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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 4 May 2022

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The first item of business is general question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would be grateful for short and succinct questions, and responses to match.

School Breakfast Provision

1. **Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recent report by the charity, Magic Breakfast, showing that four in 10 Scottish schools have no breakfast provision at all and that breakfast provision in Scotland reaches the fewest disadvantaged pupils per school of any United Kingdom nation. (S6O-01046)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are committed to the expansion of free school meals for all pupils in primary and special schools, as well as the introduction of free year-round breakfast and lunch provision to support eligible children and young people outside the school term.

Currently, breakfast club provision in Scotland is delivered through a mixed model of local authority, private and voluntary services, which might be delivered in schools or other community facilities. Services often combine food provision with early morning childcare.

We want to improve the picture and ensure that all children in primary and special education schools in Scotland have equal access to breakfast, if they need it. Preparatory work will begin this year to map the current extent of breakfast provision in Scotland. From that, we will plan our future breakfast offer, ensuring that that is informed by what parents, carers, children and young people need and is aligned with a future system of funded school-age childcare, where that is appropriate.

Paul O’Kane: Last week, we had a debate in this chamber about the cost of the school day, and yet again the Government pledged its support for free breakfasts. In its manifesto for the Scottish Parliament elections last year, the Scottish National Party pledged to provide free breakfasts all year round, for all children in state-funded

schools. That has been reiterated in the SNP’s local government manifesto in the past few weeks.

There have been lots of promises, but the Government has rolled back on its pledge to extend free school meals to all primary pupils in time for the start of the 2022-23 school year and is yet to set a new delivery date. There is no clarity on free breakfasts, which are vital. Indeed, they are even more vital during the cost of living crisis—

The Presiding Officer: Mr O’Kane, may we please have a question?

Paul O’Kane: Magic Breakfast estimates that the cost of providing free breakfasts would be £20 million and points to underspends in pupil equity funding as a way to achieve that. When will the Government keep its promise and deliver free breakfasts in Scotland? Free breakfasts have been provided in Wales for years.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am not sure whether Mr O’Kane is suggesting that we take away from Scotland’s headteachers money that is given to them through pupil equity funding. It is for headteachers to decide how to use PEF and we believe in empowering schools.

There have been major improvements, such as the introduction of universal free school meals for children in primary 4 and 5. We are considering the practical issues and the capital expenditure that will be required for the delivery of free school meals in primary 6 and 7, with our local authority partners.

As I said in my original answer, on free school meals, where we have taken action in primary 4 and 5, and on our determination to move ahead with wraparound childcare and breakfast clubs, we will fulfil our manifesto obligations in this parliamentary session.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that Glasgow City Council’s big breakfast service, which delivers 6,000 breakfasts daily across all Glasgow primary schools, forms a crucial part of the SNP’s strategy, at all levels of government, to tackle child poverty and reduce the attainment gap?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I very much commend the work of Glasgow City Council, which supports so many primary school children across the city to access breakfast daily.

There is evidence that free breakfast provision, as is being delivered in Glasgow and many other local authority areas, increases children’s health and wellbeing by reducing hunger and improving equality of access to nutritious food. That is why the Scottish Government is determined to ensure that we deliver in a like manner across Scotland.

“A Just Transition? The Voices of Oil and Gas Workers”

2. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the report, “A Just Transition? The Voices of Oil and Gas Workers”. (S6O-01047)

The Minister for Just Transition, Employment and Fair Work (Richard Lochhead): The Scottish Government welcomes the report, which will help to inform the actions that are needed to support our transition to a net zero, climate resilient and fairer Scotland. I congratulate Gillian Martin on the report, which highlights a number of important issues.

We are committed to supporting a just transition for the oil and gas sector. Over the coming months, we will engage widely in the development of our refreshed energy strategy and first just transition plan.

Gillian Martin: Over 560 oil and gas workers responded to the survey and one thing that stood out was that many were not even getting interviews when applying for jobs in the renewables sector. Many of them felt that that was because they were from an oil and gas background. Many had also invested their own money in retraining and certification and still were not getting into an interview chair.

How can the Scottish Government work with stakeholders in renewables and with recruitment agencies to ensure that they are seizing the opportunity to recruit highly skilled workers from oil and gas and that transferable skills mapping across the sectors is assisting individuals to make successful applications?

Richard Lochhead: I assure the member that a lot of good work is taking place. For instance, we are working closely with the industry skills and training body, OPITO, which has its own integrated people and skills strategy, with three action plans sitting below it. One of those plans is focused on aligning offshore energy standards. The delivery dates for key milestones have been mapped out and a skills passport is due to be delivered in the third quarter of 2023. The member raises many important issues, which I will discuss with OPITO and other stakeholders.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Yesterday, BP revealed that it will invest up to £18 billion in the United Kingdom’s energy system to turbo boost our energy security and our net zero ambitions and to ensure a just transition for oil and gas workers.

Does the minister agree that anything that could discourage and reduce the funds available for that and similar investments and hinder the just

transition that Gillian Martin rightly raises—such as the ill-conceived windfall tax—should be avoided?

Richard Lochhead: I think that the member should put a lot more of his effort into trying to persuade his Government in Westminster to help ordinary people cope with the cost of living crisis. In the meantime, this Government will continue to reflect the country’s priorities and the priorities for a just transition for North East Scotland, which the member represents.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): This latest report reveals that just one in 10 oil and gas workers feel that they have enough opportunities to switch to work in renewables.

After decades of inaction from industry, what we need is ministers who will champion the interests of workers over market forces; we need them to hold industry to account for the promises that it makes. Will the minister demonstrate his commitment to oil and gas workers by providing regular updates to the Parliament on the progress of skills transferability?

Richard Lochhead: I gently point out that Greenpeace used the Scottish Government’s transition fund as a successful transition case study. I am sure that Greenpeace, like the member, believes that a lot more can be done to address the issue, and we will do that. In the meantime, I am happy to consider how we can keep the Parliament updated. A whole lot of work is under way to ensure that we can support oil and gas workers to attain the appropriate skills and training that they require to work in other energy sectors.

Additional Support Needs Pupils (Flexi-schooling and Secondary School Transition)

3. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the transition to secondary school and flexi-schooling models for pupils with additional support needs. (S6O-01048)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are committed to supporting children and young people at key transition points in their learning.

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009 places duties on education authorities to plan for the transition of children and young people with additional support needs, including from primary to secondary school.

Education authorities are also responsible for identifying and meeting pupils’ learning needs and have flexibility in the delivery of support and the curriculum to meet their individual needs. Further guidance on supporting transition and the provision of flexible learning opportunities is within

the statutory code of practice on additional support for learning.

Meghan Gallacher: I have been contacted by a parent council in the central region regarding the statutory six-month transition period for ASN pupils, as this appears to differ between local authority areas. In addition, another parent from outwith my area contacted me about the flexi-schooling model for ASN pupils, as the local authority rejected her child's application without a valid reason. When I submitted questions to the minister regarding ASN provision, I was given a short answer saying that the Scottish Government does not record certain data on ASN provision, despite the Government setting the guidance for councils.

Why does the Scottish Government not properly record that vital information? Is it time to review ASN provision across Scotland to ensure that our young people and families are supported?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Data is held in many areas; it can be held by national Government but much of the responsibility in this area is, quite rightly, with local government. There will be differences between local authorities on those policies and it is quite right that that is the case.

Of course, I am happy to hear from Megan Gallacher in writing if she wishes to provide me with further details of the individual case and if the constituent would wish me to have a look at it and investigate whether there is more that could be done at a national level. I highlight that the progress report on the "Additional Support for Learning Action Plan" was published in November 2021. A further update will be provided in autumn 2022. If Ms Gallacher has any further suggestions about what more we should be doing in the area, I would be happy to receive those in correspondence.

Energy Efficiency

4. **Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to accelerate energy efficiency and other measures in the coming months ahead of a further potential increase in the price cap in October. (S6O-01049)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): In March, in response to the cost of living crisis, we announced further help on energy efficiency through our existing programmes. We are including more people in our flagship warmer homes Scotland programme, increasing grant levels in local authority area-based schemes and expanding the capacity of the Home Energy Scotland advice service to support an extra 12,000 households this year. We continue to explore further ways that more people can be supported,

building on our substantial programmes, which have benefited more than 150,000 fuel-poor households in the past decade.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the minister to commit to doing everything that he can to take action before the next anticipated price cap change in October, and to using his powers, however limited, to support people who are despairing of the astronomical energy bill increases, which are causing anxiety and worry? Does he agree that the United Kingdom Government must recognise that there is a cost of living and energy price crisis now, and that the chancellor saying that it is "silly" to give more support to people for energy bills now is complacent and completely out of touch with the reality that our constituents are facing?

Patrick Harvie: I do. I suspect that most of the chamber agrees that the UK Government has failed to respond to both the scale and the urgency of the cost of living crisis. The Scottish Government has written repeatedly to UK ministers setting out detailed proposals on acting now to support households that are struggling today, although, as Fiona Hyslop rightly indicates, further cost increases are looming in the autumn. Those actions include the UK Government cutting VAT on fuel bills; increasing benefits; reinstating the £20 cut to universal credit; and implementing a broad-ranging windfall tax on superprofits.

In the meantime, as well as increasing help through the major investment programmes that I have just mentioned, the Scottish Government will continue to do everything that it can to make homes warmer and cheaper to heat. To address the wider cost of living crisis, we have increased the groundbreaking Scottish child payment and will do so again before the end of the year. We have committed to doing what we can to mitigate the benefit cap and have implemented our pioneering policy of free bus travel for young people. The chancellor may think that such measures are "silly", but I think that most people in Scotland will think that they give help to those who desperately need it.

Hospitality Sector (Meetings)

5. **Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met representatives from the hospitality sector. (S6O-01050)

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): The Scottish Government works closely with sectoral organisations such as the Scottish Tourism Alliance, UKHospitality, the Night Time Industries Association, the Scottish Beer and Pub Association and the Scottish Licensed Trade Association. We engaged extensively with sector representatives over the course of the pandemic

to respond to the challenges that the industry faced and are fully appreciative of their input.

The most recent meeting with key representatives took place on 13 April 2022. Attendees discussed post Covid-19 measures, impact, support for the sector and planning guidance regarding outdoor spaces. We will continue to engage on support and recovery.

Martin Whitfield: There are many different parts of the hospitality sector, but all are linked. The pandemic brought similar challenges to the whole sector. Hospitality is not seen as safe by customers, even when businesses implemented expensive protective and social distancing measures. Will the Scottish Government endorse and support the sector? Will it emphasise the safety of hospitality, and will it commit to spending money on messaging and advertising to encourage people to attend hospitality events and venues, and to remove their fear but not drop their guard?

Tom Arthur: Martin Whitfield raises a series of very important points. I whole-heartedly recommend that we all take full advantage of our outstanding hospitality sector across Scotland.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have provided more than £4.6 billion of support to business. That includes £1.6 billion of rates relief, £802 million of which has been provided in the current financial year. Recently, in the wake of the omicron variant, we also provided £375 million of business support, of which £113 million was for eligible hospitality and leisure businesses. In addition, we have provided £80 million to local authorities through the Covid economic recovery fund.

That demonstrates clearly the support that this Government has provided to businesses across Scotland, including those in the hospitality sector. I fully encourage people across Scotland to use the services of our fantastic hospitality sector.

Roads (A96)

6. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the A96 dualling project. (S6O-01051)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government remains committed to improving the A96 corridor and will take forward an enhancements programme that improves connectivity between surrounding towns, tackles congestion and addresses safety and environmental issues.

The current plan is to fully dual the A96 route between Inverness and Aberdeen, but we have agreed to conduct a transparent, evidence-based

review of the programme, which is already under way and will report by the end of 2022.

Liam Kerr: I thank the minister for that answer. The dualling of the A86 was first promised to the north-east in 2011. According to a freedom of information request, so far, £78 million of taxpayers' money has been spent on the project. Green campaigners have said that the latest move—we have just heard about it—by the Scottish National Party-Green coalition, which delays the scheme, “demonstrably represents the end” of dualling the A96. Will the minister confirm that the A96 dualling will go ahead, or has the Government scandalously wasted £78 million of taxpayers' money on something that a party with six MSPs has now blocked?

Jenny Gilruth: That is not an accurate representation of the situation as it stands. We are not delaying the scheme. As Mr Kerr knows, the Bute house agreement sets out that we will take forward a transport enhancements programme on the A96 corridor. We have already undertaken substantial development work on the programme, which tells us that dualling the entire A96 will involve substantial offline construction of new road. Essentially, that means changing the route of that part of the current road.

All roads projects in Scotland, including the A96 programme, are subject to a detailed review and assessment work, to ensure that we deliver the right schemes and keep impacts on the environment to the absolute minimum. I am sure that Mr Kerr will agree that the climate emergency necessitates that all Governments, irrespective of their politics, ensure that future road building is not detrimental to our environment.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): For the information of all members and their families, and of Parliament staff and visitors to the public gallery, the beautiful coastal town of Nairn in my constituency is a splendid holiday destination, which one may well choose for a staycation this year. Does the minister agree that its attractiveness will be further enhanced once we have the promised bypass and the dualled connection with Inverness, and that the Scottish Government's unwavering commitment is to make that happen?

Jenny Gilruth: I listened to Mr Ewing extol the virtues of his constituency and I agree with him in that regard. He will know that the A96 from Inverness to Nairn, including the Nairn bypass scheme, which runs from Inverness to Hardmuir, is separate from the wider A96 review process that is currently being undertaken. Indeed, we met recently to discuss the process.

