to continue to provide those essential services.

That is why the funding settlement announced by the cabinet secretary is nothing short of a slap in the face to all the local authorities that have gone above and beyond what is expected on behalf of this devolved Government.

Up and down Scotland, councillors are currently poring over budget spreadsheets, agonising over how they can continue to provide essential services while facing a huge budget cut. They are all desperate not to raise council tax too much, given the pressure on the cost of living in their communities. However, the Scottish Government has passed the buck. It has cut core council funding, and now expects councillors to raise council tax to fill the gap or reduce vital services. It is simply not acceptable.

Council leaders are in agreement that the Scottish Government is ignoring them, with calls for meetings being ignored, engagement lacking and major policy announcements, such as the national care service consultation, being made with no discussion or collaboration. The way that the devolved Scottish Government treats its local government partners is a disgrace.

The Scottish Government has many warm words on preventing drug deaths and on matters such as climate change and educational attainment. Early intervention is key to many of the challenges that we face, and local government is where that preventative work takes place. Local government provides youth clubs, social centres, sports facilities, lunch clubs and school counselling services. All those much-needed facilities are at risk as local government budget cuts continue. Without those preventative services, how will we continue to tackle the challenges that we face at the earliest possible opportunity? If the devolved Government was serious about prevention, it would be investing in local government and not pulling the rug from under its feet.

I turn finally to the question of national insurance, and I ask the cabinet secretary to answer one question. COSLA confirmed to council leaders this week that the Scottish Government has received consequential payments to cover the national insurance rise for local government employees but is refusing to pass that on to councils. In England, councils are being funded for the national insurance increase, but councils in Scotland are not. Local government is the backbone of our communities, so will the minister give us an assurance that the consequential money that was received to pay for national insurance contributions will be passed on to local authorities?

Our local councils have done us proud over the past two years; we should be thanking them, building them up, recognising the vital work that they do and treating them like equal partners in government. Instead, the Scottish Government treats them with contempt. It is time to give our local councils a fair funding settlement that reflects the vital work that they do, which would help them

to deliver that work and in turn strengthen our towns, villages and local communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind colleagues that Mr Mason is the final speaker in the open debate and that everybody who participated in the debate should be here for the closing speeches.

16:22

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Like other members, I find the Conservative motion interesting in that it seeks more money for local government but does not say where that money should come from. The Labour amendment takes a similar path. One of the main options for raising such money is increasing taxes, which I would be open to, but we understand that the Tories are normally against tax rises. In fact, they usually do a lot of girning and whining about our income tax being higher than England's. The other main option is to reduce expenditure somewhere else, and the most obvious option would be to cut NHS spending, because that is one of the largest parts of the Scottish budget. Which is it? Are the Conservatives now open to tax increases or are they seriously suggesting that we cut the health budget while we are still not out of the Covid pandemic?

A party that claims to understand business and the economy surely understands that the books have to balance, but I see nothing in the motion about the source of any additional funding for local government, and neither have they replied to that question from previous speakers.

I find the concept of a ring-fenced percentage of the budget somewhat bizarre. That would take away the powers of the Parliament and MSPs to examine the budget each year and consider where needs are greatest. Over the past couple of years of the Covid pandemic, we have had to reprioritise funding, which has emphasised health services, business support and local government services. I do not think that ring fencing the budget, and by implication ignoring any kind of needs assessment, would be reasonable.

There is also the separate but linked question of allocating local government funding among the 32 councils. I would argue that that too should be based on need. For example, Aberdeen was one of the richest parts of Scotland and therefore got less central funding, which was right at the time. If that is no longer the case, however, needs should be reassessed. Such a process would have to happen in conjunction with COSLA and all the councils.

The wider question is how local government should be funded and whether more of that funding should be raised directly by local councils.

I very much support that concept. Apart from anything else, it would give councils more freedom by reducing their dependence on the centre for funding. Some central funding will always be needed in order to support councils that cannot raise the resources that they require for the needs in their area. Again, however, that funding should be based on need rather than giving everyone the same.

I agree with other members and would dearly love to see the replacement of council tax. As Willie Rennie mentioned, that question has dragged for far too long. At some point, we in Parliament need to bite the bullet and agree on a replacement tax. Such a tax will not please everyone. There will inevitably be winners and losers, but better funding for local government will mean that those who earn more, or who have more property and other assets, will need to pay more.

Let us remember that tax paid, as a share of gross domestic product, is around only 33 per cent in the UK compared to 45 per cent in France and 46 per cent in Denmark. For too long, we have tried to run quality public services without paying the sensible levels of tax that are required, so I welcome the work that the Scottish Government and the Finance and Public Administration Committee are planning to do on where we are going with tax in the longer term.

In summary, we need to be sensible; we can spend only the money that we have. If the Conservatives or Labour want more money for local government, they still have to tell us where it is coming from.

16:26

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): This topic is undoubtedly important, but I am not sure that the debate has shed much more light on it. As invited by Tom Arthur at the beginning, I will try to build some consensus.

Local government is hugely important, but part of the problem is that we keep discussing local government funding when what we need to focus on is the reality that that money pays for roads, schools, libraries, playgrounds and social services that keep the most vulnerable safe. As Douglas Lumsden has said, local government has been at the forefront of the delivery of the most vital services through the Covid response.

We struggle to find more consensus. The debate is about not just the budget but the legacy of 10 years of cuts and underfunding of local government. We have seen the number of potholes increase fivefold over the past decade and £260,000 of compensation payments go to motorists in Edinburgh because of them; the

number of libraries has been cut by a third and there are 32 per cent fewer librarians; and the numbers of non-core support staff in our schools have been slashed across the country.

It is difficult to engage with SNP members who claim that there are no cuts, only increases. The Accounts Commission clearly points out a 4.2 per cent real-terms cut in local government funding over the past five years, when Scottish Government funding has reduced by just 0.8 per cent. The Scottish Government took the cuts that the Tories passed on and increased them fivefold.

Let us talk frankly about numbers and not pretend that no cuts have taken place—they have, which is a crushing blow after the efforts of local government and its leaders. All 32 local council leaders signed the letter that states that the cuts amount to

“a £371m real terms cut”

in the current budget. If SNP members want to deny that figure, they need to explain why so many of their own council leaders signed that letter.

The SNP’s lack of clarity perhaps should not surprise us, because inconsistency has marked its time in Government with regard to local government. Let us consider council tax. When it came into government, the SNP heralded the fact that it would scrap it; later, it said that it would bring back councils’ ability to set their own council tax; last year, it said that it would freeze it again; and, in this budget, it said that it would restore to local government the discretion to set council tax. Which is it? How the SNP values and approaches local government rightly confuses us all.

The reality is that, over 10 years, local government has seen almost £1 billion cut in real terms from its ability to spend, which ultimately impacts roads, schools, libraries and playgrounds—the very services that are the fabric of our communities and the bedrock on which so many people rely. When we talk about those numbers, let us remember their real impacts and that real people and communities are the ones to suffer because of £1 billion-worth of cuts from the SNP Government over the past decade.

16:30

Tom Arthur: I am grateful to members from across the chamber for their contributions—*[Interruption.]* I am still not used to the masks after two years.

The Scottish budget has focused on the key priorities of tackling inequalities, addressing climate change and supporting our economic recovery. Scotland’s councils share those priorities, and it is clear that our citizens and

communities are best served when we work together in partnership at national and local levels.

Liam Kerr: Will the minister give way?

Tom Arthur: I would like to make a little bit of progress, please.

Within that partnership, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy will join the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government and the Minister for Social Security and Local Government tomorrow for the inaugural strategic review group meeting with the COSLA presidential team. That group will work to drive greater collaborative working, and it will discuss the implications of the budget in more detail at the first meeting.

Next week, the First Minister will meet the COSLA presidential team and political group leaders in response to their letter on the budget to discuss how best to tackle the new phases of the pandemic, progress recovery and strengthen the partnership between national and local government to deliver for our communities.

Daniel Johnson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: I am going to make a bit more progress, because I am very tight for time.

Those meetings at the highest levels of Government highlight the priority that the Scottish Government places on working with local government to ensure that high-quality public services continue to be delivered across the country. The forthcoming resource spending review will also continue to focus on key priorities, and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy is already engaging with COSLA as part of that process.

The development of a fiscal framework will also have a direct relevance to the spending review. As I outlined in my opening speech today, a fiscal framework cannot be imposed on local government; it must be developed in partnership. The Scottish Government and COSLA have now recommenced the discussions on the fiscal framework that were paused during the pandemic, and a substantive amount of work will be done this year. The development of a fiscal framework is also an important part of the on-going work on the local governance review, which considers how powers, responsibilities and resources are shared across national and local spheres of government and with communities.

Despite the overall reduction in the resources available in the Scottish budget between 2021-22 to 2022-23, the total local government settlement has increased by £588.2 million or 5.1 per cent in real terms. Yes, those figures include the additional funding for priorities such as health and

social care integration, the expansion of free school meals and the provision of additional teachers and support staff, but those are key priorities for all parties. If the budget had not funded those things, I am sure that the outrage that is being expressed today would have been redirected in that way.

I will give way to Mr Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: I will be brief. Will the minister also acknowledge the Accounts Commission's figures, which show a longer-term almost 5 per cent real-terms cut over five years?

Tom Arthur: It is important to recognise that we are operating within the context of an increasing health budget. The reality is something that Willie Rennie alluded to in his contribution. We have protected the health budget. To my knowledge, there has always been a consensus around all health consequential decisions being passed on. That is certainly the Government's position. If other parties have a different view, they should say so clearly. Perhaps that will inform their contributions about where any additional resource for local government should come from in the budget.

I still have some time remaining, Presiding Officer—is that correct?

The Presiding Officer: That is correct, Mr Arthur. You had up to five minutes.

Tom Arthur: I will take Mr Kerr's intervention.

Liam Kerr: I am grateful to the minister for bringing me in. He mentioned climate change earlier. The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport requires local authorities to help to achieve net zero. Last week, the leader of Aberdeen City Council said that the draft budget would have

"a severe impact on what we can do"—[*Official Report, Net Zero and Transport Committee*, 11 January; c 29.]

in that space. What impact does the minister think a £371 million cut to council budgets will have on the ability of councils to meet net zero?

Tom Arthur: It is important to look at the total allocation to local government and at the broader resources being allocated to our net zero ambitions. That has to be seen in its totality, including the support that we are giving to the north-east.

I reiterate the points that my colleague the cabinet secretary made in interventions. I recognise that members want more money to be provided to local government, but the debate about that tends to be an annual one. Year after year, we do not hear where that resource should come from. I am not making a political point; I am asking in all sincerity, if members want additional resource to be provided to local government,

where should it come from? If we can get to such a place, we will have an opportunity to have a far more constructive conversation and debate about local government finance. I think that we would all welcome that.

16:35

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): When every council leader in Scotland, including those in SNP-run councils, such as the City of Edinburgh Council, Glasgow City Council and Dundee City Council, are not only demanding a crisis meeting with the First Minister but excoriating in their criticism of the budget settlement, that tells its own story.

Local government has clearly had enough, and the anger transcends party politics. Indeed, it is plain for all to see that the budget settlement for the coming year has been the last straw, after the consecutive years of cuts that Daniel Johnson referred to. Councils are greatly concerned about their ability to provide core services, and they are especially concerned about the delivery of health and social care provision, given the ever-pressing and increasing demands in that area.

In this Parliament, we know only too well that there is always some debate about budgets and their interpretation. Willie Rennie talked about the conjuror's tricks. I have to say that he was guilty of being a conjuror. However, he was outdone by Mr Greer and his extraordinary contortions, which were quite separate from anything that any of his Green colleagues would have said when the party was not in government.

The minister mentioned what the Scottish Fiscal Commission said about the funding settlement. It also said that the Scottish Government and the local authorities are agreed on the fact that the cash-terms settlements for 2021-22 and 2022-23 are exactly the same. That is among the core issues that go to the heart of the debate, and it should be seen in the context of the fact that, from 2013-14 up until last year, the local government finance settlement decreased in real terms by 2.4 per cent, whereas the Scottish Government's budget went up by 3.1 per cent over the same period.

Neil Gray: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Liz Smith: I will not, if Mr Gray does not mind, because we are very pushed for time today. Normally, I would. There will be budget debates next week.

Whatever understandable and very reasonable calls might be made in relation to other areas of Scottish Government funding, local government is

finding the situation impossible. It has been short changed and severely disadvantaged.

There is a bigger picture here, too. The proportion of the local government budget that is ring fenced is now four times greater than it was three years ago. Added to that, of course, significant legislative commitments have been placed on local authorities because of the Scottish Government's policy commitments. When we strip away those legislative commitments, in relation to which councils have no discretionary option, there is virtually nothing left over which they can have real autonomy, and that is one of the big complaints that COSLA is making.