We continue to progress the preparation stages of the scheme to enable completion of the

statutory processes and, subject to no legal challenge being received, ministers will then have the relevant powers to acquire the land that is necessary to construct—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Minister, I ask for your forbearance for a moment while we tackle the source of the noise in the chamber.

Minister, if you would like to complete your response, I would be grateful. [*Interruption.*]

There will be a brief suspension while we investigate further.

14:20

Meeting suspended.

14:36

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: Colleagues, my apologies for the delay, which was due to the technical issues that we have experienced.

I resume by asking the minister, Jenny Gilruth, whether she is content and has concluded her response, or whether she would like to add anything.

Jenny Gilruth: I am content.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. That being the case, we will conclude general questions and move on to the next item of business.

First Minister's Question Time

14:36

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Question 1 is from Douglas Ross.

Ferries (Construction Contract)

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands (Con):** Thank you, Presiding Officer—I wanted to hear about the Nairn bypass, but maybe we will come back to that another day.

A quarter of a billion pounds of taxpayers' money has been spent and not a single ferry has been built, and the crucial document detailing why this awful decision was made has disappeared. However, all we hear from Nicola Sturgeon is that the situation is "regrettable". When the First Minister suggested chopping off the bottom of classroom doors, that was regrettable; wasting a quarter of a billion pounds is much, much worse.

Does the First Minister understand how angry it makes the public to hear her use weasel words such as "regrettable" rather than giving them the apology that they deserve?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I know that there is a lot of anger right across Scotland right now, although I am not sure that it is for the reason that Douglas Ross has raised today, and I suspect that he is going to feel the full force of it tomorrow.

On the issue of ferries, I have made it very clear that the delays and cost overruns are deeply regrettable. I believe that, when things do not go right in Government, it is important that leaders say so. If only other Governments followed the same principle, perhaps things might be a bit different. However, I will not—I am afraid that I am not going to be moved from this—apologise for decisions that allowed the last commercial shipbuilder on the Clyde to continue in business and that have allowed 400 workers to be employed there today, earning a wage and supporting their families.

I also will not apologise for investment in new ferries. The yard and the Government are focused on ensuring that the ferries are completed as part of our overall investment in Scotland's ferry network. I will always take responsibility when things do not go right, and I will continue to act in a way that is in the interests of the country overall. Of course, tomorrow, people have the opportunity to cast their verdict on all of that.

Douglas Ross: Nicola Sturgeon says that she is taking responsibility. Those are weasel words to the island communities that are still without these vital ferries.

Although Nicola Sturgeon will not tell it straight, Jim McColl did not mince his words on the radio yesterday. He called the First Minister out for lying. He said that

“there was no danger of the yard going under at that time.”

The man who the Scottish National Party Government trusted to save the yard and who Nicola Sturgeon stood next to and said, “This is the man to turn it round”, says that the jobs at Ferguson Marine were safe no matter what because the yard had other strong contracts.

The First Minister’s only justification for charging ahead against expert advice has been grandstanding in saying that she saved the jobs. Now it has emerged that she did not—the jobs were never at risk. Has the First Minister’s main excuse not just been shredded, perhaps like that vital missing document?

The First Minister: Let me say categorically that I stand by what I said on the radio the other morning 100 per cent. Jim McColl is many things, but he is not a disinterested and objective observer on these matters. Perhaps that is something that we should bear in mind.

Let us look at the two key points that Jim McColl was taking issue with. First, he seemed to claim that I said that there were 400 people employed in the yard back in 2015. I did not say that, as the transcript will show. I said that 400 people are currently employed there, earning a wage and supporting their families, who would not be in employment today had the contract not been awarded. That is just a matter of fact.

Secondly, Jim McColl said that the yard would not have been in jeopardy and would not have potentially closed had the contract not been awarded. That was not tested, of course, so that can only be a matter of opinion. However, I tell members this: if Jim McColl is seriously arguing that he would have continued to invest his money in a yard that had no major contracts, all I can say is that that is not the Jim McColl I know.

People can make up their own minds, but what I know is that the decisions that the Government took have ensured that the shipyard is still open and operating today, focusing on delivering the ferries, and that, today, there are 400 people working in the yard, earning a wage and supporting their families, as I said. For all that the delays and overruns with the ferries are deeply regrettable, I do not regret the fact that there are 400 people employed in the shipyard today.

Douglas Ross: Of course, the ferries scandal is just one example of the secrecy and incompetence that the Government is famous for. Just look at Nicola Sturgeon’s rap sheet of damning failures: £250 million lost on ferries; £50

million lost on Burntisland Fabrications; £40 million lost on the Rangers scandal; the worst ever accident and emergency waiting times on record; violent crime at record highs since she came to power; the widest ever attainment gap in our schools, with the lowest results in international school rankings; and the highest number of drug deaths in Europe. Surely that is a record that the First Minister is ashamed of.

The First Minister: Of course, BiFab is also still open and employing people.

There are challenges with A and E services across the whole of the United Kingdom, Europe and the rest of the world, but A and E services in Scotland have been the best performing of all four nations in the UK for six years.

Recorded crime is at one of the lowest levels since 1974 and is down 41 per cent since the Government took office. Over the long term, we have seen a 36 per cent reduction in police-recorded non-sexual violent crime since the Government took office. Homicide cases are at their lowest level since comparable records began back in 1976. The numbers of those who experience crime are down and are lower than the numbers in other parts of the UK.

On education, 1,000 school building projects have been completed since the Government took office. When we took office, only 61 per cent of schools were in a good or satisfactory condition, but that figure is over 90 per cent today.

Council tax is lower for people in Scotland than it is for people in other parts of the UK, and we have lower income tax for the majority.

We have free prescriptions. Free personal and nursing care has been extended. We have the Scottish child payment and other new benefits including the carers allowance supplement and the young carer grant. We have the baby box. The amount of early years education and childcare has trebled since the Government took office and has doubled in my time as First Minister. More staff are working in our national health service than in any other part of the UK, and we have more general practitioners per head of population.

I can go on, if Douglas Ross wants me to. One hundred thousand affordable homes have been built, and yes, crime rates are down. What have we had in 12 years of Tory Government at Westminster? We have had Brexit and austerity, and poverty has increased; we have seen pension cuts, tax increases and—worst of all—we have had Boris Johnson.

Douglas Ross: That is shameful, First Minister. It is shameful that the 1,319 individuals who died as a result of drugs in the past year did not even merit a mention in the First Minister’s response.

That is 1,319 lives lost and families destroyed, and Nicola Sturgeon—yet again—ignored them to get cheap applause from her SNP back benchers. We know that when Nicola Sturgeon takes her eye off the ball, Scotland suffers.

At a local level, the SNP's record is just as bad. It has cut hundreds of millions from council budgets, overturned hundreds of local planning decisions, brought in controversial sex surveys in schools, hit drivers with new taxes and let Scotland's biggest city be overrun by rubbish and rats. The SNP has let people down, and Labour has helped it—they share power in councils across Scotland.

Tomorrow's election is a chance to get the focus back on things that really matter to people: improving local services, rebuilding roads, investing in schools and cleaning up our streets. Scottish Conservative councillors will focus on local priorities and stand up to this SNP Government when it wastes a fortune on ferries, slashes council budgets and cuts vital services.

First Minister, why should SNP candidates be rewarded for your failure?

The First Minister: Tory and Labour were propping each other up in Aberdeen the last time I looked, and in North Lanarkshire, but let us get back to the issue: £259 million pounds of investment was pledged and secured by this Government to turn drug deaths around.

The other issue that Douglas Ross mentioned was council budgets. In this financial year, the Scottish Government budget—this comes from the Scottish Fiscal Commission—was cut by Westminster by 5 per cent in real terms, but due to the decisions taken by this Government the total funding package for local councils is up by 6 per cent in real terms. That is the difference between the SNP and the Tories.

We know that Douglas Ross is desperate and scraping the bottom of the barrel when he starts talking about sex surveys in schools. The fact is—and I suspect that this has been well noticed across Scotland during this election—that Douglas Ross has spent far more time standing up for Boris Johnson than he has standing up for the interests of people in Scotland. When it looked as if the Tories were actually going to get rid of Boris Johnson, Douglas Ross bravely called for his resignation, but when that changed Douglas Ross allowed himself to be hauled into line, and he has just become the cheerleader in chief for Boris Johnson. No consistency, no principle, no resolve and no backbone—that is Douglas Ross. He is not a leader; he is just a follower.

Council Budgets

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Across Scotland, local authority budgets have been slashed since the Scottish National Party came to power. Can the First Minister tell us what the total cut in council core budgets has been since 2013?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I have just said to Douglas Ross that this year the Scottish Government's budget was cut by more than 5 per cent and that the council total funding package is up by 6 per cent. Those figures are in real terms.

During the period since 2013-14, the local authority revenue fund has gone up to £2.2 billion. That means it is 22.9 per cent higher, in cash terms, this year than it was in 2013-14. That compares well with Wales, where Labour is in Government and where the equivalent increase is 7.3 per cent. Councils are doing rather better under the SNP in Scotland than they are doing under Labour in Wales.

Anas Sarwar: We always know when the First Minister is desperate, because that is when she starts talking about Wales. I remind her that she is the First Minister of Scotland and leads the Scottish National Party.

The answer that she was looking for was £6 billion. That is what has been cut from core council budgets. That is what this Scottish Government's own figures tell us. There has been a £6 billion cut in local budgets since 2013. In Glasgow alone, that cut has been more than £1 billion.

What does that mean in practice? It means a First Minister who tweets about reading books when, across Scotland, one in eight libraries have shut since 2010 after a £210 million cut to library budgets. It means a £320 million cut to street cleaning, meaning fewer staff, more charges and less frequent collection. It also means a £1.7 billion backlog in much-needed pothole repairs, leaving motorists to foot the bill for damage.

The First Minister has taken a Tory cut, multiplied it, and handed it down to local government. Even when her budget goes up, she still cuts local government budgets. Nicola Sturgeon can spin all she likes, she can read out the stats in her little book all she likes, but the reality is that she is failing communities across the country.

The First Minister: I am prepared to bet that the facts that are in my little book will not suit Anas Sarwar. I am pretty confident about that. He does not like me talking about Wales, but he stands up here and tries to say that, if Labour was in Government here, things would be much better. I think, therefore, that it is perfectly reasonable to

look at where Labour is in government in the UK and put that under some scrutiny.

A moment ago, I gave Anas Sarwar the cash figures showing the comparison between Scotland and Wales for the period of time that he picked. Let me give him the local authority real-terms revenue figures. Since that period, local government revenue funding is 2.3 per cent higher in real terms in Scotland and, in Wales, it is 10.7 per cent lower. Where Labour is in government, local authorities do much worse.

His figure of £6 billion is also selective and highly misleading because it completely ignores £3.6 billion of cumulative revenue funding since 2013. Let me show what Anas Sarwar is deliberately ignoring to get to his figure: £2 billion of additional funding for expanding early learning and childcare; and £720 million that goes directly to head teachers to support the most vulnerable children in Scotland. That is why Labour does not like the facts.

Finally, we will take no lectures from Labour when it comes to funding in Glasgow. The SNP administration has had to pick up the pieces of the equal pay scandal that Labour presided over. Labour robbed women from across Glasgow of money that was rightfully theirs. I am proud of the fact that an SNP administration paid that money back.

Anas Sarwar: That answer might have sounded good when the First Minister was practising it on the gravy bus on the way in, but communities across the country can see how she has decimated local communities. While SNP councils nod through SNP cuts and fail to put up a fight, Labour councillors here in Scotland are doing everything that they can to stand up for their communities and protect them from the cost of living crisis.

In Inverclyde, a £350 payment was delivered by a Labour council to 8,000 low-income households. In Glasgow, in contrast, the SNP council cut the £100 to help pensioners with the winter fuel payment. In West Lothian, discounted rail travel for the over-60s was delivered by Labour but, across Scotland, the SNP hiked rail fares and hit hard-pressed families. In North Lanarkshire, Labour has topped up the welfare fund, supporting hundreds of families. The SNP Government has refused to back Labour's plans to do the same across the country.

While Labour leads the way on tackling the cost of living crisis, the SNP prefers to make it a constitutional debate. After 15 years in government, maybe Nicola Sturgeon should stop pretending that she is in opposition and act to stand up for the people of Scotland.

The First Minister: In relation to what Anas Sarwar said about my having been in government for 15 years, let us look at benefits. It is this Government that supports the welfare fund; it is this Government that has established the Scottish child payment and increased it; it is this Government that has created new benefits—the carers allowance supplement and the young carers grant do not exist anywhere else in the United Kingdom, including where Labour is in government; it is this Government that has increased welfare payments by 6 per cent, not 3 per cent, as the UK Government has done; and it is this Government that has introduced the baby box and trebled early years education and childcare. All of that has been delivered by this Government.

People will have the opportunity to cast their verdict on all that tomorrow, but it speaks volumes that Labour, after working hand in glove with the Conservatives in council administrations for five years in parts of the country, is in a scrap for second place with the Conservatives. That is the summit of Labour's ambition.

My ambition is to win the election, so that the SNP can go on delivering real improvements for people right across Scotland, and I am happy to let the people of Scotland be the judge of that.

The Presiding Officer: We move to supplementaries. I call Jim Fairlie.

Cost of Living (Brexit)

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): A recent report by the London School of Economics and Political Science Centre for Economic Performance has indicated that Brexit-related trade barriers have driven a 6 per cent increase in United Kingdom food prices, adding to the squeeze on consumer spending power. Despite Scotland not voting for Brexit, it is clear that that damaging Tory policy is continuing to exacerbate the cost of living crisis for people right across Scotland and the UK.

Does the First Minister agree that the UK Government has shown itself to be totally incapable of providing adequate support to the people who face the brunt of the cost of living crisis, and that it is only by having the full powers of independence that we can protect Scotland's incomes, tackle poverty and build a fairer society for Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Jim Fairlie is absolutely right. In so many ways, the cost of living crisis has been created by the Conservatives. Brexit has exacerbated that crisis, and it is exacerbating it each and every day. The Scottish Government, alongside many others, repeatedly warned that Brexit would be damaging

to businesses and to trade, and that it would put food prices up, and we are seeing all of that right now.

Of course, had Scotland been independent, we could not have been dragged out of the European Union against our will. When Scotland is independent, we can again become part of the European family of nations, and I think that more and more people across Scotland want that to happen.

Community Sentencing

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Nearly 1 million hours of unpaid community sentences have been written off completely or not served at all. To put that into context, that is 100 years of sentences.

On the back of that statistic, does the First Minister still have full confidence in her policy on community sentencing? I assure her that the victims of crime to whom I speak do not.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I do. I think that it is misleading to cite hours in that way, because there will always be hours of unpaid work in the system that have not been done, but they will be done. Obviously, Covid has had an impact on that.

Ultimately, sentencing is a matter for courts, but community payback orders are a credible community sentence that make individuals pay back to the community while being punished for the crime that they have committed. Therefore, I have confidence in my policy on community sentencing, and we continue to work with the justice sector to ensure recovery from the Covid impacts.

Housing (Edinburgh)

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests.

The First Minister may be aware of the story of Edinburgh resident Calum Grevers, who has muscular dystrophy and needs a suitable home, on the ground floor with two bedrooms, that is close to his family and care team. After being told that he might have to wait three years to access social housing, he crowdsourced £32,000 for a deposit to buy his own home, with the help of the Government's low-cost initiative for first-time buyers—LIFT—scheme.

With average prices in Edinburgh being double that of the scheme's limit, what does the First Minister say to Calum, who now feels left at the mercy of an out-of-control property market? Will she and the Scottish Government now take urgent

action on the housing crisis that our capital city faces?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I thank Sarah Boyack for raising this case. I do not know all of the details of Calum's case, although I am certainly happy to look into it. Shona Robison is indicating to me that she is aware of the case and is already looking into it. She will write to Sarah Boyack with further details when she has the opportunity to do so. I am upset to hear about Calum's situation, and I want us to do anything that we can to help.

More generally, we are working with councils to ensure a continued supply of affordable housing. We have a very good record on that, and we want to build on it. We look forward to renewing that constructive partnership once the councils are elected tomorrow.

Poland (National Constitution Day)

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Will the First Minister join me and, I hope, the Parliament, in celebrating Poland's national constitution day, which was yesterday—3 May—and which celebrates and commemorates the declaration and adoption of Poland's first constitution on 3 May 1791? Will she do so in particular as Poland is doing so much these days to support its troubled neighbour, Ukraine?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I am very happy to take this opportunity to congratulate Poland and the Polish people on their national constitution day. I recently had the opportunity to meet the Polish ambassador in London, and I expressed directly to him the gratitude that many people feel to Poland for the help that it is giving to Ukraine, particularly the help that Poland is giving to people from Ukraine who have been displaced. We wish Poland and the Polish people well.

Frank's Law

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Presiding Officer,

"This makes a total mockery of the six-year campaign battle for Frank's Law. The buck stops with the Scottish Government, no matter what excuse it comes up with. Ministers need to explain why I was misled in this way, or dare I say it even lied to."

That was Amanda Kopel's reaction when she heard that the SNP had broken its promise to double the ring fence around funding for Frank's law. Amanda is in the public gallery today, so can the First Minister answer Amanda's question: why was she misled in that way?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I take the opportunity to thank Amanda for her

campaigning, as I have thanked her personally previously; as she is in the chamber today, I do so again.

I do not consider that Amanda was misled in any way, and I would be happy to speak directly to her about it. Frank's law is being—will be—implemented in full. The funding has been made available; more important than that, there is a statutory entitlement to it. It is the law that Frank's law—that is why it is called that—has to be met by councils.

I consider the matter to be really important, as I know Amanda does, for obvious reasons, and I reiterate the commitment to her today that Frank's law will be implemented, and implemented in full.

Social Care Staff (Fuel Allowance)

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): National health service staff have received a temporary increase in their mileage rate, in recognition of the substantial increase in the cost of fuel, and that is welcome. However, there was no similar increase for social care workers, of whom many in the private sector are being paid only 25p per mile. They are effectively subsidising their employers, and they are leaving the sector because they cannot afford to do that.

In response to my parliamentary question on the matter, the Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care said that the Scottish Government was in discussion with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about it. I have correspondence with me, however, that directly contradicts that claim. There has been no engagement with COSLA about it.

I am sure that the First Minister will agree with me that being disingenuous with the Parliament is unacceptable. Will she insist on urgent discussions now to ensure that care workers get the increase in their fuel allowance that they absolutely deserve?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We will do everything possible to ensure that social care workers are treated fairly. There is, of course, a difference, as Jackie Baillie is well aware—and I think that she referenced it. Government is not the direct employer of many social care workers, as they are employed either by local councils or by private operators, so the situation is not as straightforward as it is with the NHS.

However, after councils are re-elected tomorrow, I will ensure that there is engagement with councils and with COSLA to see whether we can take forward an agreement that ensures that social care workers are treated fairly in what are really difficult times for everyone.

Cost of Living (Support)

3. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): To ask the First Minister whether she will provide an update on what the Scottish Government is doing to support households through the cost of living crisis. (S6F-01051)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are doing, and will continue to do, everything that we can within our powers and resources to help people who are facing the impacts of higher energy bills, increased food costs, the United Kingdom Government's national insurance hike and interest rate rises. However, it is a fact that most of the resources and levers to tackle the crisis lie with the UK Government, and it needs to do much more.

Through our own cost of living support and our spend on Scottish social security payments, many of which are not available elsewhere in the UK, we are set to invest almost £770 million to tackle the cost of living crisis this year. Of course, we will also lift an estimated 50,000 children out of relative poverty through the Scottish child payment.

Gillian Mackay: A Tory hard Brexit has hit food supplies, Tory social security cuts have hit household budgets and the Tory obsession with fossil fuels means soaring energy bills. People are struggling with a cost of living crisis that is entirely of the UK Government's making, but we are doing what we can in Scotland to mitigate it.

I am proud that constructive and collaborative work by the Scottish Greens has led to free bus travel for young people, a more than doubling of the Scottish child payment, the biggest investment in energy efficiency in the UK and mitigation of the cruel benefit cap. Does the First Minister agree that constructive politics should be practised at all levels of Government, and that tomorrow voters should think globally and act locally by electing councillors who will work together to deliver more of that progressive agenda?

The First Minister: Yes; I agree with that, and Gillian Mackay is absolutely right to point out that in many ways the cost of living crisis is a Tory-created crisis. The actions that have been highlighted are very good examples of constructive partnership working in the Parliament between the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Greens to tackle inequality and poverty. We have worked together to ensure that we support households through the Scottish child payment, mitigating the UK Government benefit cap, which disproportionately impacts on families, and introducing free bus travel for under-22s.

All those actions support households, and we are doing them all within our fixed budget. That is in stark contrast to the UK Government's failure to

act, which is exacerbating the crisis. Removing the £20 universal credit top-up, failing to match our action on uprating benefits and the hike to national insurance are all placing much more pressure on households. The time is now to provide immediate financial help to tackle the cost of living crisis, and people across Scotland will tomorrow have the opportunity to say that very loudly and clearly.

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): Last week, the chancellor said that it was “silly” for the Tory Government to help households who are struggling with their bills. Yesterday, Boris Johnson admitted that he has not done enough to alleviate the pain of the cost of living crisis, and today, the Secretary for State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that to cope with the cost of living, people should choose value brands, and that the Government intervening would be throwing money at a crisis. Does the First Minister think that the Tories do not understand or simply do not care about the pressure that people face?

The First Minister: Is it that they do not understand or that they do not care? To be honest, it is probably both those things. I do not think that they understand at all—I think that they are deeply out of touch—but we know from callous Tory policies down the years that they do not care that much about people who are struggling. Their actions and words in recent weeks show that they do not understand, and their failure to act shows that they do not care nearly enough. We have heard various UK Government ministers admit that, and I am shocked, as many people are, that they think that it is okay to describe supporting families who face hardship as throwing money at people or, even worse, as “silly”.

There is a desperate and pressing need to act now to support households who are acutely feeling cost of living pressures every single day. The UK Government could act: it could cut VAT on fuel bills; it could tax all companies—not only energy companies—on excess profits; it could increase benefits, as we have done where we have been able to; and it could reinstate the £20 that was cut from universal credit. It could and should do all those things, but what is not and should not be an option is for the UK Government to sit with its head in the sand and take no action to support households who are in so much need at this time.

Deaf Awareness Week 2022

4. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government plans to mark deaf awareness week 2022. (S6F-01057)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Deaf awareness week 2022 is an important time to reflect on the barriers that deaf people face every day, and it is an opportunity to highlight the very

valuable work that many people across Scotland do to raise awareness of the experiences of deaf people.

We want to make Scotland a really good place for British Sign Language users. I was proud that this Parliament was the first to legislate specifically for BSL, back in 2015; since then, we have published the BSL national plan, which is the first of its kind in the United Kingdom.

In addition, we have provided funding of more than £1 million from the equality and human rights fund to the British Deaf Association Scotland, Deafblind Scotland and the Scottish Ethnic Minority Deaf Club, and a further £5 million to organisations that work to promote disability equality.

Colin Beattie: It is estimated that one in five people in Scotland is living with some form of hearing loss. Deafness does not discriminate and can impact on anyone at any time in their life. Does the First Minister agree that the key aims of deaf awareness week will help to increase visibility and promote inclusion for all in the deaf community?

The First Minister: I agree very much. The key aims of deaf awareness week are to recognise and highlight the barriers that deaf people face in their daily lives and to promote discussion about how we improve the lives of deaf people. I agree whole-heartedly that deaf awareness week will increase visibility and promote inclusion for everyone in the deaf community.

The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 is in place and we continue to take forward a range of actions to promote equality and inclusion for deaf and hearing-impaired people and BSL signers, including investing in support services, hearing dog projects and the Scottish sensory hub.

We will continue to do everything that we can to provide support. I take the opportunity to congratulate everyone who is involved in deaf awareness week, which I am sure will do a lot of good.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): The percentage of school leavers with additional special needs, which includes some deaf pupils, who achieve a positive destination has always been below the average.

An increasing number of pupils have additional support needs, and the number of special needs teachers in publicly funded schools is decreasing. Does the First Minister agree that her Government should do more to resolve the issues and help pupils with ASN to succeed?

The First Minister: Yes, I think that all Governments, including my Government, should

do as much as we can—and indeed should do more, all the time—to help ASN pupils.

That is partly about ASN teachers; it is also about ensuring that all teachers and people who work in schools are able to support young people who have additional needs. We will continue to take a range of actions to do that, so that we have a situation in Scotland—and I hope that we can all agree that we want this—in which everyone has the chance to succeed and to fulfil their potential in life, regardless of their circumstances.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Does the First Minister agree with a number of my constituents that waiting lists for national health service audiology appointments remain unacceptably long and that one thing that the Scottish Government could do in the spirit of deaf awareness week would be to commit to addressing those waiting lists?

The First Minister: A review of audiology is under way, which is really important. I concede that, as is the case in many countries, waiting times for access to NHS services in all areas are too long right now, partly down to the Covid impact. It is important that we work not just to invest in services but to redesign them, where that is appropriate. That is as important for audiology as it is for a range of conditions.

Disability Sport

5. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to support the return of disability sport in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. (S6F-01063)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Through sportscotland, we are providing almost £600,000 this year to help to deliver the new plan of Scottish Disability Sport, which is the sports body for people of all ages and abilities who have a physical, sensory or learning disability. The plan launched in April 2021 and sets a clear vision that sport and physical activity in Scotland are welcoming and inclusive for participants with disabilities.

That comes in addition to last year's get into summer programme, which included targeted sessions at the grass-roots level for children and young people with disabilities.

Brian Whittle: Sport in general has taken a significant hit during Covid, with many people unable to participate, and we are beginning to see the impact of that on the nation's physical and mental health.

Disability sport has been disproportionately affected. Sports such as powerchair football, which is a fantastic sport that enables the inclusion

of some of our most disabled athletes, are struggling to regain and recruit players.

Such crucial outlets for inclusion will not recover and thrive without direct intervention from the Scottish Government, at the national level, and local government. What consideration has the Scottish Government given to actively encouraging and enabling the recovery of disability sport after the pandemic?

The First Minister: I very much agree with the sentiments of the question and I agree with the member on the importance of sport generally, and the importance of ensuring that people with disabilities are able to fully participate in sport, if that is their wish, and physical activity.

In my original answer, I spoke about the funding that we have made available, and I am very happy, in the light of this question, to look at what further action we can take to try to support the recovery of sport in general, and disability sport in particular, from the impact of Covid. I will ask the minister to write to the member in due course with further details of that consideration.

Medication Assisted Treatment Standards

6. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether the medication assisted treatment standards have been fully embedded across Scotland. (S6F-01059)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Work to embed the MAT standards by local services and alcohol and drug partnerships is on-going. It is a crucial and significant undertaking. The Minister for Drugs Policy committed to providing updates to Parliament on the progress of the MAT standards every six months and will provide a full update and report to Parliament next month. That will follow the evaluation of local progress from each health and social care partnership area.