We note that the Scottish Government's argument for the extensive increase in ring fencing is that there is too great a variation in council performance. We do not need to point out that the relationship between the Scottish Government and councils is not particularly good at the moment, and how we mend that process is probably a debate for another day. However, I hope that the minister will understand that, for councils that are performing particularly well, the increase in ring fencing is an absolute slap in the face when it comes to how they carry out their business.

In April, councils will have some autonomy and freedom to set their own council tax rates without being obliged by the Scottish Government to keep to a particular cap. However,

"Every central government cut to council finance means a huge increase in council tax".

Those are not my words—that was in the SNP manifesto not that long ago. I think that it was the same manifesto in which the SNP was claiming that it is Scotland's oil; now, it does not seem to want that.

If councils are to address the underfunding, they will have to raise council tax—there is no other option. That is why we are calling for a different settlement and a procedure that allows agreement on that to be reached between the national Government and councils.

On 9 December 2021, when Kate Forbes presented her budget statement to Parliament, there was virtually no mention of local government despite the fact that local authorities are delivering so many critical services, which several members have referred to today. To many in this chamber and in local government, that speaks volumes about the Scottish Government's disregard for local authorities not only now, but over a long period of time.

Local authorities are complaining not only about being underfunded and underresourced but about feeling—as Mark Griffin said—undervalued and constrained by the fact that they are increasingly

tied to central Government. In other words, they feel that they are having to carry the can for central Government and for SNP policy failures. That is not fair, and that is why I support the motion in the name of Miles Briggs.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on protecting local government funding in Scotland. It is now time to move on to the next item of business. I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus.

Education and the 2022 Examination Diet

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-02839, in the name of Meghan Gallacher, on education failures and guaranteeing the 2022 exam diet. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button or enter R in the chat function now.

I call Meghan Gallacher to speak to and move the motion for up to seven minutes.

16:42

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to open today's debate on education and to move the motion in my name.

The Scottish National Party's record on education has been a sorry tale of broken promises and failed reforms. The foundation was broken long ago. In 2016, the First Minister said that the "defining mission" of her Government was education. In fact, so confident was the First Minister that she asked to be judged on her education record. The SNP's dismal record on education presents a damning indictment indeed. The judgment is one of failure after failure.

The pandemic has of course presented challenges, which was to be expected. Every MSP in the chamber will recognise that. When the First Minister announced in the programme for government that

"COVID will not be the defining experience for this current generation of young people",

I am sure that there would not have been any dissenting voices. However, over the past two years, the Scottish Government has presided over examination chaos, with last-minute cancellations and a system that reduced the grades of the pupils in the most deprived areas across Scotland.

MSPs were promised in this chamber that the SNP would learn from past experiences in order to ensure less disruption and stress for young people who are about to sit exams during the pandemic, yet here we are—new year, same old SNP. According to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, a final decision on exams could be made as late as the end of March.

We were told that the SNP would

"put protections in place for young people and minimise disruption to education."

Where are those protections? How can leaving young people in limbo about their examination diet be described as minimising disruption? How can leaving local authorities and teachers in the lurch

over examination programmes be the best way for professionals to spend their time—especially when we know that the SNP Government is not recruiting enough teachers to catch up on lost schooling.

If teachers were given a clear steer by this Government, they would be able to plan and make sure that their students are ready to sit their exams.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am seeking clarification on what exactly the Conservatives' position on exams is. If public health officials were to approach us in March or April and say that it was simply too dangerous for exams to proceed at that point, would the Conservatives' position be that we should ignore that and proceed anyway, because it would be too late to change course?

Meghan Gallacher: The Conservatives' position is that the Scottish Government needs to take a clear stance on the examination diet. Other areas across the United Kingdom have already said that exams will go ahead, whereas here we are in Scotland without any clear guidance on whether exams will definitely go ahead. That is not good for pupils or teachers.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Will the member take an intervention?

Meghan Gallacher: I am going to make some progress just now, thank you.

Recently, the education secretary announced that the Scottish Government had back-up contingencies in place to allow for exams to go ahead. However, it was later revealed that that was not the case and there were no plans in place to hold exams at alternative venues in the event of Covid restrictions, and that no money had been set aside for that. To go back to Ross Greer's point, those are the issues that we are raising today. Any responsible Government would have started preparing for this year's exams last year and would have secured alternative arrangements to ensure minimal disruption to school exams.

As we know, the SNP is often fond of comparing Scotland to the rest of the United Kingdom. The UK Government has already committed to this year's examination process. That has provided pupils and teachers with the reassurance that is needed to allow pupils to be ready to sit their exams this year.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Can the member clarify for the chamber whether the other countries in the UK have a contingency in case public health guidance suggests that exams cannot go ahead?

Meghan Gallacher: I would like the cabinet secretary to define what a contingency is, because

she has not been very clear on that up to this point.

Perhaps the Scottish Government could learn a thing or two from our friends south of the border.

It is not just Opposition MSPs who are frustrated by the Scottish Government and its lacklustre approach to exams. Daniel Wyatt, rector of Kelvinside academy in Glasgow, said that he was dismayed at the lack of clarity and he has called for exams to go ahead unless a “significant health concern” emerges. He said that leaving the decision until March would be “far too late” and that it is not acceptable for the Scottish Government to behave in the way that it is, as it

“shows complete disregard for the mental health of pupils and staff following two years of disruption, distraction and disappointment, all against a backdrop of coping with the impact of the pandemic.”

I agree with Mr Wyatt that the mental health of young people is paramount when it comes to exams.

As we have witnessed in recent years, it is young people from poorer backgrounds who have suffered due to examinations being cancelled. Braidhurst high school in Forgewood, an area that I represent both as a councillor and as an MSP, saw bright and hard-working pupils’ grades lowered, as previous decisions taken by the Scottish Government turned the exam system into a postcode lottery and reduced the efforts of pupils to entries on a spreadsheet. That is why the Scottish Conservatives are seeking a guarantee from the Scottish Government today that the 2022 examination process will go ahead in full.

The Scottish Government amendment provides no confirmation that the examination diet will go ahead. Voting in favour of it is to vote in favour of uncertainty. It would allow the SNP to kick the can down the road instead of making the right decision for our young people. It will come as no surprise that the Scottish Conservatives will be voting against that amendment tonight.

I will touch on the Labour amendment briefly. I understand Labour’s position, but its amendment could suggest that exams should be cancelled altogether in favour of an appeals process.

It is not just the examination diet that is of serious concern. Analysis by several different sources shows that the SNP has failed to close the attainment gap. In secondary schools, the attainment gap has grown with regard to the percentage of pupils meeting expected levels of literacy since attainment funding was introduced in 2017. A report by Audit Scotland pointed out that the attainment gap remains wide and that steps to close the gap need to happen more quickly. Given the poor performance by the SNP on closing the attainment gap, the First Minister and her Scottish

Government have failed to improve outcomes by ensuring that every child has the same opportunity to succeed.

The SNP has overseen a decade of educational failures that have only been exacerbated during the pandemic. Instead of listing areas where the Government wants to give itself a pat on the back, the cabinet secretary must commit to the 2022 examination diet and outline ways to tackle the Government’s abysmal record, especially when it comes to closing the attainment gap.

The Presiding Officer: If you could conclude, please.

Meghan Gallacher: It is clear that, despite the many warm words from the Government on education, education has never been its top priority.

I move,

That the Parliament regrets that education has never been the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon’s number one priority, and expresses frustration at the widening attainment gap and the failure to guarantee that the 2022 school examination diet will go ahead in full.

The Presiding Officer: I call Shirley-Anne Somerville to speak to and move amendment S6M-02839.1.

16:49

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are still living in a global pandemic, which continues to have a significant impact on education. For that reason, caution should remain and contingencies are needed in education as in other aspects of life.

I take this opportunity to thank our teachers and support staff for their on-going efforts to put our learners first. Indeed, we should all be working to put the interests of learners first, in the face of on-going uncertainty. For that reason, I strongly disagree with the highly irresponsible motion and will set out the Government’s plans to support pupils and staff at this time.

The Government has increased our investment in the Scottish attainment challenge from £750 million over the previous parliamentary session to a record £1 billion over this parliamentary session. The investment is supporting education recovery, tackling the attainment gap and recognising the impact of the pandemic.

We have committed to bringing into the system—on top of the 1,400 teachers who have been recruited during the pandemic—a further 3,500 teachers and 500 support staff by the end of this session. The school census data that was published in December shows that we already have 2,000 more teachers in the system than we

had before the pandemic. There are now more teachers than there have been at any time since 2008, and the pupil teacher ratio is at its lowest since 2009.

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

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I want to make a little progress, after which I will be happy to take an intervention from Mr Kerr.

The focus of the entire education system, including teachers, headteachers, the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Government, is on ensuring that young people are supported to perform as well as possible in their exams. As the First Minister reiterated last week, it is our firm intention that exams will take place in 2022. That position has not changed.

There are a number of aspects to that. First, significant modifications have been made to current course assessment in relation to exams and coursework to take account of disruption to learning. Secondly, contingency plans are in place, as the SQA outlined in August and described in more detail in September, to respond to the further significant national disruption that arises from Covid. There are two parts to the contingency plans. The fact that Opposition members were remarkably unaware of those measures when I reiterated them last week on social media says much about their lack of understanding of the on-going work on the issue and the lack of importance that they place on it. On that point, I am happy to take an intervention from Meghan Gallacher.

Meghan Gallacher: The messaging from the Scottish Government about the contingencies that are in place has been confusing, and we have yet to have the detail. Is the cabinet secretary willing to give members the information today, or are we to be left in the dark, not knowing what the contingencies are?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I refer Meghan Gallacher to what the SQA said in August and described in more detail in September. It is working through what will happen to each individual course if scenario 2 has to be implemented with our stakeholders—and it is important that we carry on that consultation with stakeholders.

Scenario 2 is designed to provide further support to learners in the face of additional disruption, but on the basis that exams will go ahead. Meghan Gallacher asked for more detail: support will include, for example, the provision of guidance on topics, to help learners to maximise their exam performance and reduce exam stress.

That part is a decision for the SQA board, which is actively reviewing the quantitative data, such as national teacher and pupil absence levels, as well as the qualitative evidence from partners such as the national qualifications 2022 group. That stakeholder engagement is integral.

Scenario 3 would take place if exams had to be cancelled for public health reasons.

Stephen Kerr: When will a decision be made about the implementation of those resources? We are getting managerial rhetoric from the cabinet secretary; what about the action?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The action that the SQA is taking is the monitoring of the data. If the data determines that further issues need to be addressed by the national qualifications group, that will happen—

Stephen Kerr: On what date?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: There is daily correspondence and discussion about the data, and if the data signifies that we are required to move to scenario 2, the SQA board can take that decision. It can take that decision at any time when the data suggests that that is required.

Scenario 3, in which exams would be cancelled for public health reasons, would be a decision for me. In the event that that happens, qualifications will be awarded on the basis of the professional judgment of teachers and lecturers, using evidence from the normal in-year assessments that take place during the school year.

As I have repeatedly set out since the beginning of this term, it is our firm intention for exams to take place, but it would be highly irresponsible to ignore the possibility—however exceptionally remote, as we hope it will be—of the pandemic worsening. Therefore, we have a robust contingency should the public health conditions make exams impossible. To answer the point that I think Meghan Gallacher did not know about the other nations, the devolved Administrations have prepared for the same eventuality. Indeed, on 11 November 2021, the Department for Education and the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation—Ofqual—

“confirmed contingency plans to support students in the unlikely event that exams in England cannot go ahead”.

We are planning for contingencies across the United Kingdom.

When that approach was announced, in August 2021, Larry Flanagan from the Educational Institute of Scotland said:

“It is essential that appropriate and robust contingencies are in place”.

Let us be clear—and this is a point that Ross Greer correctly made in his intervention: the Tories

are proposing that, even if there is a future new variant or a turn of events in the pandemic that leads public health experts to advise against public gatherings, the Scottish Conservatives would bring children and teachers into school regardless of the consequences of that action.