Later on, in the summer, a subsequent report will provide further detail of the work that is being undertaken in each area. That work is being supported with annual funding of £10 million over the next four years.

Claire Baker: In March 2021, the drugs minister pledged that the MAT standards would be fully embedded across the country by April 2022. In reality, it is increasingly clear that the target is not going to be met, given the wholly inadequate funding of drug treatment services, health and social care services and the workforce over the past 15 years. That failure is leading to lives continuing to be needlessly lost.

This is supposed to be a national mission, but instead of delivering the standards that were promised, more families are going to have to suffer while they continue to wait for action. What

does the First Minister have to say to those families?

The First Minister: I recognise the importance of the MAT standards and the Government is doing what it committed to do. It is important that the standards are embedded in every local area and that they are then properly implemented. That is the work that is under way and the minister has committed to report to Parliament regularly on that.

The standards apply to all services and organisations that are responsible for the delivery of care. Access to treatment is a key part of supporting those who use drugs and, of course, it is a key part of our overall strategy to reduce deaths from drugs. The minister will report next month, but this work continues to be of the highest priority for the Government as a whole.

The Presiding Officer: We turn to general and constituency supplementary questions.

Northern Ireland Protocol

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether she will provide an update on any discussions that the Scottish Government has had with the United Kingdom Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency in light of the potential impact on Scotland of his reported comments regarding the Northern Ireland protocol.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We remain deeply concerned about the dispute over the Northern Ireland protocol. The protocol is part of the European Union-United Kingdom withdrawal agreement. When Boris Johnson signed it, he described it as a “fantastic moment”. The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine, Neil Gray, has written to the UK Government making it clear that invoking article 16 of the protocol or, indeed, unilaterally introducing legislation to breach international law would be deeply irresponsible and would probably trigger severe trade and economic impacts for the whole UK, including Scotland.

In light of the serious implications of such action, we would certainly expect the Scottish Government to be involved in discussions in advance. However, despite our repeated requests, the UK Government has, to date, shown no willingness to engage on the issues.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise (Cairngorm Funicular Railway Repairs)

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): We now know that the Scottish Government has decided to make HIE fund the additional repairs to the Cairngorm funicular

railway. That money will have to come from HIE's annual budget. We know that the repair bill will be well in excess of £20 million. When the Scottish Government made that decision, it knew that some Highland businesses would, as a consequence, lose the financial support that they get from HIE. Will the Government review the decision, which I believe will cripple HIE and Highland businesses?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We want to support Highland businesses and we will continue to work with HIE to make sure that we can deliver on its priorities. In light of the question's having been asked, I will look at the particular issue in more detail and am happy to get back to the member in due course.

Police Scotland Training (Colombia)

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Police Scotland's international development and innovation unit continues to provide training to some of the world's most serious human rights abusers. In Colombia, where there is evidence of human rights abuses being committed by the national police, including the killing of protesters, Police Scotland officers continue to provide training. Given the evidence of human rights abuses being committed by the national Colombian police, can the First Minister explain why the Scottish Government approved the deployment of Police Scotland officers to Colombia?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Operational matters are for the chief constable, and I am sure that he will pay attention to this exchange. I recognise that these issues can be sensitive and controversial. However, it is important to note that where Police Scotland provides support and training to police forces in other parts of the world, it is about enhancing human rights and ensuring that, in parts of the world where such an approach has not always been taken, police forces are trained in taking a human rights approach to policing. I recognise the concerns that can be addressed. The chief constable is independent of the Government, but I will ask him to write to the member in more detail about the particular issues.

Breast Cancer Screening

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Scotland has been trailing behind other parts of the United Kingdom for some time on the resumption of breast cancer screening for those who are aged over 71. That is having a real impact on women who are aged over 70. Just last week, I was contacted by a woman from Edinburgh whose request for a mammogram was twice refused by NHS Lothian. However, Margaret was able to get

an appointment in Newcastle, where screening revealed an invasive lobular breast cancer, which needed to be removed by surgery and follow-up radiation.

I will ask the First Minister three simple questions. If other UK nations can continue to screen, why cannot Scotland do it? In the meantime, does the First Minister think that it is acceptable for Scots to have to travel to England for screening? Does the First Minister agree with my constituent, Margaret, that her cancer might have been detected much earlier and with a much more favourable outcome if her request for screening had not been refused in Scotland?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Those are important issues and it is important for me to be clear about aspects of them. In doing so, I will try to address all three of the questions. In respect of the individual case, I understand the concern and anxiety of the individual concerned.

Breast screening is recommended for patients who are between 50 and 70. The clinical recommendation is that routine breast screening should be done every three years. As we have sought to recover those services from the impact of the pandemic, and after the brief cessation of all screening services at an earlier stage of the pandemic, our advice has been that we focus first on those for whom breast screening is specifically recommended, in order that we can ensure that we can catch up on appointments that have been missed for that group.

To address the first question, I say that other UK Governments will take their own decisions. I have heard a concern that reintroducing optional screening for women who are over 70 has, in other parts of the UK, had an impact on ensuring that services can be caught up for women for whom screening is recommended. I do not know whether that is the case, but I have heard that concern being communicated.

We have sought to prioritise women for whom breast screening is recommended. However, we are currently working towards reintroduction of self-referrals for women who are over the age of 71 later this year. We intend that that service will be resumed in the autumn. We consider that we will be able to allow that to happen, while ensuring that any impact on the eligible screening population is minimised, which is really important.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a brief pause before we move to portfolio questions.

Portfolio Question Time

Health and Social Care

15:24

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move directly to the next item of business, which is portfolio questions. The first portfolio is health and social care. If a member wishes to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button, or type R in the chat function, during the relevant question.

General Practitioner Services (Online Appointments)

1. **Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact assessments it has made of any increased use of online appointments on patients' access to GP services. (S6O-01022)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): Near Me is a safe and secure national health service video consulting service that enables people to attend appointments from home or wherever is convenient. During the pandemic, the use of Near Me in Scotland rose from around 1,000 consultations per month to a peak of 90,000 per month. GP consultations are included in those totals. Usage is currently at around 50,000 consultations a month.

The Scottish Government has published its impact assessment of Near Me. If the member has not seen it, I will be happy to send a link.

Ultimately, GP practices are responsible for ensuring that their local appointment arrangements, whether online or otherwise, meet their patients' needs and provide satisfactory access.

Mercedes Villalba: In the face of opposition from patients and staff, Old Aberdeen medical practice was put out to tender, and that has resulted in declining standards of patient care for many of my constituents. One example is the roll-out of an e-consult system to arrange GP appointments online. That should have allowed patients to request an appointment at any time but, in reality, it has left many struggling to access the care that they need, including one constituent who contacted me when she was 30 weeks pregnant and unable to get an appointment through the e-consult system. That is an unacceptable deterioration of what was a highly effective and popular practice.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could we have a question please, Ms Villalba?

Mercedes Villalba: Will the minister commit today to undertaking an impact assessment of the e-consult system and how it has affected the provision and quality of patient care at Old Aberdeen?

Humza Yousaf: I will certainly look at that suggestion with an open mind and in more detail, because I know about the e-consult system and I am disappointed to hear the feedback that Ms Villalba's constituents are giving her.

As the member knows, NHS Grampian has provided its GP practices with that e-consult system. It is meant to help doctors to prioritise and assess which patients need face-to-face help and which patients can, for example, have help over the telephone or through video consultation. Patients can access e-consult at any time, even outside surgery hours.

Notwithstanding all that, I hear the concerns that have been raised by Mercedes Villalba, and I will give serious consideration to her suggestion. In the meantime I will take the issue up with both the health and social partnership and the health board.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Sandesh Gulhane, who is joining us remotely, has a supplementary question.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): GPs are holding more consultations than before the pandemic, but demand is such that patients do not feel that they are being seen in the manner that they would like. What new measures will the Scottish Government put in place to support GP practices, which are under unsustainable pressure, and—possibly via a campaign—to better communicate with patients that GPs are open for business and to explain the different appointment types that are available?

Humza Yousaf: We are doing a lot to support GPs—including increasing funding this financial year. Communication and messaging are also important. We have made sure to say clearly to people that we want to increase the number of face-to-face appointments, and we are working with the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners on that. In addition, the unfair vilification of GPs and GP staff, including receptionists, that is coming from some quarters in the United Kingdom Government and even from some in this Parliament must stop.

We must support patients in order to increase the number of face-to-face appointments, but we must also make sure that access to GPs is part of a hybrid system that includes online access and

video and telephone consultation as well as face-to-face consultation.

Health Spending 2022-23

2. **Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how much it will spend per head of the population on health in the current financial year. (S6O-01023)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): This financial year, 2022-23, £18 billion is provided for health and social care. That takes forward our commitment to increase spending on the national health service by 20 per cent—over £2.5 billion—by the end of the parliamentary session, and builds on our front-line spending, which is £111 per person higher in Scotland than in England; to put that in context, that is, proportionately, over £600 million more.

Stephanie Callaghan: I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer and for making that comparison. Will the cabinet secretary also set out the elements of the social contract that residents of Scotland benefit from that are not available elsewhere?

Humza Yousaf: That is an important question. On top of the spend per head being higher than it is in England—it is also £146 per head higher than it is in Wales—people in Scotland get access to free medicine. We have abolished prescription charges, while the fee in England is well above £9 per item. We have abolished national health service hospital car parking charges, which saves users more than £60 million. We also provide free dental care for people who are under 26, and we are the only United Kingdom nation to provide free universal NHS-funded eye examinations.

I am proud of our record on the NHS, not only because of the proportionate spend per head but because of all the additional benefits that are enjoyed in Scotland but not in other parts of the UK.

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Spend in our NHS is crucial, but so are actions. The cabinet secretary will be well aware that, in 2018, Moray's maternity service was temporarily downgraded for up to 12 months. The chief executive of NHS Grampian has now said that it could be a further decade before the service returns. Does the cabinet secretary agree with that timescale, does he agree that it is unacceptable and what is he going to do to speed it up?

Humza Yousaf: As Douglas Ross well knows—because I have met him, as well as local campaigners and clinicians at Dr Gray's and at Raigmore—I have stated that we see model 6 as the end destination. I have committed to a timetable of this summer for the interim model 4,

and to a timetable of later in the year to get towards model 6. I will not pre-empt the on-going discussions, but both health boards—NHS Grampian and NHS Highland—are crucial to model 4 and to model 6. They know that I expect urgency and pace and that we must do this in a way that is safe and sustainable for the women who are involved and their unborn children.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will be aware that, from 2007 to 2010, the Scottish National Party Government did not pass on the money that it received from the then UK Labour Government for the NHS. Had it done so, the NHS would have £1 billion more today to spend on helping our hard-working NHS staff to care for patients. Does the cabinet secretary believe that his predecessor was right to divert money away from the NHS, given the challenges that we face today?

Humza Yousaf: Labour has a cheek to talk about health spending given that it was the architect of private finance initiative spend in our hospitals. This SNP Government abolished car parking charges, which is something that I am very proud of. If it were up to Labour—if it were still in power—patients, as well as staff, doctors and nurses going to work, would all have to pay to park. I am very proud of the fact that front-line health spending in Scotland is £146 per head higher than it is in Labour-controlled Wales.

Covid-19 Vaccination (NHS Lanarkshire)

3. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress regarding the spring Covid-19 vaccination programme in the NHS Lanarkshire area. (S6O-01024)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): As part of its spring Covid-19 vaccination programme, NHS Lanarkshire has administered a fourth dose to more than three quarters—76 per cent—of all residents aged 75 and over. That includes more than four in five—82 per cent—of people aged 75 and over in the NHS Lanarkshire area who received their third dose more than 24 weeks ago. That demonstrates strong progress and is very much in line with our expected delivery progress at this stage.

Vaccine officials meet all national health service boards individually bi-weekly to cover performance and delivery and to discuss whether any additional national programme support is required. Furthermore, planning discussions for future activity, including preparing for any possible future autumn/winter programme, are very much under way.

Clare Adamson: I thank the workers from NHS Lanarkshire who have been providing this service in the area.

I was contacted by two of my Motherwell and Wishaw constituents, who suffer from multiple sclerosis and chronic heart failure respectively. Both are housebound, but they have been refused the spring booster dose. Can the cabinet secretary advise on the best course of action for my constituents and others who believe that they might be eligible for the spring booster programme but who have been unable to get the vaccine?

Humza Yousaf: I thank Clare Adamson for raising that issue. She is welcome to give more details to me in writing if she wishes.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation advises that, to be eligible for a spring booster, adults must be either

“aged 75 years and over, residents in a care home for older adults”

or

“individuals aged 12 years and over who are immunosuppressed”.

The definition of immunosuppression is taken from chapter 14a of the green book, “Immunisation against infectious disease”. I will send that detail across to the member.

If the member’s constituents are not eligible because they do not fit that definition, there is some clinical flexibility. Of course, as the member knows, that would be a clinical decision for clinicians and vaccination leads to make; that is not a decision that I can make as a minister.

We are waiting for interim advice from the JCVI about a future programme. Those who are not eligible currently might well be eligible for a future autumn/winter programme. I think that that interim advice is due imminently.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that, whether rural Scotland is located in North Lanarkshire or, for example, in Nairn, there is a shared desire for vaccination services to be provided locally? Building on the excellent work that he has carried out with me and Dr Baker of the Nairn medical practice, will the cabinet secretary engage with NHS Highland to progress consideration of that issue so that GP practices that wish to continue providing local vaccination services are able to do so?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That goes a wee bit wider than North Lanarkshire, but I am sure that the cabinet secretary will want to take a stab at answering.

Humza Yousaf: My colleague has raised an important issue. I was delighted to meet him and

Dr Baker, both of whom are thoughtful and considered individuals, to discuss those points about local vaccination.

There is flexibility in the system. For example, there are parts of Scotland—I am thinking about Argyll and Bute for example—where GP services are administering vaccinations. I will raise the specific issue with NHS Highland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 is from Brian Whittle, who joins us remotely.

Long Covid (Poor Mental Health)

4. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support people who are experiencing poor mental health as a result of long Covid. (S6O-01025)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): The impact of the pandemic on our population has been far reaching. Those who are suffering from long Covid should have access to the right mental health support at the right time. Our general practitioners and local healthcare teams are best placed to offer advice or treatment for mental health concerns, and they continue to work tirelessly to ensure that help and support is available to anyone who needs it.

In addition, we have worked with NHS inform to develop a dedicated long Covid website, which provides information and support in relation to low mood and depression, and anxiety, with signposting to self-help guides.

Underpinning the range of support that is available across the country is the Scottish Government's record funding for our national health service, which includes unprecedented investment for mental health services.

Managing the mental health impacts of the pandemic remains an integral part of our plans to refresh our mental health strategy. There will be an opportunity for us to consider how we improve existing support for people with long Covid and ensure that that support is consistently available across Scotland.

Brian Whittle: Long Covid is a serious issue in the aftermath of the pandemic, with tens of thousands of Scots estimated to be suffering from it. We should have had the opportunity to discuss the issue in a debate that was, unfortunately, postponed by the Scottish Government. When the Government responds on the issue, will the minister ensure that treatment for the potentially debilitating mental health aspect of long Covid is included as part of that?

Kevin Stewart: Of course, the mental health aspect should be included. Subject to the

Parliament's agreement, we intend to bring back to the Parliament a long Covid debate on 19 May. That will allow ministers to provide a fuller update on progress, as we will not be bound by the pre-election period restrictions in which we currently find ourselves. I am quite sure that Mr Whittle will be looking forward to that debate.

Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP): Mental health is one of the major public health challenges in Scotland, and I put on record my thanks to NHS staff and the Scottish Government for ensuring that that has remained a priority throughout the response to Covid-19. Will the minister provide an update on the increase in mental health staff since the Scottish National Party came into office? Will he set out the action that the Government is taking to increase the number of mental health staff, to allow our patients to access support in their communities?

Kevin Stewart: There is no doubt that the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of our population will be felt for years to come. We are investing record levels of funding and expect total spend on mental health, including by NHS Scotland, to exceed £1.2 billion in the current financial year. That funding will help services in all areas respond to the needs of the communities that they support, including in the member's constituency.

In response to Ms Brown's question about staffing, I should say that, since this Government came to power in 2007, the mental health workforce has increased. There has been a 95.6 per cent rise in the number of psychology staff, a 34.7 per cent rise in mental health nurses, a 21.6 per cent rise in consultant psychiatrists, and an 83.4 per cent rise in staff in children's and adult mental health services.

Menopause (Specialist Services)

5. Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that women who need it have access to specialist services for advice and support on the diagnosis and management of menopause. (S6O-01026)

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): We are determined to ensure that women are able to access the care and support that they need for menopause, whether through primary or specialist care. There is now a specialist menopause service in every mainland national health service board and support in place for the island health boards. A menopause specialists network meets regularly to provide consistent advice and peer support to health care professionals, including primary care teams.

We know that many women will seek support from their local general practice for their menopause symptoms. To support primary care, NHS Education for Scotland is developing menopause training for healthcare professionals, including practice nurses and GPs. Support for women who are experiencing the menopause will continue to be a priority for the women's health plan as it is implemented.

Ruth Maguire: I thank the minister for that action.

Hormone replacement therapy is part of the jigsaw of menopause management. For many women, it provides invaluable relief from the quite debilitating symptoms of menopause. Those women will be concerned about reported shortages of HRT supplies. Can I ask the minister what that situation is in Scotland? Further to that, would she consider enabling pharmacists to prescribe HRT, so that, where there are shortages, women can be advised on and provided with an alternative at the time, rather than having to return to their GP?

Maree Todd: Community pharmacists in Scotland are able to make appropriate generic or branded substitutions by endorsing for a change of strength or quantity if alternative products are available. Pharmacists who are independent prescribers can prescribe items within their clinical competency. We are committed to expanding the number of community pharmacists who undertake independent prescribing qualifications, and we have invested in a programme to support that.

In addition, serious shortage protocols—SSPs—which apply to the whole of the United Kingdom, are used for serious shortages when medicines are likely to be unavailable for some time. Three SSPs were introduced across the UK on 29 April 2022. In accordance with the SSP, community pharmacists can limit the supply to three months for eligible patients, to help conserve stock and ensure that as many patients as possible are able to have access to their prescribed medicine.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): My question is in a similar vein to the previous one.

Across Scotland, many women are struggling to access hormone replacement therapy due to complex issues in the supply chain. Although the shortages are largely the product of increased demand, it is unacceptable that many women are experiencing severe discomfort and anxiety as a result.

It is welcome that the UK Government has established an HRT task force to get to the bottom of these issues, but what work is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that the short-term and long-term supply of HRT can meet the rising demand in the future? Can the minister confirm

whether the Scottish Government is working with the Scottish Medicines Consortium, health boards and community pharmacies to improve the flow of medicines between suppliers, wholesalers and pharmacies?

Maree Todd: The member is absolutely correct that these problems are affecting the whole of the UK. She will also be aware that the supply of medicines is a reserved matter for the UK Government. However, Scottish Government officials and NHS national procurement colleagues are regularly updated on any supply disruptions that might arise, and they provide advice to NHS Scotland on options for addressing the shortages.

The disruptions in the availability of HRT are concerning to those who prescribe them. Any patient who is affected by them should discuss alternative treatment options with their doctor in the first instance.

Undoubtedly, those disruptions arise because of complex issues. There is a rise in demand, but other factors are also contributing to the shortages of HRT. We welcome the appointment of Madelaine McTernan as the HRT tsar. We will absolutely work with the UK Government to improve the situation on this really important matter. We will make sure that information from Scotland is taken into account. My officials have already been in contact with the Department of Health and Social Care to work alongside Ms McTernan.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next question, I make a plea for succinct questions and answers. Otherwise, I will simply not be able to call all the questions.

Home Care Waiting Lists

6. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what recent assessment it has made of the number of people requiring home care but who remain on waiting lists for such care. (S6O-01027)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): The Scottish Government is aware that there are significant pressures facing the social care sector at present, including high levels of unmet need, and the situation is under constant review. The cross-sectoral adult social care gold group meets fortnightly, providing strategic national oversight on system pressures alongside key partners. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I also have frequent meetings in local areas that face the most acute social care pressures, with discussion focused on solutions.

Graham Simpson: Last year, more than 500 people died while waiting for home care. More than 5,000 people are waiting to be assessed, 404

of whom are in South Lanarkshire. Age Scotland has described the figures as an “absolute tragedy”. It is a fact that the longer that people languish on those lists, the quicker they deteriorate. What urgent steps will the minister take now to get on top of this crisis?

Kevin Stewart: The Scottish Government has encouraged and supported partnership working between local resilience groups and health and social care partnerships in order to get this right. Through contact with partnerships, I am aware that there is a range of local initiatives across the country to support recipients of care, using volunteers, redeployed staff and third sector partners. A lot of work is going on in that regard. In our discussions, the cabinet secretary and I are ensuring that best practice is exported across the country.

We have to recognise that, although things are improving, we have had a significant problem with staffing shortages because of folk being off with Covid-19. That situation is improving, and thank goodness for that. Also, we would be doing so much better on the social care workforce if we had retained the staff who have returned to their home countries because of Brexit and the Tory Government’s hostile environment on immigration.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 is from Natalie Don, who joins us remotely.

Adult Disability Day Centres (Operating Levels)

7. Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on whether adult disability day centres are able to operate at pre-pandemic levels. (S6O-01028)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing and Social Care (Kevin Stewart): I recognise the importance of day services to those who use them and to their families and carers. Decisions about individual services are made by local authorities, but it is important that such services resume, given the benefits that they bring to people, the current low risk to public health and the mitigations that can be put in place without hampering operations. Last year, I wrote to local authorities to emphasise the importance of day services and to ask authorities to look at reopening services in line with Covid-19 guidance as soon as possible.

Further to a recent meeting with representatives of unpaid carers, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has undertaken to write to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to ask for an audit of adult day care and respite services in every local authority, with a view to finding out which services have reopened and which have only partially opened or opened with reduced capacity.

Natalie Don: In my constituency, it appears that the local health and social care partnership is not certain how the guidance applies to the reopening of its adult day care centres to pre-pandemic levels. While organisations such as Capability Scotland have reopened their centres to pre-pandemic levels, that has not happened in local authority-run adult day care centres. Can the minister clarify the guidance to which day care centre operators must adhere? I would be happy for the minister to respond to that point in writing, if he wishes to do so.

Kevin Stewart: On Natalie Don’s point about Renfrewshire health and social care partnership being uncertain about the guidance, I ask that it engages with my officials, and we will help in that regard. It is vital that services return to a new normal, in recognition that there are improved infection prevention measures across society. Covid-19 still remains a public health concern, so it is recommended that folks follow the current Public Health Scotland guidance.

I reiterate that, if there is any dubiety about the guidance, Renfrewshire health and social care partnership is free to contact my officials or Public Health Scotland to get clarity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have now run out of time, so I will have to draw portfolio question time on health and social care to a close.

Social Justice, Housing and Local Government

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next portfolio is social justice, housing and local government.

Free Bus Travel (Asylum Seekers)

1. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what discussions the social justice secretary has had with the transport minister regarding the possibility of extending free bus travel in Scotland to people seeking asylum. (S6O-01030)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Asylum seekers in Scotland are already able to access the national free bus travel schemes for older and disabled people and, of course, for under-22s.

The Minister for Transport and I are keen that we do what we can to support all asylum seekers in Scotland, including by enabling them to access support and services on the same basis as other residents in Scotland. That includes providing free bus travel to other asylum seekers. We are doing that while needing to bear in mind UK Government

reserved policy, which, unfortunately, restricts access to support.

Mark Ruskell: It is clear that free bus travel for under-22s has been transformative for hundreds of thousands of young people. However, the cost of living crisis will hit all those seeking asylum, especially given that they are forced to live on just over £40 a week and are banned from working.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that now is the time to take decisive and practical action to counter the hostile environment agenda that is pedalled by the Tories? Will she commit to meeting me and other interested parties to unpick, as she explained, the barriers to expanding free bus travel to all those seeking asylum in Scotland?

Shona Robison: I am happy to meet Mark Ruskell to discuss the issue in more depth. He will be aware of the ending destitution together strategy, which sets out a clear approach to improving support for people with no recourse to public funds who are subject to restrictions. That includes people who are seeking asylum.

Scottish Government officials are investigating the case for providing free bus travel for asylum seekers who do not meet the criteria for existing schemes. I am happy to update Mark Ruskell in due course, either at the meeting or in writing.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary and the Minister for Transport for having met me to discuss the issue. Does she recognise that the policy would cost less than £400,000 a year? In terms of impact versus cost, the initiative would be extremely good. If there is such a hold-up, will the cabinet secretary give an indication of the timescale that we could face before the initiative is introduced? A lot of people in our community face destitution, which is a serious hardship, on a day-to-day basis.

Shona Robison: I recognise Paul Sweeney's interest in the issue. He has asked me a number of questions about it and has campaigned on it hard. When we met, we had a very constructive meeting.

As I said in my answer to Mark Ruskell, we are actively looking at what can be done. Obviously, we need to bear in mind the restrictions regarding no recourse to public funds, but we are keen to do what we can around the issue of transport.

I know that one local authority has already made some progress in that area. Stirling Council has used some of its Home Office funding for supporting resettlement to buy bus passes for Syrian and Afghan families who are covered by the United Kingdom Government resettlement scheme, and I think that it is extending that support to Ukrainian refugees.

Officials are working on the issue, and I want to pick up the conversation more broadly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities once the new team is in place.

I am happy to keep Paul Sweeney apprised of progress, because I know that he has an active interest in the matter.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The recent crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine have put Scotland's new Scots refugee integration strategy to the test. Can the cabinet secretary underline the ways in which the new Scots approach offers compassionate support and opportunities to displaced people, despite the scale of those challenges?

Shona Robison: The new Scots refugee integration strategy provides a clear framework for all those who work towards refugee integration in Scotland, with the key principle that integration begins from day 1 of arrival. It assists partners to make the best use of resources and expertise by promoting partnership approaches, joined-up working and early intervention.

The strategy provides a strong foundation on which to respond to challenges that refugees, asylum seekers, displaced people and communities across Scotland face, and it aims to support people to use and share their skills, culture and experience as they begin to rebuild their lives.

Affordable Housing

2. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the delivery of affordable housing. (S6O-01031)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Latest statistics show that since 2007, the Government has delivered 108,106 affordable homes, of which more than 75,000 are for social rent, including 17,681 council homes. That record is something to be very proud of, as is our commitment to deliver 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 areas.

We have £3.6 billion of planned investment this parliamentary session to allow the important work of ensuring that everyone in Scotland has a warm, safe and affordable place to live.