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude, cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is the height of irresponsibility and political posturing to do so. On that basis, we will continue to have contingencies in place to provide certainty for schoolchildren.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I move amendment S6M-02839.1, to leave out from “regrets” to end and insert:

“commends the education workforce for its continued efforts to deliver high-quality school education throughout the COVID-19 pandemic; acknowledges that the pandemic has caused disruption to learning, not just in Scotland but around the world, as recognised by the World Bank and the UN; welcomes the Scottish Government’s commitment to education recovery through significant investment in teacher employment, digital inclusion, tackling costs associated with the school day, and study support; recognises the Scottish Government’s ongoing commitment to tackling the poverty-related attainment gap, the progress made pre-pandemic in closing the gap, and the further £1 billion investment over the course of the current parliamentary session through the refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge; notes that it is the Scottish Government’s firm intention that the 2022 national qualification exam diet will take place if it is safe to do so; welcomes the National e-Learning Offer, which has been in place since August 2020, and acknowledges that the Scottish Government and SQA continue to closely monitor disruption caused to schools by COVID-19, with a commitment to provide additional support to learners as required.”

16:56

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am happy to lead this timely debate for Labour.

These remain incredibly challenging times in our schools, and the disruption of the past few years is truly unprecedented since the advent of universal education in this country. All of our education staff deserve our thanks. An already difficult job is made worse by having to deal with the dithering and delay that has become a hallmark of SNP education policy over many years. We are now in late January, and the situation surrounding exams and assessment remains far from clear. Senior education officials speaking at the Education, Children and Young People Committee this very morning sought urgent clarity about the planning scenarios for assessment, and they commented that it is far better for schools to know what mitigations and support may be open to them.

If the cabinet secretary refuses to answer questions on that in the chamber and will not listen to members, I urge her to heed the calls from senior education professionals across Scotland. Equity in education is not a mere subjective value, and it is not fluffy or a nice to have; it is the objective basis on which a national system of qualifications is founded. Grades must be comparable if they are to act as a passport to employment and to the next steps of education.

The national system has been vital for social progress in Scotland, both material and cultural, for women, for Catholics and for black and minority ethnic Scots. It gives people a piece of paper that says, “I am as able as any other, and your prejudice is that alone.” The whole process gives validity to the very idea of social progress, even if the reality of it has become far less likely over the past decade and a half. We know that the experience of the pandemic has been unequal across different areas and demographics.

More work is urgently needed to assess for whom and how the impact has been greatest, but we know that, at an individual level, there are young people who have lost far more time in school than others, through no fault of their own. The next steps that are taken must redress that equity gap. The Government should urgently produce a plan to ensure that young people are supported, including through specific provision for those who need most support. Our education staff are working tirelessly in unprecedented circumstances to that end, but they need all the help that we can muster.

Further, and as the barest of minimums, the Government must immediately publish an appeals process, inclusive of a no-detriment policy, so that young people in exceptional circumstances can achieve redress if the Government fails to act before grades are assessed.

The Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland has made it clear that the Government’s failure in that area—not once, but twice—was a breach of the children’s rights that the Government claims to respect. Those without standing appeals from 2020 were, at a stroke of the cabinet secretary’s pen, told that they would not have any route of appeal.

We are well past the point of cumulative lost education that forced the cancellation of last year’s exam diet. It stands to reason that, without taking steps now, the Government will fall below its own very low bar for action.

A senior teacher contacted me this very afternoon to express concern at the huge loss of learning that has been faced by his pupils. He said:

"I feel sorry for so many kids who are going to be treated like everyone else, when they are not the same."

The Government has backed itself into a corner on the exam diet. Now we all need the exams to go ahead, because there is no real alternative. Teachers unions are very clear that there is no real plan B. We all want to see the decline in cases continue, but I am daily concerned that a surfeit of confidence might mean that the necessary preparations for new variants or for a rapid deterioration of the situation were neglected.

Let us hope that circumstances permit a full exam diet, but action must be taken now to ensure that it is a fair one. I hope that the chamber will back Labour's amendment.

I move amendment S6M-02839.2, to leave out from "and the failure" to end and insert:

“; recognises the disruption to the educational experience of young people caused by COVID-19; believes that it is the duty of the Scottish Government to ensure that there is equity in the qualifications system; notes that in-year learning has again been disrupted in this academic year, and calls, therefore, on the Scottish Government to immediately publish a National Appeals Process, which includes exceptional circumstances caused by disruption and guarantees no detriment to pupils.”

17:00

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We do not often get a chance to debate education in this chamber, despite it, apparently, being a top priority for the Government five years ago, so I will broaden my remarks beyond the exams, although I will cover them, too. I want to cover the major issues, because we are at a crossroads for Scottish education. I feel sorry for Shirley-Anne Somerville because she has been landed with a job that her four predecessors flunked over the past 15 years.

The performance on education is on the slide in international terms. In the most recent programme for international student assessment study, Scotland received its worst-ever scores in maths and science. Scotland is worse than Hungary, Slovakia and, on some measures, Poland and Turkey. Heaven forbid—it is even worse than England.

While the SNP's performance has been falling in international terms, the poverty-related attainment gap has grown. That is not quite true—it has narrowed marginally, but at the current rate of progress it will take decades to close. Closing it is the objective that has been set by the First Minister. Just narrowing it, at this rate, will let down thousands of pupils for decades.

The SNP's response to the decline in international terms was to scrap the survey of literacy and numeracy and replace it with the

already discredited, national census-based Scottish national standardised assessment testing system, which includes—this is unbelievable, but it is still in place—testing of five-year-olds. The SNP did not like the international comparisons, so it also withdrew from the trends in international mathematics and science study and the progress in international reading literacy study. Even Russia and Iran take part in those studies. Who would have thought that Scotland would be more secretive than Iran and Russia?

This is a short debate, but let me make some positive proposals at this important crossroads for Scottish education. The education secretary should improve the role of knowledge in the curriculum, especially in the broad general education. We should give teachers more support with materials that are created by expert teachers and bring back principal teachers.

We must reverse the dramatic decline in education support plans for pupils with additional support needs. We need to put teachers back in charge of the bodies that replace the SQA and Education Scotland, so we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. We need to reverse the growth in temporary teacher numbers by making more teachers permanent, by making the funding for them permanent.

We need to rejoin TIMSS and PIRLS, scrap the SNSAs and reintroduce a beefed-up SSLN, so that we can measure both locally and internationally without a system that teaches to the test.

We must also give pupils greater confidence and clarity that this year exams are on. As we heard at the Education, Children and Young People Committee this morning, the dithering—and it is dithering—about whether we should have scenario 2 in place should end. We should have it in place right now, so pupils can have greater certainty.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Will Willie Rennie give way?

Willie Rennie: No—I am sorry; I do not have enough time.

All those proposals are constructive and positive. However, the truth is that the SNP has been belligerent for years on education. It was far too slow to expand early education, especially for two-year-olds, and it failed to accept that the pupil premium was necessary, just because those were ideas that originated in England. It would just not listen, for years on end, until the growing poverty-related attainment gap forced it to act. It put the worst of Scottish nationalism ahead of Scottish education, and it is pupils who are paying the price.

My fear is that the new education secretary does not have the political backing to address the deep-rooted problems in Scottish education. It appears that she has been sent by the First Minister—

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude, Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: —to manage rather than lead. No longer do we hear about education being the top priority of the First Minister. That should worry us all, including the education secretary.

17:05

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I will say out loud what many people are thinking when they look at the text of the motion: it is short, it is curt and it is shrill. It woefully oversimplifies what has already been a challenging time over the past two years. I put on record my thanks to all the people across all education sectors who have, to be frank, knocked their pan in, rapidly upskilled and adapted in the changing Covid context.

The motion is lazy. It sums up the Tory attitude to Scotland, devolution and our education system. It tries to grab the headlines with negative soundbites that pay no regard to hard-working professionals, parents and pupils. Is it the total sum of Scottish Tory thinking on education to go negative rather than come up with actual solutions?

Stephen Kerr: Will Kaukab Stewart give way?

Kaukab Stewart: I will not give way. I will have my say at the moment and come back to the member if I have time.

We are not yet in the clear from a huge public health challenge to humanity across the globe. The pandemic has disrupted every country, every person and every aspect of our lives. As someone who worked through the lockdown at the chalk face, so to speak, I know exactly what the impacts on children, families and teachers have been. The pandemic has taken its toll, but to turn it into a political football for partisan gain is appalling.

However, let us face it, we should not be too surprised: the last time the Tories controlled Scottish education their big idea was to saddle headteachers with budget management as if to say, “Here’s your allocation. You have no training in financial management but, hey, don’t blame us if you can’t get what you need.” That was a blatant attempt to undermine local government and an ill thought-out attempt to bring the commercial market ideology into Scottish schools.

I do not know whether Meghan Gallacher thinks that attacking the First Minister personally is a great tactic. We are watching the worst Prime

Minister dissemble, lie and bring his public office into such disrepute that now even AC12 has come in on the act.

The Scottish Government has provided significant investment that is making a world of difference: more teachers, the lowest teacher pupil ratios since 2009 and practical support for all, such as free school meals or digital devices. That investment is delivering results and 94 per cent of teachers feel that they have the autonomy to develop the PEF plans that respond to their local needs.

Meghan Gallacher: The Scottish Government budget cuts the PEF. I would like to hear Kaukab Stewart’s response to that because, surely, to tackle the attainment gap, teachers need adequate PEF to get the money to the pupils who need it.

Kaukab Stewart: As Meghan will be aware, the PEF budget has been realigned to ensure that local authorities can respond to their local needs. We know that the challenges of poverty are not located in one place or the other; there are many variables.

Ninety-five per cent of headteachers feel that Covid-19 and school building closures have had at least some impact on their progress on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. That challenge is faced by countries across the world but, in the months since I was elected, I have not heard a single Tory suggestion on how that could be improved upon.

One unintended consequence of the Covid pandemic is the opening up of a debate on whether school exams are the best assessment for our young people. The pandemic has given us an opportunity to reflect on and assess how we best measure the academic and wider achievements of our young people from all backgrounds.

The Presiding Officer: Ms Stewart, if you could conclude, please.

Kaukab Stewart: I beg your pardon.

Unlike the Tories, I am not prepared to turn the clock back—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Stewart. I have to ask you to conclude.

Kaukab Stewart: —to some kind of social conservatism harking back to the good old days—

The Presiding Officer: Ms Stewart!

Kaukab Stewart: —when poor people were meant to know their place.

The Presiding Officer: Ms Stewart, I ask you to conclude.

Kaukab Stewart: I beg your pardon.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members to refer to all members using their surnames as well as forenames.

17:09

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I express my support for the motion that was lodged by my colleague Meghan Gallacher.

In my region, West Scotland, there are two high schools that are only minutes apart. The first is ranked sixth in the league tables, and the other is ranked 230th. It will not come as a shock to members to learn that the percentage of pupils attaining five higher passes at the former is more than double the percentage at the latter. Such statistics are replicated across Scotland. Throughout the majority of a child's learning journey, the odds are distinctly in favour of those from the least deprived areas, yet despite Conservative objections the Scottish Government has pushed forward with its cuts to the attainment challenge areas without having addressed the key problem, which is that one child's future will be drastically different from another's because of the postcode lottery.

The past two years have been chaotic, despite several months' notice of cancellation of exams. It remains a myth that this year will go any more smoothly with just a few weeks' notice. That shows a complete disregard for pupils' mental health and for their futures. The Scottish Government must announce its final decision immediately so that extra revision resources can be made available and the necessary health measures can be put in place.

The SNP continues to blame its bad track record on the pandemic. The cabinet secretary was quick today to remind my colleague Meghan Gallacher that we are going through a pandemic. I remind the cabinet secretary that higher pass rates declined for four years in a row prior to the pandemic; that the SNP lowered the standard that is required for a person to be deemed literate or numerate; and that our education system has continued to plummet in the international rankings. I am not sure what Kaukab Stewart was talking about when she referred to international rankings. I remind her that Scotland is plummeting, having recorded its lowest performance yet in the PISA rankings.

Ross Greer: Will the member take an intervention?

Pam Gosal: I do not have enough time; I would like to finish.

If education—and reducing disruption of it—was truly a priority for Nicola Sturgeon's Government, it

would listen to the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, which has recommended that exams go ahead and said that schools would benefit from extra funding to cover virus-related staff absences.

Last year, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's report on the education system in Scotland highlighted that an important step in moving forward would be realignment of the early stages of the education system to ensure more consistency. I truly fear that pupils will, without undergoing any sort of formal examination, feel unprepared for the mode of assessment that they are likely to experience should they progress to further and higher education. That is evident in the growing positive-destination gap.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member give way?

Pam Gosal: I am just concluding. I am sorry.

In conclusion, Scotland's children—our children—deserve an education system that is not content with meeting baseline targets but strives to be world beating, competitive and—most of all—inclusive. Since I was elected last year, I have consistently repeated in the chamber that we have had 14 years of SNP failings. I now stand here saying that we have had 15 years of the SNP failing our children. I sincerely hope that I will not be standing here next year—

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude, Ms Gosal.

Pam Gosal: —asking the same questions.