Willie Coffey: I have seen promising signs that affordable house building is getting back into full swing in my area, with more than 1,500 low-cost and social homes now built by the Scottish National Party in East Ayrshire since 2007.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that the house building sector is on track to a full recovery following the pandemic, which puts Scotland in a good position to achieve its ambition of a further 100,000-plus affordable homes across the country by 2032?

Shona Robison: The pandemic took its toll and we are aware that global issues around material, skilled labour, supply shortages and associated rising costs have affected the pace of delivery. However, I am pleased to say that the affordable housing sector is showing signs of recovery, with completions having risen by 35 per cent compared to December 2020.

In East Ayrshire, up to £66.5 million will be made available over the next five years—a 25 per cent increase on the previous five years, which I am sure that the member will welcome.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): If the cabinet secretary is proud of her record, can she explain to Parliament why, after 15 years of SNP Government, we see a record number of children living in unsuitable temporary accommodation in Scotland? What plan does the Scottish Government have to end that practice?

Shona Robison: We are working extremely hard to end the use of temporary accommodation. An estimated 2,100 households with children have been helped into affordable housing in the year to March 2021. We reintroduced the council house building programme, which is the first such central Government support to councils in a generation. That is in marked contrast to the half a million council houses that were sold off under the Tories, which is a lot of homes to have to make up.

It does not stop there. An article in *The Telegraph* shows that Boris Johnson is leading the charge to sell off housing association homes. Not content to sell off council homes, the Tories now want to sell off housing association homes. Affordable housing is only safe under the SNP Government.

Adult Disability Payment (Indefinite Award)

3. **Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** I remind members that I am in receipt of personal independence payment.

To ask the Scottish Government how many people it estimates will qualify for an indefinite award within the first 12 months of the national launch of adult disability payment. (S6O-01032)

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson): Our policy on indefinite awards will avoid unnecessary reviews for severely disabled people who have needs that are highly unlikely to change. The approach will provide dignity, be proportionate to people's needs

and provide the security of long-term financial support. Our approach is supported by disabled people.

The decision-making process for adult disability payment will be person-centred and compassionate, to meet the needs of individuals. The number of awards will therefore depend on the circumstances of the people who apply. The Scottish Fiscal Commission is responsible for forecasting adult disability payment, and our policy on indefinite awards will be part of its next forecast.

Jeremy Balfour: I am slightly surprised by the minister's answer. I asked only for an estimate, so a rough idea would have been helpful.

If the payment is indefinite, how will an individual who applies and gets a lower rate be able to have it reviewed? Their condition might get worse, although they might not know that. Will the new social security system allow for the department to do reviews so that it can benefit the claimant and not take away from them?

Ben Macpherson: I presume that there is implicit praise for the Scottish Government from Mr Balfour on this issue, as there has been from across the United Kingdom. He makes some important points, and I would be happy to have further discussion with him on them.

We are in the launch period of the adult disability payment; we will then undertake case transfer. People can apply during the first phase of the adult disability payment pilot for indefinite awards; then, as part of the case transfer process, when they are reviewed after they have been transferred, they will be able to apply for an indefinite award. We are making awards only at the higher rate at the point of transfer, but we continue to engage with stakeholders on potential indefinite awards for those on the lower rate in due course. That is a further consideration.

In addition—this is an important point—we are cognisant of Mr Balfour's point that, if someone feels that their condition has changed, they should be able to provoke a review to seek more support if they think that they are eligible for it. Those issues are all being considered, as they should be, and I would be happy to discuss them further with Mr Balfour.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I register an interest as someone who is in receipt of personal independence payment.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, Chloe Smith, has confirmed that it will be for the Department for Work and Pensions to determine who is eligible for passported benefits should the Scottish Government wish to implement different eligibility for adult disability

payment, and she has asked for notice of intention around that. Will the minister confirm whether it is his intention to change eligibility for adult disability payment, including getting rid of the 20m rule? Has he indicated such to the DWP?

Ben Macpherson: That is not entirely relevant to the question about indefinite awards. Ms Duncan-Glancy is aware of the engagement that we have had with the committee and the UK Government on adult disability payment and the eligibility criteria for it. As she knows, we have committed to starting a review of adult disability payment later this year and into next year, and eligibility criteria will be assessed as part of that. We will consider matters, including passporting, going forward from there.

Child Poverty (Stirling)

4. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how the actions set out in its tackling child poverty delivery plan will support low-income families in Stirling. (S6O-01033)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Our second tackling child poverty delivery plan, “Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026”, sets out how we will provide immediate financial support to families and break the cycle of child poverty.

We will increase the Scottish child payment to £25 by the end of 2022, having doubled it to £20 per week last month, and we have committed to mitigating the United Kingdom Government’s benefit cap as fully as possible within devolved powers. We will also help parents to work and earn more through increased investment this year of up to £81 million in a new parental employability offer and transition fund.

Evelyn Tweed: It is hugely welcome that the Scottish Government is increasing the Scottish child payment and mitigating the UK Government’s cruel benefit cap, but does the cabinet secretary share my frustration that policies such as the Scottish child payment are undermined by the UK Government’s welfare changes, including the cut in universal credit, and agree that we could go so much further in realising our ambitions in tackling child poverty if we did not have to mitigate actions that have been taken by Westminster?

Shona Robison: Yes, I totally agree with Evelyn Tweed on that point. The devastating impact of successive UK Government welfare cuts that have been imposed since 2015 is incredibly frustrating. Those measures include, among others, the two-child limit, the removal of the £20 universal credit uplift and the 2015-20 benefit freeze. If those measures were reversed, an

additional £780 million would be getting into the pockets of Scottish households. Importantly, that would lift 70,000 people, including 30,000 children, out of poverty in 2023-24.

Despite that, we will continue to provide support that is unparalleled in the UK to low-income families, including by increasing our Scottish child payment and taking further action to mitigate the impact of Westminster policies such as the benefit cap, as we do already for the bedroom tax.

Disabled People (Mobile and Park Homes)

5. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what duty local authorities have to assist disabled people who reside in mobile or park homes under the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons (Scotland) Act 1972. (S6O-01034)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): We want disabled people in Scotland to have choice, dignity and freedom to access suitable homes that have been built or adapted to enable them to participate as full and equal citizens.

Local authorities have powers and duties under a range of legislation, including the 1972 act, to assess an individual’s care needs and to provide support services as required. The support that is offered should be based on an assessment of the person’s particular needs, should take account of their preferences and should not be affected by the type of property that they live in.

Colin Beattie: The cabinet secretary might be aware that, in many mobile or park homes, disabled residents are denied adaptations by local councils, which cite the temporary nature of the homes. How best can that widely held position be countered, so that disabled residents receive the support to which they should be entitled?

Shona Robison: Colin Beattie raises a very important matter. Everyone should have access to the support that they need to be able to live in a home that is suitable for them.

We know that the adaptations system requires improvement, and we are currently undertaking a review that will improve, streamline and accelerate that system. The review will consider issues relating to adaptations to park and mobile homes, to ensure that access to adaptations is fair and equitable, regardless of property type or tenure, and it will remove any inconsistencies.

Cost of Living (Cowdenbeath)

6. **Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it is

providing to families in the Cowdenbeath constituency that may be at risk of poverty due to the cost of living crisis. (S6O-01035)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Through our second tackling child poverty delivery plan, we have set out bold action to drive forward progress across the country on our national mission to tackle child poverty.

This year, we are set to invest almost £770 million to tackle the cost of living crisis. By the end of this year, our five family benefits will be worth more than £10,000 by the time an eligible family's first child turns six, and more than £9,700 for every subsequent child. That is £8,200 more than is available for children in England and Wales.

In addition, our Scottish child payment will lift an estimated 50,000 children out of relative poverty in 2023-24.

Annabelle Ewing: I welcome the various measures that the Scottish Government is putting in place to help my Cowdenbeath constituents. However, given that so many people face acute financial hardship, it should surely be all hands on deck. Is it not the case that Scottish Government interventions in this regard are being undermined by the failure of the Chancellor of the Exchequer of the United Kingdom—who, regrettably, still holds the key economic levers in Scotland—to step up and treat this crisis with the urgency that is required?

Shona Robison: Annabelle Ewing is absolutely correct. Would it not be better if we were all facing in the same direction on child poverty? As the First Minister said during First Minister's question time, the UK Government has failed to act or even to understand the pressures that households are facing. We have repeatedly urged the UK Government to take more action to support hard-pressed households, including by cutting VAT on household energy bills, by taxing companies on excess profits and by matching the 6 per cent uprating that we delivered for eight of our social security benefits, but it has failed to do so. The Scottish Government will continue to do what it can, but would it not be better if the UK Government was to do the same?

Roma and Traveller Communities (Site Provision)

7. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what support it is giving to local authorities for expanding the provision of sites for Roma/Traveller communities and reducing time on waiting lists. (S6O-01036)

The Minister for Equalities and Older People (Christina McKelvie): The Scottish Government

is providing up to £20 million to local authorities between 2021 and 2026 through the Gypsy Traveller accommodation fund for more and better accommodation. The second round of the fund opened on 31 March, and we have asked for proposals for projects to increase accommodation across councils that have identified the need for more pitches or a new site. In addition, we are commissioning research in 2022-23 to make it easier for local authorities to identify and plan for unmet accommodation needs. Those actions will support our work in reducing waiting lists.

Maggie Chapman: The Clinterty Travellers site in Aberdeen is already at capacity. Although there are redevelopment plans, which are much needed and welcomed, the improvements will not increase capacity or tackle waiting lists. Will the Scottish Government consider implementing statutory reporting on delivery plans, site provision and waiting list actions, so that a fuller picture can be provided of the community's needs? Can the Scottish Government do more to recognise ancestral stopping sites? That might help to address some of the issues that the community faces.

Christina McKelvie: I thank Maggie Chapman for what is an incredibly important question. There are already a range of obligations on local authorities to plan and report on Gypsy Traveller provision, including requirements under the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 as well as through local housing strategies and housing need and demand assessments. There is also annual reporting to the Scottish Housing Regulator. If Maggie Chapman has other ideas on how we could do more of that, I would be very happy to meet her to discuss them.

Our joint action plan with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities includes an action to map traditional stopping places, which is still being progressed as we speak.

Aberdeen City Council anticipates that capacity at the Clinterty site will increase from 21 to 38 caravans, while complying with fire safety regulations. I am happy to discuss those points further and to mark the progress that has been made, should Maggie Chapman wish that.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the minister for her update on the progress on the housing to 2040 strategy and in line with the 2019 action plan that is being made on Gypsy Traveller sites, including new sites.

My committee—the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee—heard evidence from COSLA that Gypsy Traveller sites had been deemed not to be suitable accommodation under the homes for Ukraine scheme. Can the minister give any indication that

Gypsy Travellers here, and those coming from Ukraine, will be supported in appropriate accommodation? What can the Scottish Government do to ensure that there is no discrimination in that process?

Christina McKelvie: There were a couple of questions in there. We provided £2 million in 2021 for councils to make immediate improvements on public sites, based on what their residents said that they needed, and all 19 councils with Gypsy Traveller sites received an allocation.

I met representatives of the Gypsy Traveller community a few weeks ago, and I have community conversations with them very regularly. They raised the issue of the homes for Ukraine scheme, and I have raised it directly with the minister responsible. I will write to Clare Adamson with a response on that.

In the first funding round of our accommodation fund, just over £1 million was provided to three local authorities for specific projects. Final allocations to those projects will be agreed for 2022-23, and will be paid. The projects in—Aberdeen City, Clackmannanshire and Fife—will provide accommodation that better meets the needs of residents, including through larger pitches. Design, planning and procurement are well progressed in all those projects and the work will start on the sites this year.

I will come back to Clare Adamson on the point about homes for Ukraine.

East Lothian Council (Service Delivery)

8. **Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** For the final time, I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests as a serving councillor on East Lothian Council.

To ask the Scottish Government how it works with East Lothian Council in the delivery of local government services across the area. (S6O-01037)

The Minister for Social Security and Local Government (Ben Macpherson): As Mr Hoy will know as an elected councillor—at least for a short while yet—local authorities are independent entities with their own powers and responsibilities. It is for councils to decide how they manage day-to-day service delivery and decision-making processes, albeit within statutory limits and boundaries.

However, maintaining a close and constructive partnership with local government has and always will be a priority for the Scottish Government. That partnership approach is underpinned by regular meetings with councils and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, so that we can understand their needs and respond and support

them accordingly. A range of portfolio cabinet secretaries and ministers, and officials, have regular contact on key shared priorities with individual local authorities, including East Lothian Council.

Craig Hoy: Does the minister accept that cash is key, and that no matter how hard the Government tries to spin it, we need only look at the figures to see what it really thinks of our councils? In East Lothian, the Scottish National Party cut the council's core funding by £3 million in real terms this year alone. In what way is slashing East Lothian's budget while saddling the council with spending commitments for SNP policies anything other than a cynical cash grab by centralising SNP ministers?

Ben Macpherson: I will not repeat what the First Minister stated at First Minister's question time earlier, except to emphasise that the Scottish Government has had a real-terms reduction of 5.2 per cent, whereas there has been a 6.3 per cent real-terms increase in our allocation to local authorities compared with 2021-22. East Lothian Council will receive £213.3 million to fund local services this financial year, which equates to an extra £19.4 million to support vital day-to-day services, and is an additional 10 per cent compared with 2021-22. In addition, all councils will receive their fair share of the currently undistributed sum of £93.9 million.

It is important that we also consider the wider context of Scottish Government initiatives, such as the Scottish child payment, which are all additional supports for communities across the country.