17:14

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): The Conservatives contend that the Scottish Government has not prioritised education. Of course, that assertion does not stand up to any scrutiny. Scotland has the highest spending in schools per pupil of any UK nation, teaching numbers are currently the highest they have been for 14 years, and the Scottish Government will fund 3,500 additional teachers and 500 support staff in the current session of Parliament, which is over and above the 1,400 teachers who were recruited during the pandemic. Indeed, in today's meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, we were rightly scrutinising how the new baseline funding for teachers and support staff will lead to permanent, as opposed to temporary, contracts.

There may be differences of opinion regarding the policies, approaches and levels of success within Scottish education, including on closing the poverty-related attainment gap, but to suggest that the Scottish Government—which has committed a

further £1 billion for Scotland's attainment challenge, on top of the £150 million that has already been invested—has not prioritised education is demonstrably wrong. It is simply wrong.

Of course, the Scottish Government has prioritised not only education; it has also sought to prioritise various other factors that are crucial in tackling the poverty-related attainment gap. The draft Scottish budget includes £197 million to double the game-changing Scottish child payment from April this year, and to extend it to cover under-16s by the end of 2022, which will help to lift an estimated 40,000 children out of poverty.

Let us contrast that with the impact of the cruel UK Government decision to remove £20 a week from universal credit. What impact do the Conservatives think taking scarce funds from low-income families will have on education, in relation to supporting children and families and children's ability to learn? It makes no sense.

Best start grants and best start foods, access to digital devices, school trips and school uniforms, and free school meals form a strong base on which to continue to build our efforts to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap. Although progress was being made to close the gap pre-Covid, we clearly had to go faster and more had to be done. A review of progress with the attainment challenge last year demonstrated that nine out of 10 headteachers believed that resources had made a difference in addressing the poverty-related attainment gap. My colleagues and I on the Education, Children and Young People Committee want to understand better how incomes and progress are measured, given the national priority and the sheer volume of cash. By the end of this parliamentary session £1.75 billion will have been invested in the attainment challenge.

We also need to ensure that Scotland's system of accreditation for learning in schools, which is currently underpinned by a top-heavy swathe of extra exams—the past two years aside, of course—can better recognise the skills, efforts, talents and abilities of young people, especially those from our most deprived communities. That will play a crucial role in addressing Scotland's poverty-related attainment gap. The Education, Children and Young People Committee and Parliament as a whole must carefully scrutinise the reforms that will, ultimately, be presented, but there is definitely a real opportunity to recognise better the abilities of students.

I note that the Conservative motion demands that the 2022 exam diet must “go ahead in full”. No ifs, no buts—it should go ahead no matter what. In the quote that was read out by Meghan Gallacher to support the Tory position, Mr Wyatt quite sensibly included a caveat that public health

factors could still impact on exams. That is the Scottish Government's position. I understand that that is also the position in England. Tory rhetoric in Scotland is simply embarrassing.

Today, the Education, Children and Young People Committee heard evidence that, with regard to contingency planning on exams, scenario 2 needs to be considered in short order. I am sure that the Scottish Government will want to consider that.

I support the Scottish Government amendment and I ask members to reject the Conservative motion and the Labour amendment.

17:18

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

We all know that the pandemic has had a significant impact on education. In the past two years our learners, teachers and other staff have all experienced significant disruption to education. Learning has continued to be interrupted in this school year, with infection-control and self-isolation requirements having meant that many pupils have been unable to attend school, whole classes have been asked to work remotely, and there has been uncertainty for pupils and teachers over the exam diet.

The Scottish Government continues to state that education is a priority. Although working to keep schools open is crucial at this point in time, there are broader issues that I wish to highlight. We know that the pandemic has affected children from the most deprived areas the most, and that the already unacceptably large poverty-related attainment gap has increased.

In 2020, I called on the Scottish Government to commit to an equity audit when pupils returned to school. Even at that point, we were seeing significant differences in engagement and educational experiences. The audit found particularly negative impacts for young people who are transitioning from primary to secondary school and for those in early primary, and it found that higher numbers of pupils from less advantaged backgrounds showed a regression in literacy and numeracy. It also showed the impact of the pandemic on the mental and physical health and wellbeing of children and young people.

The audit document was initially published at a very high level, and it is unclear to me how the problems that it identified are being significantly addressed. The Scottish Government has a responsibility to address those findings or it risks there being additional gaps in learning, which will create more disadvantage. The pupils who are most negatively impacted are those who are affected by poverty. We need immediate steps to

address its underlying causes and to support them in their education.

Across the country, the picture continues to be mixed, as self-isolation of pupils and teachers causes disruption. Teaching staff who have worked throughout the pandemic—not without risk to their health—are already under huge pressure amid staff shortages. They face additions to their workload because they are expected to prepare for all eventualities. Uncertainty around exams and the future of the SQA is only exacerbating the situation. I understand the desire for certainty that some members have expressed this afternoon, but we also need to be realistic about the situation that we face.

I ask the Scottish Government whether any assessment is being made of the areas and schools that have been, and are being, most impacted by Covid. In my region, some schools have had more absences and closures than others; we need to ensure that increased support is received where it is needed.

We know that pupils who are at key points in their schooling feel the impacts of the pandemic more keenly. For pupils who are sitting exams, there have been huge challenges. The same goes for those who are transitioning from primary to secondary school, and for those who are starting primary school. There are children who are now part of the way through primary 2 whose only experience of school has been during a pandemic. They have been unable to mix across classes and have only recently been able to have lunch in dinner halls. Nativities and school concerts have been cancelled or performed to a camera. The social experiences that those children have been missing out on should not be overlooked and the potential longer-term impacts must be addressed.

The pandemic has also impacted parents and guardians of children who are due to start their primary schooling. At a point in history when starting school is potentially more difficult for a child, we should be doing all that we can to support families who choose to defer entry in the interests of their child. I have long supported the Give Them Time campaign and its calls for funded childcare provision for all families who choose to defer the start of primary school. I welcomed the inclusion of Fife, Stirling and Clackmannanshire councils in the pilot areas for an additional year of funding, but I call on the Scottish Government to bring forward full implementation of that and to support all local authorities to deliver it as soon as possible. We cannot have families waiting because of where they live, and the pandemic surely adds to the argument for the policy change.

We have seen the impact, from the early years to university, on education over the past two years. We must ensure that we assess that and

act on it. Pre-pandemic, there were huge challenges in education that have only been exacerbated. The Scottish Government needs to do more to ensure that this generation of learners does not continue to be disadvantaged.

17:22

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I fully expected this afternoon's other Conservative debate to be the most trying of the week, in which we had to listen to the party that has cut Scotland's budget demand that we somehow spend more money than we have. However, this motion blows that one out of the water in how disingenuous, dangerous and incoherent it is.

For months, the Scottish Government has made it clear—over and over again—that the only circumstances under which exams will not go ahead this year is if the public health situation makes that impossible. However, somehow, that is not good enough for the Conservatives, who want a cast iron guarantee that exams will go ahead.

Meghan Gallacher's motion makes sense only if the Tories want a guarantee that exams will go ahead even if public health officials say that it is not safe for them to do so. If that is not what the Tories are saying, why are we here? If, for example, they agree that the outbreak of a dangerous new strain could, conceivably, make exams unsafe, they agree with the Scottish Government's existing position.

Taking the motion and the Tories' public statements to their logical conclusion leads me to the same conclusion that I have come to a number of times during this pandemic, which is that, if they think that they can get headlines out of it, the Scottish Conservatives have a wilful disregard for the health and safety of teachers, support staff and school pupils.

Meghan Gallacher: Will the member take an intervention?

Ross Greer: I will gratefully take an intervention from the member if she can clarify whether the Conservatives concede that there is a situation under which it might be too dangerous for exams to take place this year.

Meghan Gallacher: When I was making my contribution, I said that I agreed with Daniel Wyatt, who said that "a significant health concern" would be a reason for the exams not to go ahead. However, does Ross Greer not agree with the Scottish Conservative position that leaving it until March is too late to make decisions on exams? That is why we are seeking clarity today.

Ross Greer: I really hope that it does not come as news to the member that the Scottish Government cannot speak on behalf of Covid. The

Scottish Government cannot predict what variants will emerge in March, April or May.

In bringing the debate, the Conservatives have at least given other colleagues the opportunity to make more reasoned contributions, and better understand other elements of this year's national qualifications diet beyond the exams themselves.

Both the education secretary and the First Minister have repeatedly stated that if there is significant disruption in this school year, additional support will be made available for those undertaking national qualifications. In recent weeks, both have also acknowledged that disruption has happened. Therefore, I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for outlining the process for activating further support. However, I associate myself with the remarks made by colleagues, particularly Mr Marra and Mr Rennie, about the impact of delaying those decisions.

In recent years, the appeals system has been a point of acute failure, and I am glad that Mr Marra brought it up. For all its failings, some improvements were made last year, which I hope will be maintained, most obviously the removal of any associated charge in making appeals. Making appeals universally free to access, and ending the scandal of the old quasi-appeal system—which was disproportionately used by private schools that had the financial means to do so—would be an improvement.

The SQA has consistently failed to take a rights-based approach to its work, compliant with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that cannot be repeated with any additional measures that are brought in to reflect this year's disruption.

I will make one other request of the cabinet secretary in relation to any forthcoming announcement about additional measures ahead of this year's exams. Thousands of college students who are due to take NQ exams this year have been impacted by far greater levels of disruption, and have far less access to in-person learning than school pupils. That happened on the basis of public health restrictions, which I still absolutely believe to have been the right call. However, if we are to acknowledge that grading students as if this were a normal year would be unjust, the impact on college students in particular should be factored in to whatever decisions are made in regard to additional support. I make the same point to the board of the SQA.

Before closing, I will briefly touch on the rest of the motion. It is hard to take seriously Conservative criticism about the slow rate of progress in closing the attainment gap when it is the very party that is taking £20 a week away from the most vulnerable people in this country, at a

time when the two parties of this Government are putting £20 a week back into the pockets of the most vulnerable families across Scotland. We will not close a poverty-related attainment gap without tackling poverty at source.

The Presiding Officer: Please close, Mr Greer.

Ross Greer: This Government is trying to do that; perhaps the Conservatives would like to help in that endeavour, rather than criticise our efforts to undo the damage that they are so wilfully causing.

17:27

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): As my party's former spokesperson on education, I do understand how challenging the past 18 months have been for everyone in education. However, today, I can hear history repeating itself. Time after time, our education sector met endless U-turns and a lack of advice support and clarity with resilience and patience, and we should be thankful that it did so.

The Government's position today is utterly bizarre. The rosy picture that it is painting bears no resemblance to the reality of what many staff and pupils have actually faced over the past 18 months. The Government amendment makes some bizarre and bold claims, such as its rehashing of the Scottish attainment challenge funding. That policy was launched in 2015—it is not news to us today. What about its self-congratulatory back patting over closing the attainment gap? That is just bizarre, because we know that progress was not being made long before the pandemic, and I will come on to the point in a moment. Worse is the woolly commitment to this year's exam diet going ahead. The Government uses the words

"if it is safe to do so".

What does that mean? The cabinet secretary needs to tell the teachers and the young people, because nobody actually knows.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: "When it is safe to do so" means that the public health guidance is not that gatherings should not go ahead. When it is safe is when public health guidance says that it is. I am not sure how much clearer we can be. It is about public health guidance.

Jamie Greene: Will the cabinet secretary explain to us why, in a few short weeks, there will be 67,000 people at Murrayfield stadium watching the rugby, but we cannot get 100 people in a sports hall sitting an exam in a well-ventilated room? The cabinet secretary needs to explain that to young people, because the logic behind it makes no conceivable sense. Why is the First Minister relaxing Covid restrictions week after

week, which we support and called for, yet she cannot make a firm commitment around exams?

Let us look at the barriers to exams. Let us address them one by one. Is place the problem? Is the school estate ventilated enough? If it is not, it should have been more than a year ago. That is what the EIS demanded and what teachers and Opposition members have asked for. Are people the problem? Is there a worry that there are not enough invigilators? What has the Government done? Where is the massive improvement exercise? Where are the hundreds of retired teachers and newly qualified teachers that we called for? Where is the effort for plan A, plan B and, God forbid, plan C? None of that preparation was put in place and there has been 18 months of warning that this could happen again this year. There has been no preparation or plan and I am afraid that the outcome for young people may again be dire.

How can the Government set up criminal courts in cinemas but not find somewhere to hold an exam for 100 people? It makes absolutely no sense, cabinet secretary. Here is my biggest worry about the issue: is preparation, not place or people, the Government's true concern? Is there a genuine worry that those young people are not ready to sit exams? I am genuinely concerned that there is a cohort of young people in Scotland going on to further and higher education who have never sat an exam in exam-like conditions, and that should worry everyone who has an interest in education.