In concluding, on behalf of the Scottish Government, I thank all those who are retiring as councillors for their public service.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on social justice, housing and local government. There will be a brief pause before we begin questions on the next portfolio.

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture. Any member who wishes to request a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button or enter R in the chat function during the relevant question. Succinct questions and answers would help to allow me to take all the questions in the *Business Bulletin*.

People with no Recourse to Public Funds (Financial Support)

1. **Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the

constitution secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding support for people with no recourse to public funds to access financial support. (S6O-01038)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities are working to deliver our joint strategy, “Ending Destitution Together: A Strategy to Improve Support for People with No Recourse to Public Funds Living in Scotland 2021-2024”, which was published in March 2021. The strategy aims to improve and strengthen support and provision for people who live in Scotland and have no recourse to public funds.

That pioneering strategy is the first of its kind in the United Kingdom and is being delivered in partnership with third sector public services and local authorities over the next two years. The Scottish Government is providing £250,000 to support a Scottish crisis fund, which is co-ordinated by the British Red Cross, up to June 2022. The fund provides grants to people who are facing destitution and experiencing barriers to accessing support.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Over the past six months, hundreds of people who have no recourse to public funds have been supported with emergency cash through the Scottish crisis fund, which is delivered by the British Red Cross. The cabinet secretary will be aware that the fund is a pilot.

The work of a number of charities that support refugees and asylum seekers who are at risk of destitution is welcome, but getting money to people is one of the most effective ways of providing short-term help. Does the cabinet secretary agree that cash payments must be at the heart of efforts to tackle destitution? Will she commit to expanding the reach of the Scottish crisis fund, to ensure that that lifeline can reach everyone, including Ukrainians who are currently on seasonal work visas and are at risk of being made destitute?

Shona Robison: Pam Duncan-Glancy makes important points about the Scottish crisis fund, which was important not just in providing emergency grants but in capturing data to improve our understanding of where and why destitution occurs, to inform our longer-term approach. The Scottish Government will review the data that the British Red Cross provides, to inform the next steps, and I will be happy to write to Pam Duncan-Glancy with a further update.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Will the Scottish Government set out what action it and COSLA are taking via the strategic migration

partnership to safeguard the mental health and wellbeing of people who have no recourse to public funds?

Shona Robison: The ending destitution together strategy includes an action to “improve access to mental health services for” people with no recourse to public funds, “by working to better understand the barriers and to collectively agree the practical actions that can be taken”.

The Scottish Government provided funding of £223,000 to Simon Community Scotland and Safe in Scotland in 2021-22, to boost the direct practical support that those organisations provide in meeting the mental wellbeing needs of people with no recourse to public funds in Glasgow and Edinburgh, many of whom have post-traumatic stress disorder or similar conditions that are related to the reasons that led them to leave their home countries.

French Presidential Election

2. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask what assessment the Scottish Government has made of the potential impact on Scotland of the outcome of the French presidential election. (S6O-01039)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I take the opportunity to repeat the congratulations of the Scottish Government—and, no doubt, those of members from all across this Parliament—on the re-election of President Emmanuel Macron for a second term.

The result creates an opportunity for the Scottish Government, particularly through our office in Paris, to continue our collaborative work with the French Government on shared issues such as culture, climate change, biodiversity and human rights. It also presents an opportunity to reaffirm our shared and strongly held European values.

Elena Whitham: Voters in France recently joined voters in a number of European countries in rejecting the far right, with their dismissal of Marine Le Pen at the ballot box. What assurances can the cabinet secretary give that Scotland’s politics will also remain internationalist and free of hate?

Angus Robertson: The Scottish Government’s approach to international engagement is built on the same values of fairness and inclusion as guide our policies at home. Our international activities and domestic priorities are mutually reinforcing.

By offering our expertise and making a constructive contribution to addressing global challenges, we can continue to promote Scotland

as a good global citizen. At the same time, our international work and engagement inform the achievement of our domestic objectives—for instance, by advancing a just transition to a net zero nature-positive economy.

Energy Efficiency Measures (Cultural and Heritage Buildings)

3. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the culture minister has had with the minister for zero carbon buildings regarding work to install energy efficiency measures in cultural and heritage buildings. (S6O-01040)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government is working with stakeholders, including Historic Environment Scotland, to develop approaches and solutions that will decarbonise Scotland's historic buildings and places while respecting their special characteristics.

Although I have not met with Mr Harvie in relation to this issue specifically, the Scottish ministers take collective responsibility for all decisions that are reached by the Scottish Government, and will continue to do so. That includes our commitment that all buildings reach a good level of energy efficiency, where it is technically feasible and cost effective, by 2033.

Maurice Golden: Evidence that has been taken at committee points to the fact that there has been no assessment of the costs of retrofitting buildings. Will the Scottish Government commit to supporting the cultural and heritage sector in making such an assessment?

Neil Gray: As I have just outlined, the Scottish Government has a commitment that all buildings reach a good level of energy efficiency, where it is technically feasible and cost effective, by 2033.

I know that Historic Environment Scotland and others are doing a fantastic amount of work. I recently visited the Engine Shed in Stirling, which provides a huge amount of research and training support for people who carry out work on our historic buildings. I also visited Holyrood lodge, which is just around the corner from here, where we can see some such retrofitting work. I encourage Mr Golden to visit both places so that he can see the work that is going on to encourage the work in this space.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): In Edinburgh, we have many historic buildings and sites that are faced with the twin impacts of Covid and rocketing energy prices. What additional funding to mitigate the impact of climate change and to install energy efficiency measures will be given by the Scottish

Government to ensure that those buildings are kept fit for purpose in the future?

Neil Gray: The Scottish Government supports historic buildings and monuments through the work of our lead public body, Historic Environment Scotland. That includes providing £14.5 million annually for grant schemes that enable repair and revitalisation of the historic environment.

We are also currently providing substantial free advice and offering targeted support to our small and medium-sized enterprises to increase uptake of energy efficiency measures and zero emissions heating through the Business Energy Scotland support service, which is managed by the Energy Saving Trust. If Sarah Boyack wishes to raise issues in relation to specific buildings that she is concerned about, I would be happy to see that information in writing and to respond appropriately.

Historic Environment Scotland (Climate Change)

4. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting Historic Environment Scotland to deliver its inspection programme, and related remedial works, on the condition of, and impact of climate change on, heritage sites. (S6O-01041)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): In the current financial year, the Scottish Government will provide £70.1 million to support Historic Environment Scotland. We are maintaining our enhanced support, given the impact of the pandemic on its commercial income. Its inspection programme—which is designed to assess the condition of, and the impact of climate change on, some of Scotland's most significant heritage sites—is already under way. I continue to engage regularly with it to discuss the progress of those inspections and the current and future outlook for our heritage sites.

Claire Baker: The minister will know that a number of heritage sites are currently closed across my region, which is Mid Scotland and Fife. Those castles and other sites are vital for attracting visitors and tourists, not least due to our “Outlander” connection. How is the minister supporting Historic Environment Scotland to progress the surveys quickly?

Also, I imagine that there will, at the end of the process, be quite a large price tag on the remedial work. The minister spoke about £14 million a year and about £70 million going to HES. Will that cover the cost of the anticipated remedial work? What discussions is the minister having with HES to prepare for the funding that will be required?

Neil Gray: Claire Baker is fortunate in that there are, in the region that she represents, 17 sites of interest. I am sure that she would welcome the opportunity to visit some of those sites with HES to see the work that is being progressed.

The closures and access restrictions are regrettable but necessary. I am sure that members will appreciate that health and safety must remain the top priority. By restricting access, HES is making sure that it does not expose visitors or HES colleagues to possible risks. I continue to discuss the closures and restrictions regularly with HES, and I will continue to impress on it the need for its communications plan to provide clarity and consistency for sector stakeholders and the public, as we approach the summer visiting season.

In relation to finances, the inspection programme is on-going. HES is working hard at all its properties to uncover the extent of the issues that are faced. We will thereafter make a full assessment of costs.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): I thank the minister for accompanying me on a recent site visit, hosted by Historic Environment Scotland, to Linlithgow palace in my constituency, to hear about and see the extent of the high-level masonry repairs that are required to ensure safe and, possibly, phased reopening of Linlithgow palace, which was the birthplace of Mary, Queen of Scots.

Tourism and businesses in the town need the palace to reopen in order to attract trade. Can the minister commit to prioritising the timescales and funding that are needed to ensure that Linlithgow palace opens safely and timeously?

Neil Gray: Yes, of course. I thank Fiona Hyslop for her invitation and for allowing me the opportunity to see in March the condition of Linlithgow palace in a close inspection. The risk that falling masonry poses to visitors and staff brought home to both of us the impact of accelerating climate change on our historic environment. I encourage members who have properties in their region or constituency that are in care and are affected by access restrictions, to arrange a site visit with Historic Environment Scotland and to speak to its conservation experts.

Access restrictions remain unfortunate and frustrating for us all, but there are compelling reasons why they are necessary, at this time. I am keen that the inspection surveys be carried out as quickly as possible, in order that we can re-establish visitor access to our precious historic sites.

Cultural and Heritage Institutions (Glasgow City Centre)

5. Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what work it is doing to

support the revival of cultural and heritage institutions in Glasgow city centre, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. (S6O-01042)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): Over the course of the pandemic, the Scottish Government has announced £256 million of support to the culture, creative, heritage and events sectors. That includes a £20.8 million fund administered by Creative Scotland to support cultural organisations as a result of the omicron restrictions. Creative Scotland will publish the recipients of that fund shortly. Three Glasgow based culture and heritage organisations received funding under Historic Environment Scotland's historic environment recovery fund, totalling £88,900. The Scottish Government has contributed more than £7.5 million to the refurbishment of the Burrell Collection. Discussions are going on regarding the Scottish Government's support towards the refurbishment of the Citizens Theatre.

Annie Wells: Cultural and heritage institutions will play a vital part in attracting people back to the Glasgow city centre. However, like many other organisations, they face a business rates cliff edge at the end of June. Will the Scottish Government consider the strategic use of rates relief to support those institutions, as has been called for by a number of leading arts organisations?

Neil Gray: I am sure that Annie Wells will be familiar with the fact that the Scottish Government has already funded the most competitive rates regime in the United Kingdom, and that it has gone over and above the UK Government's scheme in providing support to businesses and ratepayers across Scotland. If she has a particular proposal that she would like to offer, then I and my Government colleagues would be happy to hear it, in order to ensure that we are providing all necessary support to the institutions that she, and I, hope will recover as quickly as possible—not just from an economic perspective, but also a wellbeing perspective.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): It is reassuring to hear about the support that is available for cultural institutions, but it is also worth remembering that freelancers remain a vital element of Scotland's cultural sector. Can the minister provide any update on the hardship fund for creative freelancers?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The supplementary was a wee bit wider than the question, but perhaps the minister could deal briefly with the question that was raised.

Neil Gray: Gillian Martin raises an important area. I appreciate that freelancers have been

particularly affected by Covid-19 measures. Most recently, the Scottish Government has provided more than £10 million to support freelancers in the form of two funds that are administered by Creative Scotland. The cancellation fund for creative freelancers made awards totalling £2.9 million, and the hardship fund for creative freelancers made awards totalling over £7.5 million. The list of those recipients will be published shortly by Creative Scotland.

Immigration Powers

6. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last held talks with the United Kingdom Government to discuss devolving immigration powers to Scotland. (S6O-01043)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): In our January 2020 white paper, we clearly set out how devolution of migration powers would work. In February, I wrote a joint letter with my Welsh and Northern Irish counterparts to the United Kingdom Minister for Safe and Legal Migration calling for immediate changes to the immigration system and for regular engagement. On 28 April—last week—I met the UK minister to discuss a range of migration issues. Despite that, there has been no positive response from the UK Government. Therefore, it is clear that only through independence and the restoration of freedom of movement can we properly tackle Scotland's population challenges.

Rona Mackay: I thank the minister for that answer. My office manager and his husband have been asked by a Ukrainian family friend to sponsor their 16-year-old while his parents are trapped in the Donbas region. It has been 10 days since the application was submitted, and they are still waiting on an update from the Home Office. Does the minister agree with me that powers over immigration must be devolved to Scotland, so that we can waive the requirement for visas and allow refugees to get here as quickly and safely as possible?

Neil Gray: I really sympathise with Rona Mackay's constituents in that case. Sadly, people remain at the mercy of the Home Office visa processing arrangements. Rather than properly funding a humanitarian resettlement scheme, the homes for Ukraine and family schemes are characterised by significant administrative issues, complex application processes and unacceptable delays for individuals who are forced to flee their homeland. The UK is now in the unenviable position of being the only major European country without a legal route in for unaccompanied children who have no family connection. That

exposes highly vulnerable children to preventable harm.

I raised those points with the UK Minister for Safe and Legal Migration last Thursday and, although Scotland stands ready to assist within the current system, we remain of the view that the UK must follow the example of the European Union and waive visas for Ukrainian refugees.

Ukraine Family Scheme (Funding)

7. David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the discussions that it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the support, including funding for local authorities, for displaced people settling in Scotland under the Ukraine family scheme. (S6O-01044)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and Minister with special responsibility for Refugees from Ukraine (Neil Gray): We continue to raise the need to provide the same level of critical support to all Ukrainians and their families and, crucially, for parity of funding, no matter what sponsorship scheme that person is under. I have raised that repeatedly with the UK Government. I raised it again in a letter to the UK Government Minister for Refugees on 25 April, and followed that up when I met him last week. The Welsh Government's position is exactly the same as ours. I also encourage the UK Government to replicate our supersponsor approach, which will provide greater safeguarding protections.