That used to worry the Green Party, which sits there bereft of criticism of front-bench members now that it is in government. The Greens used to work with us to defeat and pressurise the Government—for example, when John Swinney was dragged to the chamber to apologise and make amends for the utter shambles of the 2020 SQA diet.

Ross Greer: Will the member take an intervention?

Jamie Greene: Mr Greer has had his say. I am afraid, and I say this with no pleasure, that he will not stand up to front-bench members on the issue, but it is about time that somebody did.

In closing, I will say what I said the last time that we proudly brought the issue of education to the chamber. Where there is a will, there is a way. There are plenty of ways, but listening to front-bench members and the glib contributions from their back benchers, there is very little will.

17:31

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The Conservative members who are in the

chamber are often keen to describe the perceived benefits of being part of the UK as the broad shoulders of the union, but I have always found those shoulders a tad slopy. Today, Conservative members have not just slopy shoulders, but brass necks.

Ms Gallacher's motion does not even give the subject of debate its full title. It is the poverty-related attainment gap—poverty that is largely inflicted by the punitive practices of the UK Government that introduced the two-child cap on benefits and is cutting universal credit payments by £20 a week at a time when living costs are soaring. Those costs are soaring because of the failure to manage the UK's energy market, Brexit costs being passed on to consumers when Scotland did not vote for Brexit and increased costs at fuel pumps and for food. At least let us have an honest discussion about the causes of poverty and where the blame for it lies.

Stephen Kerr: I am glad that the member has given way. Here is what the Deputy First Minister said in March when he was out courting for votes: he promised every child in Scotland a free digital device and a free internet connection. Where are they? It takes a brass neck to say that to get votes and then fail to deliver.

Clare Adamson: The member is obviously not aware of what is happening in schools right now and where the support is coming from for families who need digital devices. I know where the families in my area need to go to get them, so perhaps he needs to investigate how to get them himself.

I commend Claire Baker for her constructive comments, but I wish that we also had powers over employment law in Scotland, because another real problem that families face is zero-hours contracts and precarious employment, but that is in the hands of the shambles that is the Tory party Government in Westminster.

What is the Scottish Government doing to challenge poverty in our education system? The education maintenance allowance, which was scrapped in England, continues in Scotland to allow young people from the most financially challenged backgrounds to support their continued education at schools, colleges or universities, through a £30 per week payment. There is record funding of more than £250 million for the attainment Scotland fund and 167,000 pupils in primaries 1 to 3 benefit from free school meals, which have been rolled out further. That is a saving for families of £400 a year per child. The Scottish Government has achieved the commission on widening access's target of 16 per cent of full-time first degree entrants to university coming from the 20 per cent most deprived areas in Scotland. It has also increased the national

minimum school clothing grant—£120 for primary school pupils and £150 for secondary pupils.

Frankly, the facts do not bear out the rhetoric from members on the Opposition benches. We have continued to achieve better outcomes and better leaving statistics for pupils. More pupils in Scotland go on to further and higher education and we have record numbers of people in modern, graduate and foundation apprenticeships. Those points are all positives for our young people. I was convener of the Education and Skills Committee when the alternative assessment model was brought in last year. The model worked, and businesses, colleges and universities recognised young people's qualifications.

What message is sent out today? I want to send one to pupils that their efforts and those of their dedicated professional teachers will allow them to move on to positive destinations. We should support them and not cast shade on robust and fair processes. If the Tories do not know what contingency means, or the difference between open-air and indoor events, they need to go back to school.

17:36

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close for Labour and to support the amendment in my colleague Michael Marra's name.

Our most effective tool to truly improve the future, advance our country and help our communities is education—to have an environment that allows our young people to think critically, imagine, dream and even come up with the solutions to today's problems and hopefully implement them tomorrow.

The debate has been fractious, but many members have made interesting contributions. I highlight that of Willie Rennie, in which he talked about our being at a crossroads. I deeply hope that we are at a crossroads and not at a cul-de-sac with education. It is for the Government and Parliament to ensure that it is a crossroads.

Pam Gosal rightly talked about inequality and the poverty-induced attainment gap, which is a frightening truth, day to day, for our young people and their families. There is inequality across Scotland. Some children have missed substantial parts of school; some have struggled to re-engage with it as a result of Covid; and some are frankly disillusioned with it, because of Covid and because of their background.

There is an inequality of experience. One of the challenges that we have found in the debate is around the experience of individual pupils, and I want to concentrate on the question of appeals.

Looking back to previous years, I think that we should have learned from experience about the appeals situation but, frankly, we are not in a good place in Scotland.

In the first year of Covid, the cabinet secretary wrote off a number of appeals with the stroke of a pen—the futures of those individual children were changed with the flick of a pen. That is an aspect that the Scottish Human Rights Commission and everyone looks at with a deep sadness. That was against those children's human rights, but they could not do anything, because we do not have the UNCRC bill as a statute in this country.

The experience of the past year was little better. Some children's personal circumstances could not form the grounds of their appeal, be it the death of a parent or their own experience of Covid or suffering from long Covid. They could not have the opportunity to say, "My experience was horrendous. Please, can you do something about it?"

This year's pupils do not even know on what grounds they could appeal. I welcome Ross Greer's comments about the appeals situation, because notwithstanding where one sits on the argument about whether exams absolutely will happen or absolutely will not happen, we have heard from across the chamber and particularly from the cabinet secretary about the work that has been put in should there be additional disruption. Can we hear about the work on what the journey of appeal will look like for children this year? I hope that it is free; it always should have been. I hope that it will take the individual's experiences of the exam situation or the assessment model that is used into account. I hope that children can appeal on their own individual experience of that. I hope that additional resources can be put in so that our incredibly hard-working teachers and support staff can give those children additional time when they come into school.

As we stand here—

The Presiding Officer: Can the member conclude, please?

Martin Whitfield: —debating, pupils in some year groups are already starting their preliminary exams. They are doing so not knowing what the journey ahead holds for them. Please can we see a road map for appeals?

17:40

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We have got to the point of the debate at which we now know that the Tories accept that there are reasons why exams might not be able to take place, and that is if public health guidance says that they should not. It would appear that we are also now at the point at which

the Scottish Government is being blamed for not having a crystal ball and being able to see what the public health guidance and advice will be between April and June. The Government will continue to make decisions as soon as we can with the data and advice that we have at the time. That is the best that we can do and, to be honest, it is as much as the public should expect. The Government should deal with the information that we have rather than assuming what might happen four months from now.

Meghan Gallacher: Does the cabinet secretary accept that, if we have to wait until March to find out what the Government's exams strategy is, that will be only weeks before the first exam takes place? That will put teachers and pupils under severe stress and cause them anxiety.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: With the greatest of respect to Meghan Gallacher, we will move as quickly as possible if the public health guidance changes. I cannot tell what the public health guidance will be nearer exam time. Everyone in the system is planning for the exams to take place and is determined to make that happen. The only thing that will change that is public health guidance. It is a remote possibility, but it would be highly irresponsible not to have a contingency plan in place, as other countries do.

We have heard some more thoughtful contributions during the debate, particularly Claire Baker's, and I thank her for it. I will take at his word Willie Rennie's positive contribution and suggestions. Some—who knows?—I might take up; others I will respectfully continue to disagree with.

Once again, Pam Gosal got us into the Scottish Conservatives' trap of describing last year's qualifications as chaotic when 137,000 candidates received their formal results, and we had more passes at higher level than we have had since the advent of devolution. As Clare Adamson pointed out, the qualifications were welcomed by universities, colleges and employers as credible in very difficult circumstances. That is the reality of what happened last year.

Ross Greer rightly pointed out the need to make quick decisions, particularly on scenario B, and other members also mentioned that. I reiterate the point that we are looking at numbers every day. The SQA has that close contingency with the Government, and it is working closely with stakeholders on that. It will take a decision as soon as it feels that that point is reached.

Daniel Johnson: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: If Daniel Johnson will forgive me, I want to make progress to deal with a point that Ross Greer and Martin Whitfield

discussed on appeals and exceptional circumstances. We expect an announcement on that soon. I appreciate that many people are looking for that to happen. One of the reasons why this time has been taken is to ensure that we are having the right type of consultation with the national qualifications 2022 group about what the process should look like, and what should be contained within it. We are absolutely determined to have the right type of stakeholder engagement, but I confirm that there is no cost and the system will be much more comprehensive than in the rest of the UK.

We have not had time to discuss the support that is already in place for students in this time of disruption. There has been a small number of partial school closures and—thankfully—an even smaller number of full school closures but, through the national e-learning offer, support is available to every learner from the age of three to 18. There is a great deal to support students through the very challenging times that they are going through, such as the West Partnership online school videos to support the senior phase and the e-Sgoil study support webinars and resources.

During today's discussions, I have been genuinely baffled by Meghan Gallacher's assertion that we should learn lessons from what is happening down south. I say to Meghan Gallacher, with the greatest respect, that today is definitely not the day to espouse that view. Lessons are being given by a Tory Government that is scrapping rules to save a Prime Minister's skin. That is highly irresponsible.

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude, cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Prime Minister is more interested in his own political survival than what is right. We in the Scottish Government will continue to do what is right, in the right way, as quickly as we can, to support our learners. What a shame it is that we have had such an irresponsible motion from the Scottish Conservatives—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: —but it is not surprising.

The Presiding Officer: I call Sharon Dowey to wind up the debate.

17:46

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Conservatives have come here today with one very simple ask—that Scottish pupils be treated with respect. Throughout the experience of the past two years, our young people have not been able to enjoy that right. Instead, they have

been shunted from classroom to home and back to classroom, with little consideration of the effect that any of that was having on their mental health, the attainment gap or—more importantly, some would argue—their grades.

As with so many aspects of Covid, clarity is what we need right now—clarity on exams, clarity on face masks in schools, clarity on the attainment gap and clarity on the free laptop for every child that never arrived—but the truth is that clarity is one of the many things that the Scottish Government has failed to provide. It is obvious to anyone that the confusion is having a detrimental effect on our children's wellbeing. It was necessary only to listen to today's meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee to hear at first hand from the experts about the impact that that confusion is having on an education system that was once the envy of the world.

Exams are not the only thing that have been affected; the whole school experience has been affected. Scottish students have lost out on many of the extracurricular school and social activities that play such an important role in their development. All members will remember their own school sports days. For the past two years, many Scottish children and their families have missed out on creating those special memories. For them, there have been no prizegivings, no sports days, no nativity plays and no end-of-year shows.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Sharon Dowe: I would like to make some progress.

In a way, those things are as important as exams. Therefore, I ask the SNP Government to offer a guarantee and to commit not only to the exam diet being held this year but to school plays and sports days going ahead, too. It is a small ask, but it would mean so much to so many pupils, parents and teachers.

My colleague Meghan Gallacher reminded us that the First Minister asked to be judged on her education record. What a record that is. The First Minister told us that education was her top priority and said:

"I want to be judged on this."

I think that it is fair to say that the First Minister has been judged and has been found wanting. Meghan Gallacher told us that the SNP's record on education is a tale of broken promises and failed reforms, and she is right. If members go to any school in Scotland, they will find that sentiment echoed by parents at the school gates.

The international performance of our education system should not be ignored either, as Pam Gosal noted. Although the results of the OECD reports might not matter much to the SNP, educators overseas are paying close attention and are coming to their own conclusions.

Pam Gosal also noted the lack of progress that has been made on the attainment gap. I have now lost count of the number of times that I have heard SNP politicians tell us that the gap is closing. The reality is that, after seven years and £1 billion, the Scottish Government has made little headway. Closing the attainment gap is the First Minister's "sacred responsibility" and her "defining mission". If this is how she goes about her sacred task, I shudder to think what happens to the projects at the bottom of her in-tray.

Jamie Greene refreshed our memories of the chaos of last year's exams, the fiasco that was the appeals system and the failure of the SNP Government to tackle inequality in education. All of that is, of course, before we even get to the Scottish Government's humiliating climbdown over primary 1 testing, which it implemented against the will of this Parliament—a decision that, two years on, is still coming back to bite it.

I will touch on some of the contributions around about. Shirley-Anne Somerville said that contingencies are needed to ensure that we are doing all that we can to keep schools open and that exams take place. She said that it is her firm intention that they should go ahead, but we are looking for a commitment to that today, so that schools know that the exams are going ahead and they can plan ahead. That would give clarity to teachers, parents and pupils.

Kaukab Stewart: I have listened many times to the assurances. Is Sharon Dowe still not assured that a commitment has been given that exams will go ahead unless the public health advice at the time goes against that? The safety of our children is paramount—surely, Sharon Dowe agrees.

Sharon Dowe: No, I do not agree—*[Interruption.]* I think that we should be told today. At committee today—*[Interruption.]* At committee today, some of the comments included that, to release the anxiety that is out there, we need a decision sooner rather than later. A decision that could take up to another three months is no good; we need a decision now so that the schools can plan ahead. They are already planning to have exams, but we need to take away pupils' anxiety. They need to know now that the exams will go ahead.

Kaukab Stewart made a political football of the issue in her speech, although she said that it was us who were doing that. She also said that the

SNP had made a world of difference to education, but the results do not show that.

Michael Marra spoke about how teachers are working exceptionally hard to support pupils. We totally agree with that. His contribution was really good. Claire Baker's was also excellent. She talked about all the problems that we have in relation to regression in literacy and numeracy.

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude, Ms Dowey.

Sharon Dowey: Okay.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you.

Sharon Dowey: To conclude, the chamber is in agreement that exams should go ahead this year, but pupils, parents and—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Dowey. You are out of time, but thank you very much.

That concludes the debate on education failures and guaranteeing the 2022 exam diet.

Standards Commission for Scotland (Appointment of Member)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-02862, in the name of Claire Baker, on the appointment of a member of the Standards Commission for Scotland. I call Claire Baker to move the motion on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.

17:53

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

Along with Christine Grahame and Maggie Chapman, I was a member of the corporate body appointment panel, and I invite MSPs to agree the appointment of Suzanne Vestri as a member of the Standards Commission for Scotland.

As the chamber will know, the corporate body supports seven independent office holders, and one of our statutory duties relates to appointing, with the agreement of the Parliament, some of the office holders.

This appointment relates to the Standards Commission for Scotland, which is part of the ethical standards framework. Its role is to encourage high ethical standards in public life by promoting and enforcing the codes of conduct for councillors and members of devolved public bodies. The commission has a convener and four members, all of whom are part time.

Let me turn to our nominee. Suzanne Vestri is a self-employed consultant who provides a range of services to voluntary and public sector organisations, including organisational development advice and the design and delivery of a range of training. She is also a board member at the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration. We believe that Suzanne will bring to the post professionalism, fairness and a strong commitment to ensuring that high standards of conduct in public life are upheld. I am sure that the Parliament will want to wish her every success in her new role.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees, under Section 8 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000, to appoint Suzanne Vestri as a Member of the Standards Commission for Scotland.

[*Applause.*]

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

Business Motion

17:54

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-02851, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 25 January 2022

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
 followed by First Minister's Statement: COVID-19 Update
 followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Transvaginal Mesh Removal (Cost Reimbursement) (Scotland) Bill
 followed by Committee Announcements
 followed by Business Motions
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
 followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 26 January 2022

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Justice and Veterans; Finance and Economy
 followed by Finance and Public Administration Committee Debate: Committees Budget Scrutiny
 followed by Business Motions
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 5.00 pm Decision Time
 followed by Members' Business

Thursday 27 January 2022

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
 followed by Members' Business
 2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills
 followed by Stage 1 Debate: Budget (Scotland) Bill
 followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 1 February 2022

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
 followed by First Minister's Statement: COVID-19 Update
 followed by Scottish Government Business
 followed by Committee Announcements
 followed by Business Motions
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
 followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 2 February 2022

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Covid Recovery and Parliamentary Business; Net Zero, Energy and Transport
 followed by Scottish Government Business
 followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scottish Rate Resolution
 followed by Business Motions
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
 5.00 pm Decision Time
 followed by Members' Business

Thursday 3 February 2022

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 11.40 am General Questions
 12.00 pm First Minister's Questions
 followed by Members' Business
 2.15 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.15 pm Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs and Islands
 followed by Scottish Labour Party Business
 followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 24 January 2022, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:55

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motions S6M-02852 and S6M-02853, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 (Licensing of Short-term Lets) Order 2022 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Town and Country Planning (Short-term Let Control Areas) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2022 [draft] be approved.—
[George Adam]

17:55

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Self-catering is an integral and hugely important part of the Scottish tourism sector, in terms of jobs, revenues and the world-class experience that Scotland offers to visiting guests. The sector generates £867 million annually for the Scottish economy. Throughout the passage of the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 (Licensing of Short-term Lets) Order 2022, significant concerns have been raised by the sector and those whose livelihoods depend on the income that they receive.

Given the impact that the pandemic has had, we should be mindful of the unintended consequences and the potential negative impact that the new order will have on already fragile tourism businesses. Scottish National Party ministers clearly understood that the previous order was unfit when they withdrew it in February 2021. It has been largely unchanged, and the new draft was laid in January 2022, but the concerns of industry, experts and members have been dismissed by ministers.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Liberal Democrats support the introduction of control areas for problematic short-term let hotspots, but, like the member, we think that the licensing scheme is disproportionate and that a registration scheme would be a far more sensible way to proceed. Does the member recognise that the concern comes not just from the Liberal Democrat and Conservative benches, but from the wise Mr Fergus Ewing, who has expressed concern recently in committee? Does he think that the minister should pay attention to that concern and make changes?

Miles Briggs: I absolutely do. As the member outlined, the concerns are shared across the sector, including by the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers, the Professional Association of Self

Caterers UK, Scottish Agritourism, Scotland's Best B&Bs, and the Scottish Bed & Breakfast Association, as well as Scottish Land & Estates. What is concerning is that, as Willie Rennie outlined, the views of the sector have not been taken on board, and the workable solution that has been put forward in the form of a registration scheme has been put to one side by SNP ministers. Indeed, the whole short-term lets sector is united in favouring a registration scheme. The sector also has support from the Federation of Small Businesses, NFU Scotland and all short-term lets organisations. It is worth reflecting that several of those bodies are so angry with the Scottish Government that they felt the need to leave the short-term lets stakeholder working group, because they felt that it was a "sham", in their words, and that it was not addressing their concerns in any constructive way.

I also welcome the comments from my SNP colleague Fergus Ewing, who was mentioned by Willie Rennie. He discovered his independence on the back benches when he said at committee—and I fully agree with this—that

"the licensing scheme is too draconian and unfair".

The Presiding Officer: If you could please conclude, Mr Briggs.

Miles Briggs: I will.

He continued:

"There will now be a period of division, difficulty and anxiety among tens of thousands of law-abiding small businesses that have done nothing to deserve the threat that is now being held over them."—[*Official Report, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee*, 21 December 2021; c 24.]

I ask that Parliament rejects the licensing order at decision time.

17:59

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): The legislation delivers on our commitment to effectively regulate short-term lets. We recognise the important role that short-term lets play as a source of flexible and responsive accommodation for tourists and workers, which brings many benefits to hosts, visitors and our economy. However, when this work started in 2018, it was in response to the significant concerns of residents and communities across Scotland—particularly in Miles Briggs's area, I should add—about the impact that the increase in short-term lets was having on their areas, with regard to local housing supply, noise and antisocial behaviours.

The issue was not just an urban or rural one, as was shown in correspondence and throughout our

consultations. We heard from residents across the country, from Ayr to Applecross, from the Trossachs to North Berwick and from Skye to St Andrews. Constituents regularly asked members of the Scottish Parliament what action the Government was taking to address the issue, while we were taking the time to gather the evidence and hear the views of people and stakeholders so that we could agree on the form that such action would take.

I am pleased that we have responded to those concerns with the clear action on which members will vote tonight.

Miles Briggs: I have been working on the matter with other members of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. None of us is against the change, but the clear ask was that, given the impact of the pandemic, the Scottish Government consider a registration scheme, rather than a licensing scheme. Will the cabinet secretary say why that suggestion was so categorically rejected and why people had to leave the Government's working group?

Shona Robison: If Miles Briggs and the Tories are not against the change, I presume that they will vote for it at decision time.

We have discussed registration versus licensing on many occasions. We considered registration as part of the 2019 consultation and we considered the proposals that the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers made last year.

However, we do not think that registration offers the same protections as licensing does to guests, neighbours and local communities. To be robust and effective, a registration scheme would have to do many of the things that a licensing scheme will do, and the fit-and-proper-person test, which is critical and will be in the licensing scheme, would not be in a registration scheme.

On the working group, I am pleased that many stakeholders have said that they will continue to work with the Government on the detail.

We have already introduced legislation that allows councils to establish short-term let control areas and manage the number of short-term lets. The introduction of a licensing scheme will protect the safety of guests by ensuring that all short-term lets in Scotland comply with mandatory safety standards and that the people who provide such lets are suitable. That will ensure that short-term lets are safe and can continue to make a positive impact on local economies, while balancing those issues with the needs of local communities.

The licensing order, which the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee approved last month, gives local authorities the autonomy to tailor the scheme to address

particular local issues and needs. It will enable authorities to know what is happening in their areas and to be responsive and handle complaints effectively.

We have engaged with stakeholders. We have listened. We have made changes. We are committed to working with local authorities to review levels of short-term lets in hotspot areas in 2023.

I urge members to support the motions.

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

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-02854, on designation of a lead committee.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Criminal Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum in relation to the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill (UK Legislation).—[George Adam]

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

Decision Time

18:03

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are 10 questions to be put as a result of today's businesses.

I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Tom Arthur is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Mark Griffin will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-02838.2, in the name of Tom Arthur, which seeks to amend motion S6M-02838, in the name of Miles Briggs, on protecting local government funding, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

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

18:03

Meeting suspended.

18:08

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Tom Arthur is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Mark Griffin will fall.

Amendment S6M-02838.2, in the name of Tom Arthur, seeks to amend motion S6M-02838, in the name of Miles Briggs, on protecting local government funding in Scotland. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

Fergus Ewing has a point of order.

I believe that Mr Ewing's microphone is on, but unfortunately we cannot hear him in the chamber at the moment.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (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)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)

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

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)

Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-02838.2, in the name of Tom Arthur, which seeks to amend motion S6M-02838, in the name of Miles Briggs, on protecting local government funding, is: For 67, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Amendment S6M-02838.1 falls.

The next question is, that motion S6M-02838, in the name of Miles Briggs, on protecting local government funding in Scotland, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (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)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)

Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)

Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: I call Fergus Ewing for a point of order.

I apologise, Mr Ewing, I believe that connectivity issues are preventing us from hearing you at the moment.

The result of the division is: For 65, Against 56, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the key role that councils play in their communities and their part in delivering a national recovery; recognises that the independent Scottish Fiscal Commission has stated that overall the 2022-23 Scottish Budget has reduced in real terms by 5.2%; notes that this is in spite of continued COVID-19 and inflationary pressures on public services; welcomes the Scottish Government's Budget for 2022-23, which, despite these challenges, includes record funding of £18 billion for Health and Social Care, doubles the Scottish Child Payment, introduces free bus travel for everyone under the age of 22, and delivers a fair settlement worth over £12.5 billion of funding to local authorities; recognises that the total local government

settlement has increased by £588.2 million, or 5.1% in real terms, including specific funding for social care, education and employability support, and welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to developing a fiscal framework for local government and delivering a citizens' assembly on sources of local government funding.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Michael Marra will fall.

The next question is, that motion S6M-02839.1, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, which seeks to amend motion S6M-02839, in the name of Meghan Gallacher, on education failures and guaranteeing the 2022 exam diet, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (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)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)

McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Choudhury, Foysof (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 67, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Amendment S6M-02839.2 falls.

The next question is, that motion S6M-02839, in the name of Meghan Gallacher, on education failures and guaranteeing the 2022 exam diet, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is now closed.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (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)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)

McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the vote on motion S6M-02839, in the name of Meghan Gallacher, as amended, is: For 67, Against 53, Abstentions 1.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament commends the education workforce for its continued efforts to deliver high-quality school education throughout the COVID-19 pandemic; acknowledges that the pandemic has caused disruption to learning, not just in Scotland but around the world, as recognised by the World Bank and the UN; welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to education recovery through significant investment in teacher employment, digital inclusion, tackling costs associated with the school day, and study support; recognises the Scottish Government's ongoing commitment to tackling the poverty-related attainment gap, the progress made pre-pandemic in closing the gap, and the further £1 billion investment over the course of the current parliamentary session through the refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge; notes that it is the Scottish Government's firm intention that the 2022 national qualification exam diet will take place if it is safe to do so; welcomes the National e-Learning Offer, which has been in place since August 2020, and acknowledges that the Scottish Government and SQA continue to closely monitor disruption caused to schools by COVID-19, with a commitment to provide additional support to learners as required.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-02862, in the name of Claire Baker, on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, on the appointment of a member of the Standards Commission for Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees, under Section 8 of the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc (Scotland) Act 2000, to appoint Suzanne Vestri as a Member of the Standards Commission for Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-02852, in the name of George Adam, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is now closed.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (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)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the vote on motion S6M-02852, in the name of George Adam, is: For 68, Against 53, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 (Licensing of Short-term Lets) Order 2022 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-02853, in the name of George Adam, on approval of an SSI, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 87, Against 33, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Town and Country Planning (Short-term Let Control Areas) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2022 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-02854, in the name of George Adam, on the designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Criminal Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum in relation to the Public Service Pensions and Judicial Offices Bill (UK Legislation).

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Asda Foundation

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and the Holyrood campus.

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-02621, in the name of Alexander Stewart, on the Asda Foundation and its community work. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament notes the new fund that was launched by the Asda Foundation in 2021 to help reunite communities, acknowledge the benefits of togetherness and support groups, as COVID-19 restrictions began to ease across the UK; understands that, through the Bringing Communities Back Together fund, grants of between £250 and £1,000 were available to support groups to get activities back on track, or hold get-together celebrations; is delighted that five Asda stores across the Mid Scotland and Fife region have supported 19 projects with funding totalling £15,220; understands that, in 2020, the Asda Foundation invested more than £500,000 in community projects and good causes in Scotland alone, which, it believes, have made a tangible difference to the wider community; further understands that Asda is committed to looking for good causes to support through its foundation, as well as its award-winning community programme, and applauds the Asda Foundation, and everyone involved, for what it sees as their collective, sterling work for the ultimate good of communities across Scotland and the UK as a whole.

18:29

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to open the debate and I thank colleagues for their support for the motion, allowing me to secure the debate.

Coronavirus and its restrictions have dominated nearly everything in our lives for the past two years. In many cases, it has had tragic results and my thoughts and deep condolences go out to individuals who have lost loved ones and friends in its wake. Bad news has dominated nearly all forms of the press and media on a daily basis, which has, sadly, had a real effect on individuals across communities.

However, if we scratch the surface, we will expose some positives beneath that have emerged from the pandemic. It is that aspect that I wish to discuss this evening.

One shining example of positiveness that we have seen, which has rarely been talked about, is community resilience. Prior to the pandemic, we were all getting on with our normal lives, until the pandemic came and shattered them.

Some people seldom spoke to their neighbours or socialised with them at all, but when the

seriousness of the Covid pandemic became apparent, that started to break down in communities. People took to helping one another, calling out to neighbours, albeit from a distance, and many local businesses started to put together support mechanisms to ensure that elderly, disabled and housebound individuals were supported. That has to be commended. Community spirit and resilience have become shining examples that have perhaps not been seen since the second world war.

Although myriad local businesses have been working on great opportunities to secure support, one corporate has shown real resilience through its charity, ensuring kinship and support during lockdowns. That charity is the Asda Foundation. It donates funds and works through its many community champions, helping to unite communities and celebrate togetherness.

The foundation provides grants to a range of good causes in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, including hundreds of new groups that were established to deal with the challenges of the pandemic. It ensures that individual projects nominated by people in their communities get support, with the idea of giving something back to the communities that have supported them.

Asda has a number of large stores in my region of Mid Scotland and Fife, in Alloa, Dalgety Bay, Dunfermline, Halbeath, Glenrothes, Kirkcaldy and Perth and at St Leonards. The stores all have an in-store community champion, whose role is to ensure that support for the local community is at the forefront. That can involve anything from litter picking to helping schools or care homes and providing essential supplies. Their tireless support for good causes has had a massive impact on many of our communities across Mid Scotland and Fife, and I commend them and congratulate them on that.

The foundation supports that work in a number of ways. It offers grants, including the C-19 grant, which was its first response to the pandemic. The grant provided support by offering hygiene products to groups in care homes and hospitals and to the homeless.

Getting schools back on track is another grant, which helped schools that were struggling to secure items with personal protective equipment, uniform banks, stationery supplies and breakfast and after-school clubs.

Another activity is green token giving, through which customers are able to nominate and vote for the causes that they would like to support in the community. The champions nominate local causes that are outstanding in their support for individuals.

The supporting communities grant was delivered through essential items that were

donated in-store. Groups could apply for food, hygiene and wellbeing products and, being community-based, they could bring communities back together.

Grants were also available to celebrate restrictions beginning to ease and communities once again being able to meet safely. The foundation took that work forward.

Many individuals in the company have done many things to provide support. Karen Owens from Asda in Dalgety Bay raised money and awareness through the tickled pink breast cancer campaign. She was marking 10 years since her own diagnosis by donating the money that she was sponsored to raise.

Barbara Inglis, who is the community champion for Asda in Dunfermline, worked with give a kid a start to donate essentials for Christmas boxes for vulnerable and isolating families across Dunfermline and the Fife area.

Michelle Stevenson, who is the community champion for Asda in Glenrothes, provided support by donating large amounts of vegetables to Leslie Community Pantry, and ensured that that happened over the Christmas period.

David Findlay from the click and collect team went the extra mile in his support. He went out of his way to ensure that individuals received support and got their shopping delivered to their homes. There are many more stories of individuals coming together to provide support.

Grants from the Asda Foundation's bringing communities back together fund can be anything from £250 to £1,000. The foundation is very much working hand in hand with people.

Examples in Fife include the Fife Steel Basketball Club in Kirkcaldy, which received £713 for new kits for its under-14 squad. Another example is the Rimbleton primary parents partnership in Glenrothes, which received £1,000 to restart its big breakfast club—the money gave the partnership the opportunity to have something that it had not been able to have for 18 months.

Across the Mid Scotland and Fife area, Asda has secured £16,465-worth of support for 21 local projects. As well as supporting individuals, the foundation, through the new grant, has donated more than £700,000 to help bring local communities back together again.

I pay tribute to each and every group, individual and community champion, and to Asda for its outstanding work in supporting communities throughout Scotland. I commend them and congratulate them on their endeavours, foresight and community resilience. Each and every one of them has gone the extra mile to step up and stand up to support individuals and communities. That

goes to show what can be achieved when we all work together under the banner of community resilience.

I wish the Asda Foundation all the best for the future.

18:37

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I thank Alexander Stewart for lodging his motion for today's members' business debate.

I am pleased to be able to recognise the Asda Foundation's continued commitment to make the communities around its stores better places in which to live and work for its staff, customers and the wider community. As we have heard, the Asda Foundation has been able to give back to the communities that it serves through the bringing communities back together project, which gives grants to local groups and organisations. Those grants have helped to reunite communities, celebrate togetherness and support groups as they resume their activities in person.

In my Aberdeen Donside constituency, a few groups have benefited from funding through the project, such as Northstar 2010s and Dyce Boys Club 2006 whites, as have organisations such as North East Sensory Services, which supports individuals across my constituency as well as the wider north-east region.

Further to the bringing communities back together project, the Asda Foundation is able to give back to communities through the green token giving scheme. I am sure that anyone who shops in Asda will be familiar with that scheme. It creates a form of local democracy and empowers customers and their community to decide which small, local, grass-roots organisations they believe should get funding.

I am aware that, Scotland-wide, Asda has donated around £319,000, with Aberdeen stores benefiting from £14,400. Two stores in my constituency have donated around £1,800 each to their local communities.

Unfortunately, the in-store green token giving scheme was suspended because of the Covid-19 pandemic. That led to the introduction of online voting in 2021, which has enabled Asda customers and the wider public to vote for the projects that matter most to them.

In my Aberdeen Donside constituency, a number of local projects and organisations have been fortunate enough to have received funding through Asda's green token giving scheme. The Bridge of Don and Danestone First Responder Service has put the money that it has received through the green token giving scheme to the

running of its service and the installation and upkeep of vital public access defibrillators.

It is also important to note that each Asda store across Scotland has a community champion. The community champions listen to the needs of the communities around each store and work with local people to ensure that Asda provides support to those who need it most.

I have recently been made aware of some of the outstanding work that community champions Fiona Cumming, who works at Asda Dyce, and Jan Craig, who works at Asda Middleton Park, do with their respective communities, and I applaud them.

I am happy to spread the word about the fantastic work that Asda and its community champions are doing in Aberdeen Donside and throughout Scotland, and I look forward to working with them in the future to further that work.

18:40

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank my colleague Alexander Stewart for bringing the motion to the chamber.

During the Covid pandemic, the Asda Foundation has shown that it can positively and actively make a difference to community life across Scotland. We all have examples from our constituencies and regions of local voluntary organisations that have been supported by Asda for a number of years now. It might be helpful to provide background to demonstrate the importance of the financial and other assistance that Asda has been providing.

According to the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator, there are about 45,000 voluntary organisations in Scotland, the vast majority of which are community based. Those community initiatives have been hard hit by the pandemic; more than 20 per cent of charities face a critical need of funding and the harsh reality of possibly having to close down. The problem has also been exacerbated by the majority of charities having to postpone or cancel fundraising events because of lockdown restrictions. For understandable reasons, charities have also seen volunteer numbers fall during the pandemic. At the same time that all of that is happening, charities face an increasing demand for their services, as local communities need assistance with the financial, social and health impacts of the pandemic.

With that challenging background, one of the important ways that the Asda Foundation has been able to provide support is through grants to a range of good causes in Scotland, including hundreds of new community groups that have been established during the pandemic. Reflecting

the community nature of that assistance, as we have heard from other colleagues, each project that Asda supports is nominated by people in the local community. It is important to emphasise that local communities have identified which organisations are in most need of support.

In my region of Mid Scotland and Fife, there is a long list of voluntary organisations and charities that are supported by the Asda Foundation's bringing communities back together fund. The five Asda stores in the region have supported 19 projects, with funding of more than £15,000. This week, I have also been made aware that two Asda stores in Mid Scotland and Fife are making further awards to support other projects across the region, which they will very much welcome.

I will mention a few individual projects that the Asda Foundation has supported. First, the Linton Lane Centre in Kirkcaldy is one of Kirkcaldy's longest-running community centres, with a history that dates back almost 100 years. During that time, the Linton Lane Centre has been at the heart of events in the Templehall area and beyond. The centre provides a home for a range of services, including nursery play groups, child health clinics, advice on addiction support, as well as a Monday to Friday venue for the Kirkcaldy food bank. There are also numerous recreational groups, which are based at and operate from the centre, so the additional funding that the Asda Foundation provides has been a vital and welcome boost to all those who are involved with the Linton Lane Centre.

Another example is the award that Asda in Glenrothes granted to Arden House, a voluntary organisation that was established in 1982 and provides a range of services, including day centres for older people living independently in the community who, due to complex health reasons, are at risk of social isolation, which has been exacerbated during the pandemic.

Many other examples have been highlighted—and will be highlighted, I am sure—by colleagues, so I will conclude by again thanking Asda Foundation for its continuing hard work for the benefit of communities and support of many valuable local organisations across Mid Scotland and Fife, across Scotland and across the UK.

18:45

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank Alexander Stewart for securing the debate. I have always been impressed by the work of the Asda Foundation and the very real difference that its support makes to small, local organisations. As we all know, many new groups have been established to help people deal with the challenges that are being faced as a result of the pandemic. The

extended work of the foundation will have a significant positive impact on many local communities, in a variety of ways.

The foundation's development of the two new Covid-19 grants and its new £200,000 partnership with the Royal Voluntary Service to help tackle loneliness and isolation are great news for our communities. The healthy holiday grants, which allow the continuation of groups that would typically be holding summer holiday activities and providing a healthy and nutritious meal to children, and the hygiene grant, which is aimed at patients and residents of hospices and care homes, will provide invaluable support to some of the most vulnerable in our communities and those who are most affected by the pandemic.

Those grants are a very welcome addition to the long-established green token giving scheme, the transforming communities and improving lives grants, the emergency fund and the slightly newer bringing communities back together fund, which was launched to help reunite communities, to celebrate togetherness and to support groups as we continue to recover from the coronavirus pandemic. At the end of last year, I was delighted to learn that local causes in my constituency, including the Linton Lane Centre and the Gallatown gala and community group, had benefited from just over £3,000 of funding. In these challenging times, that money will be of great help to those groups.

We have heard from our colleagues about some of the numbers involved, such as the £1 million that is invested in more than 4,000 local good causes every year. I will not repeat what has already been said, but I will touch on what I feel is of great importance: the fact that each project that is supported by the foundation is nominated by local people and communities. It is thanks to the engagement, input and feedback of those communities that that investment reaches the grassroots groups and organisations that need it most.

Groups in my constituency, including Kirkcaldy Rugby Football Club's wee blues, Fife Migrants Forum, Fife Steel Basketball Club, the Linton Lane Centre, Kirkcaldy Foodbank, the Pathhead pensioners group and Nourish Support Centre, are among those to have benefited from the foundation, to great advantage. All are significant community groups and resources that make a big impact on local communities, and they are recognised as such by local people.

Although community engagement is important, and will continue to be so, no debate about the work of the foundation would be complete without acknowledging the vital link that is made by Asda's community champions. In Kirkcaldy, our champion is Jean Ritchie. Since I was first elected in 2011, I

have had the opportunity to work closely with her and with Asda's Kirkcaldy store. It is always a pleasure to attend and participate in its many fundraising and community events.

Before the pandemic, thanks to Jean and her infectious enthusiasm, it was not unusual to see me in my local Asda store, sporting an elf suit, a pink tutu, or some other novelty costume, singing along with a choir, or being heckled by a group of schoolchildren. Given that Easter is fast approaching, I am sure that, if it is allowed, she will already have the bunny ears lined up and ready to go.

As I am sure is the case with many other community champions across Scotland, I frequently see Asda's Kirkcaldy champion out and about in the community. Whether it be litter picking or helping the local food bank or local schools, it is important that the work of those champions is also celebrated, and I give my personal thanks to each and every one of them for their hard work and dedication. They are an integral link between the corporate foundation and the small grassroots organisations across all our constituencies.

In conclusion, I commend Asda's commitment to making communities around its stores better places in which to live and work, for colleagues and customers, and I look forward to continuing to work closely with it in the years to come, as it helps to transform communities and improve lives throughout Scotland.

18:49

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I congratulate Alexander Stewart on securing the debate and thank him for the opportunity to speak about Asda's bringing communities back together fund and the broader work of the Asda Foundation in supporting communities.

Like the other big supermarkets, Asda is a significant company and a familiar aspect of modern life for many of us. Recently, we have talked about supermarkets when considering the retail sector and supply chains. My committee—the Economy and Fair Work Committee—has been taking evidence on supply chains, and I recognise the challenges with shortages that many retailers have experienced.

Although large supermarkets provided a vital service during lockdown and over the pandemic, we cannot deny that their profits benefited from that experience. However, supermarkets such as Asda can demonstrate corporate social responsibility in a number of ways, such as taking steps to address food poverty, promoting healthy diets, improving food labelling and supporting the communities in which they are situated.

The prominence of large retailers gives them a huge role in our communities and in family life. It is welcome when they take steps to invest in the areas that provide them with a loyal customer base and income. Many people rely on large supermarkets for financial or geographic regions. For some people, the convenience of being able to purchase everything in one place is critical.

It is welcome that Asda builds relationships with the communities in which it is based and works with local people and projects where possible. Over the years, it has run a number of schemes to support local communities. Those include its community life programme and the hard work of the local community champions, which Alexander Stewart highlighted. Those people reflect community spirit. Like David Torrance, I recognise the long-standing commitment of Jean Ritchie from the Asda in Kirkcaldy.

Throughout the pandemic, the Asda Foundation has awarded more than £700,000 across Scotland, including more than £72,000 in Mid Scotland and Fife. Through its green token giving awards and grants scheme, 174 local groups have benefited. I know how much that is valued.

A key part of that support was the bringing communities back together grant, which was introduced as lockdown restrictions eased to provide community groups with funding for celebratory events and items that they needed to get back on track. The five Asda stores across the Mid Scotland and Fife region have supported 19 local projects with funding of more than £15,000. Among the groups to benefit from the fund are Fife Steel Basketball Club in Kirkcaldy, which was granted funding for new kits, and Rimpleton primary school in Glenrothes, which used the grant to restart its big breakfast club.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to recognise and welcome the work of the schemes, the hard work of the people involved and the support that Asda has provided to communities as we emerge from the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, we saw the strength of our communities in supporting people in need, from the setting up of soup kitchens in people's homes to deliver food to the vulnerable, isolated and elderly to the creation of buggy walk groups to help new parents and others. I am grateful to individuals, organisations and businesses across my region that have come together to establish ways to help with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and recovery.

Too often, the community grants respond to an absence of provision elsewhere. The increase in food bank donations during the pandemic was praised but the fact that so many people had to rely on those services reflects a broader failure. Far too many people have been left struggling

over the past two years as the impacts of the pandemic have pushed many who were already struggling further into difficulty.

Although businesses such as Asda have a role to play by giving something back and supporting local community activity, the levels of funding involved are limited. I am sure that they are meant to be about topping up and offering additional support, but they can too often be seen to be plugging gaps. That is not the role of supermarkets. We need to ensure that our voluntary sector is properly supported and that every effort is made to increase the incomes of low-paid people and those on benefits. If that were done, we could really see the strength of schemes such as Asda's in providing the additional community support, events and activities that have been valued across Mid Scotland and Fife.

18:53

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): It is great to speak in members' business today, especially given the uplifting and positive nature of the motion.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, everyone has struggled, whether financially, emotionally or physically. In those moments of darkness, community leaders have risen to the occasion. Therefore, I am delighted to support the motion in the name of my colleague Alexander Stewart, which acknowledges the commitment of the Asda Foundation and the tangible differences that it has made to the wider community. Sometimes, it can be easy to forget that businesses are not just about generating profits or creating jobs but about building communities and enhancing lives.

As Alexander Stewart mentioned, the Asda Foundation, other businesses and organisations and individuals have been coming together and supporting local communities throughout lockdown and as lockdown restrictions have begun to ease.

In my region, the Asda Foundation has supported schoolchildren during the lockdown and as they return to school. Grants of £500 enabled healthy packed lunches to be delivered during the lockdown; 90 laptop bundles were given to nine schools in my region; grants supported families with return-to-school items; and breakfast and after-school clubs were supported. Through the hygiene fund, the foundation donated 250,000 medical-grade face masks to struggling care homes and additional grants for the purchase of personal hygiene items for care home residents and staff. It awarded funding of around £31,000 to 39 projects across the west of Scotland, helping to get local activities restarted.

In addition to funding initiatives, the green token giving programme has encouraged local residents

to get involved in supporting local causes, 24 of which have received funding from the programme, including Clydebank Women's Aid and Milngavie Old Peoples Welfare Committee.

I am sure that we have all heard stories of individuals and organisations in our local areas helping out in numerous ways during the pandemic—help has been given to elderly and vulnerable residents to get their shopping, pick up their prescriptions or walk their dogs. Asda is one of many organisations that have been providing hands-on help in difficult times.

We often forget about the ripple effect that thriving businesses can have on communities. The stories that have been told here today remind us not only of the importance of businesses giving back to the community but of the importance of local businesses to residents. I thank the Asda Foundation, as well as other organisations and individuals across Scotland who have contributed to community work, whether that be through monetary means or by simply helping out. I hope that, in the future, we all appreciate our local businesses and return the favour by supporting them as they make a recovery from the pandemic.

18:57

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): I congratulate Alexander Stewart on securing this excellent debate. It has been an absolute pleasure to hear from members in the chamber and virtually about the outstanding work that the Asda Foundation has been doing in their constituencies and regions.

Before I turn to the substantive part of my response to the motion, I am sure that, having heard David Torrance's speech about his endeavours to support the foundation, all members will want to join me in asking about him wearing novelty costumes and a pink tutu. A few years ago, he had his long locks shaved off in Parliament to raise money, so will we see the pink tutu in Parliament? I think that that question is on everyone's lips.

In all seriousness, it has been inspiring to hear about the work of community champions and the community groups that the foundation supports. It has also been inspiring because, as members have noted, notwithstanding the huge challenges that our communities have collectively faced during the pandemic, a huge amount of learning has taken place. Alexander Stewart referred to there being perhaps the greatest sense of community spirit since the years of the second world war—that is not overstating it.

When we face the huge challenges of recovery and addressing inequalities that have been

exacerbated by the pandemic, which Claire Baker touched on, partnership working and community spirit will be essential. Although there are forums for partnership working through our community planning partnerships and third sector interfaces and the work that we do locally as MSPs, great work is done by the private sector. Pam Gosal spoke about the ripple effect that businesses can create, and I join her in encouraging our constituents and members of the public across Scotland to repay the support that so many local businesses provided throughout the pandemic.

I recognise the incredible work that the Asda Foundation has done and I thank it for its efforts to reunite communities. I understand that it is committed to making the communities around its stores better places to live and work, and it partners with thousands of charities, community groups and local good causes to support projects that make communities a better place to live.

The foundation's mission is to transform communities and improve lives throughout the UK, complementing the ambition of Asda Stores to be at the heart of local communities. I understand that each project that the foundation supports is nominated by the people and communities whom they serve and that, for the foundation, sharing its passion is the ideal way to give something back to the local communities that support it.

Over the course of the pandemic to date, the foundation has supported more than 1,700 groups, with awards totalling more than £750,000. As members have noted, the foundation ran the healthy holiday fund, which provided grants of £500 to local groups to make and deliver healthy packed lunches during lockdown to the children who normally receive free school meals; invested £2 million to provide 7,000 laptops and tech packages to schools across the UK to help those children who were at risk of falling behind because they did not have the technology to take part in online lessons during lockdown; and donated 250,000 medical-grade face masks to care homes that were struggling to access them at the height of the pandemic. Those are just some of the examples of the fantastic work that the foundation has done for communities, and I give it my sincere thanks and applaud its sterling efforts.

I also take the opportunity to thank other independent funders for their on-going support and efforts in supporting the third sector and their communities. The pandemic has proved beyond doubt that the organisations, networks and people who make up the third sector are critical to the health and wellbeing of our people, places and communities. During this incredibly difficult time, places have remained communities, where people feel safe and valued, are included and have

connections due to the tireless efforts of those organisations, networks and people.

Despite health restrictions and significant increases in demand for services, the work of the third sector has been key in the resilience of our communities throughout the pandemic. The Scottish Government wants to recognise that and work to create the best conditions for the third sector to thrive and contribute to Scotland's recovery.

I also thank the partners who worked with us at pace to develop the wellbeing fund in 2020, including the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Hunter Foundation, the Corra Foundation and Inspiring Scotland. The £50 million wellbeing fund was part of a £350 million package of emergency funding to support people most affected by the pandemic. The funding was distributed across Scotland through a mix of grants to local charities, third sector interfaces and national priorities, as well as open applications worth more than £21 million.

In addition, and in recognition of the important role that small, grass-roots community groups play in supporting adult mental health and wellbeing, the Scottish Government's £15 million communities mental health and wellbeing fund for adults was announced on 15 October 2021. This is the first year of a two-year fund to support mental health and wellbeing in communities across Scotland, which aims to build on the excellent examples of good practice and innovation that we have seen emerge throughout the pandemic.

The fund will focus on suicide prevention, social isolation and loneliness, and prevention and early intervention, as well as addressing the mental health inequalities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and the needs of a range of at-risk groups. The fund will support small, grass-roots community groups and organisations to deliver such activities, thus providing opportunities for people to connect and revitalise their communities. It will be delivered through a locally focused and co-ordinated approach via local partnership groups, working together to ensure that support to community-based organisations is directed appropriately and in a coherent way.

The Scottish Government has a clear vision for community-led regeneration, too, supported by our place-based investment and our empowering communities programmes, which enable our communities to use their distinct local knowledge, expertise and commitment to respond and adapt to big challenges in their own way, helping them to shape their own futures. The investment is supporting them to develop community assets, thereby enabling them to generate their own income and in turn support the creation of new

jobs and access to services that benefit the people in their communities. More than 340 community organisations and community-led projects are being supported in 2021-22, with investment totalling nearly £13 million.

Continued support for the programme forms a key commitment in our Covid recovery strategy, which recognises the action taken by communities in response to the pandemic as a key part of the resilience of our communities.

At the start of December, I had the pleasure of speaking to a debate on loving local, in which I spoke of the important role that our local shops and businesses have in our communities. This financial year, we launched our £10 million-pound multiyear Scotland Loves Local programme, which aims to encourage people to think and choose local. The programme is designed to support recovery from Covid for our communities and local businesses, and embed the loves local culture that we started to witness during the pandemic. It encourages a safe return to our town and city centres, while taking care to follow guidelines to look after one other.

Our shared experience during the pandemic has demonstrated the potential of local communities and businesses to work together. Working collaboratively and in partnership is vitally important, because we cannot achieve our ambitions without working with and for our communities, without participation and engagement, and without harnessing our collective resources for local impact. That is what a place-based approach is about—working together to tackle the challenges and support our communities to thrive.

I will finish by once again thanking the Asda Foundation. It reflects the principles of a place-based approach and is a shining example of supporting local communities and making a difference to the lives of local people. I understand that it has numerous other grants planned for 2022, which will continue the fantastic work that it has done so far and its positive impact on the local communities.

I thank Alexander Stewart and members across the chamber for their contributions this evening, which recognise the excellent work of the Asda Foundation and our community champions.

Meeting closed at 19:06.

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