Those who are uniting with their families need to access health, education and support services, too. Our local authorities want to support people, regardless of the scheme through which they have arrived, but the authorities must receive equality of funding in order to do so.

David Torrance: I thank the minister for that answer. Does he agree with me that UK Government's approach to the crisis in Ukraine has, from the start, been too slow and piecemeal to effectively address the scale of the challenge? Does he also agree that the UK Government must urgently provide the financial aid that Scottish local authorities need to fully implement support programmes for refugees and asylum seekers?

Neil Gray: Yes, I agree. The pace of the UK Government's Ukrainian visa schemes is particularly disappointing and frustrating for hosts and, most importantly, for the displaced people who are desperately seeking somewhere to settle. The bureaucratic administrative system that the UK Government has put in place to respond to a humanitarian crisis is leaving many Ukrainians in perilous situations as they await clearance. Compatible financial support must be made

available to local authorities to support people who come through the family scheme. There should be no in-built discrimination with regard to how displaced people arrive here.

In addition, given the fragility of private sponsorship, we must be prepared to rematch people into alternative accommodation if there is a breakdown in host arrangements. That will also incur additional costs, and we must ensure that appropriate funding is in place to support that. Our local authorities want and need to provide the same level of critical support, regardless of the scheme through which Ukrainians arrive. I have repeatedly urged the UK Government to provide that parity of funding across family and support sponsorship schemes, as has the Welsh Government, and I will continue to do so.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): One problem that we repeatedly hear that refugees are facing—not just Ukrainian but Afghan and Syrian refugees, too—is a lack of translation and interpretation resources, which can be a huge roadblock to settling into the new country. What more can the Scottish Government do to ensure that those resources are available to the refugees we welcome into Scotland?

Neil Gray: I thank Foyso Choudhury for that important question. I am very grateful to the Ukrainian community in Scotland, whose members are stepping up on a voluntary basis to support translation services. I do not have responsibility for the Afghan or Syrian schemes, but I know that the Scottish Government commitment to support people, regardless of where they come from, is clear. If Foyso Choudhury requires further detail on that, I am more than happy to provide it in writing.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Given that the Home Office figures show that only 20 per cent of those who hold visas under the homes for Ukraine scheme have made it to the UK, will the Scottish Government renew its calls to the UK Government to waive visa requirements for all Ukrainian refugees across Scotland and the rest of the UK? Frankly, two out of 10 is just not good enough.

Neil Gray: I absolutely agree with Stephanie Callaghan, and she is right to raise the concern, which I share, that the slow pace of visa processing has meant that there are problems with people getting here. The translation of visas into arrivals is a major concern, and I remain very frustrated at the pace of the UK Government's visa schemes. We now see the consequences of the decision, and reports of hundreds of people abandoning their efforts to come to the UK altogether; however, we know that households across the UK want to welcome displaced Ukrainians to the UK and provide them with a

place of safety in our communities. Last Thursday, I raised those points with the UK Minister for Safe and Legal Migration.

Although Scotland stands ready to assist within the current system, we remain of the view that the UK Government must follow the example of the European Union and waive visas for Ukrainian refugees.

Scottish Government International Offices

8. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work of its international offices. (S6O-01045)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): I would be delighted to do so. Scotland's international network creates domestic opportunities, attracts investment and ultimately benefits the people of Scotland. Our international offices use a range of both qualitative and quantitative indicators across five outcomes. An update on that work was provided to the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee as part of its inquiry into the Scottish Government's international work. I have recently undertaken visits to Ireland, the United States, Canada and Germany, and was supported by our international offices in the respective countries. Those visits have demonstrated all those priorities in action.

Alexander Stewart: Collectively, the Scottish Government's international offices have a budget of nearly £8 million of taxpayers' money. However, it was noted in the recent report by the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee that, up until now, reports on their activities have only been available in response to freedom of information requests. Will the cabinet secretary commit to publishing an annual report on the work of those offices, so that future activities undergo the proper scrutiny by the Parliament?

Angus Robertson: I urge Alexander Stewart and all other colleagues who have an interest in this area to take every opportunity to recognise the excellent work that is being undertaken on behalf of us all by representatives in Scotland's offices around the world. As I noted during my committee appearance, I was pleased to see the cross-party enthusiasm for and consensus on the excellent job that Scotland's international offices do day to day.

We will respond to the committee's report in due course, and I look forward to Alexander Stewart's possible participation in the debate next week on the matter. On his particular point, we are committed to a continuous process to ensure that the work that is undertaken by our international

network is measurable, transparent and available to the public.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary elaborate on the ways in which the new Copenhagen office will assist the Scottish Government's implementation of the renewed Nordic-Baltic policy statement and promote relationships with the countries in that region?

Angus Robertson: That is an excellent question. Our new Copenhagen office will seek to increase Scotland's economic and cultural visibility in the Nordic regions by promoting co-operation around shared challenges and seizing the commercial opportunities that come with it. For instance, the office will build on the extensive partnerships between Scotland and Nordic countries around energy transition, decarbonisation and renewable technologies. It will also expand existing co-operation on digitalisation, the blue economy and the creative industries.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time on constitution, external affairs and culture. I will allow a short pause to allow front bench teams to switch positions if they wish to do so.

National Walking Month

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-04256, in the name of Maree Todd, on walking: improving health and strengthening communities. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

16:44

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): It is my pleasure to open today's debate to celebrate national walking month and to discuss how walking and wheeling play a huge role in improving the health and wellbeing of the Scottish people.

This Government is committed to delivering a more active nation. We have pledged to double the investment across sport and active living by the end of this session of Parliament, and we have made record levels of investment in active travel to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to take part. Walking and wheeling is central to our vision.

Being active really is the best medicine. It helps to prevent many illnesses and diseases, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and a number of cancers. In addition, it benefits our mental health and helps us to maintain a healthy weight.

Walking and wheeling are the easiest and most accessible forms of physical activity for most people. However, there are loads of pressures in society that lead us towards less active lifestyles and many Western European countries are seeing a decline in activity levels. The good news is that we in Scotland are bucking the trend. We have generally maintained the overall proportion of people who meet physical activity guidelines, and we have seen an increase in the number of people participating in recreational walking from 59 per cent in 2012 to 68 per cent in 2019.

The impact of the pandemic on those trends is still to be fully understood, but it seems clear that the overall picture is of a greater impact on those who are already facing barriers to participation. For example, we know that deconditioning among older people has the potential to cause long-term issues around increased frailty.

We are determined to focus even more strongly on the need to address inequalities in a recovery from the pandemic. Our additional investment in active living will target health inequalities across the spectrum of sport and physical activity. For walking and wheeling, we have increased our financial support for Paths for All, which will increase the number of health walk projects in Scotland—an activity with disadvantaged groups

and communities—as well as leading a refresh of the national walking strategy.

Alongside that investment, the active travel budget will increase to £320 million by 2024-25, accelerating progress towards our ambitions for Scotland to be an active nation and our commitment to reduce car kilometres.

Those strategic ambitions become reality on the ground through the efforts of a huge number of highly motivated and skilled people across Scotland, who are helping to enable and support people to be more active more often in schools, workplaces and communities.

It is always a great pleasure to celebrate the hard work and innovation that the people of this country are capable of. There is no better example than the daily mile. That idea, which was born in Scotland, has spread throughout the world.

Established in 2012 as a school-based programme, the aim of the daily mile is clear: run, jog or wheel in the fresh air with friends for 15 minutes a day, a minimum of three times a week. Doing so has been proven to improve the physical, social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing of our children, regardless of age, ability or personal circumstances. One recent study has also suggested that it helps with children's memory and cognition, so doing the daily mile has made them more clever.

I am sure that all members know that I am a huge advocate of the daily mile and that I always prioritise my day to allow myself the time and space to get outdoors and exercise in the fresh air. I thoroughly recommend that to everyone. Only last week, I attended the daily mile's 10th birthday event in Dundee, where I participated alongside almost 800 schoolchildren in completing the mile to celebrate its evolution and the positive impact that it has had over the past decade.

With more than 164,000 children and young people participating in the daily mile currently, from more than 900 schools across all 32 local authorities, we are leading the way to improving the health and wellbeing of our future generations. We are on track to becoming the first daily mile nation in the world by the end of 2022.

We often have particular advantages in Scotland when encouraging people to walk and wheel more. We have a truly unique natural environment, which can be a huge asset to our health and wellbeing. We want to ensure that that is as accessible as it can be. Our green health partnership programme is supporting and encouraging people to be more engaged with nature and the outdoors.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I agree with the minister that going for a

walk is probably one the greatest things that someone can do. In 2005, local authorities were committing £16.5 million a year to help maintain outdoor access facilities and provide rangers. That has now dropped to £11 million, and five local authorities have nothing at all within their budgets for outdoor access. Does the minister not think that it would be a good idea for local authorities to buy into this in the same way that the Scottish Government does? Will she give them the funds to do so?

Maree Todd: Certainly, my party has made commitments to increasing access to participation in physical activity and I am absolutely keen to support anything that I can in central Government so that all of our local authorities—newly elected tomorrow—make progress on that issue.

In central Government, we are doubling the budget on sport and physical activity over the course of this parliamentary session. Big increases are coming in terms of investment in active transport, and I think that that will make a fundamental difference.

I have recently approved further funding for the green health partnership programme, which supports and encourages people to be more engaged with the outdoors and with nature. I am very keen that that programme continues the great work that is taking place. I saw some of it for myself during a recent visit to the Highland green health partnership, where the community woodland in Evanton, near Dingwall, is being used for a whole range of activities, including buggy walks, health walks and forest bathing. It is wonderful. Using local assets in that way can bring a community together. It makes connections between generations and develops a common sense of belonging. There is a clear social benefit as well as physical and mental health benefits.

The Government is prioritising the importance of investment in walking and wheeling. We recognise that that is central to our vision of a more active Scotland because of all the benefits that it brings to our health and our wellbeing and because it strengthens communities. We are always open to ideas on how we can continue to improve our approach, and I look forward to a constructive discussion about what more we can all do to encourage and support people to walk and wheel more often.

I propose that the Parliament support the motion and that we commit to working together to deliver a healthier and more active Scotland, up to and beyond 2030.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises National Walking Month and agrees that everyday walking and wheeling play a huge role in improving the health and wellbeing of people in

Scotland; notes that the Scottish Government is committed to inclusive opportunities for everyone to walk and wheel, helping to connect and strengthen communities, reduce some of Scotland's biggest health inequalities and reduce pressure on the NHS, and further notes that the Scottish Government is committed to doubling investment across sport and active living, allocating record levels of investment to active travel, working with partners to reduce barriers to walking and wheeling and helping to make these the default choice for short journeys, leisure, socialising or as part of longer public transport journeys in Scotland, which will also contribute to Scotland's journey to net zero.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I call on Paul O'Kane to speak to and move amendment S6M-04256.1. You have around five minutes, Mr O'Kane.

16:52

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): This debate is extremely important as we mark national walking month. We should take the time to thank all the organisations that have engaged with and briefed us ahead of today's debate, in particular Paths for All, sportscotland and the Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society. Their engagement in the debate and more widely on the issue of walking across Scotland is hugely important and they make a vast contribution.

We also start with a degree of consensus on the vital importance of getting out and walking or wheeling, and on the improvements that that simple activity can make to our physical and mental health and wellbeing. I am sure that, like me, members across the chamber rediscovered what it is to take time to walk or wheel during the lockdown periods of the past two years. Many people found huge benefit from going out for that daily walk or wheel, whether in our beautiful countryside, beside our lochs and mountains, in our urban parks or along canals. In many ways, people rediscovered the joy of what was around them and saw huge benefits for their health and wellbeing.

We know from evidence that a 20-minute walk can reduce the risk of a number of preventable health conditions, including certain cancers, depression, heart disease and type II diabetes. Supporting people to be physically active is vital to our public health mission in Scotland and active travel is vital to reducing health inequalities, meeting our climate targets and relieving pressure on the national health service. It is not just walking, of course; associated activities such as running and cycling also have an impact and must be supported.

The national walking strategy is hugely important for encouraging people to walk. As the strategy was originally launched in 2014, I hope that the minister will say more about its refresh and update, particularly as we recover from Covid-

19 and hope that people sustain that level of activity. There are many strong recommendations in the strategy and it points to the work that we still have to do. Figures from local authorities in 2019 show that the proportion of trips made on foot ranged from 39 per cent in Dundee to just 11 per cent in East Renfrewshire. As I hail from East Renfrewshire, it is clear to me that we need to do more locally and nationally to get those numbers up.

Another key recommendation in the strategy is that there must be

"Better quality walking environments with attractive, well designed and managed built and natural spaces for everyone".

That brings me to the Labour amendment. Although, as I have said, many people in our communities rediscovered walking in the lockdowns, they also discovered that paths are often inaccessible or covered in litter, that too many pavements are cracked and broken, and that too many parks are dark, unlit and unsafe to go to, particularly for women on their own. Councils are struggling to keep up with repairs and it is becoming harder and harder to sustain

"attractive, well designed and managed"

areas for walking, wheeling and cycling.

The truth is that, since 2013, the Scottish Government has cut £6 billion from local authority budgets and, right now, there is an eye-watering outstanding roads repair bill of at least £1.7 billion. That bill has been accumulated under the Government, and it makes already dangerous conditions worse—and that is even before we come to pavements. People will not walk if the infrastructure is not there to support them. Understandably, cash-strapped councils have had to prioritise other issues.

That has had an adverse impact on our most deprived communities and has limited the options for people to get out and take the most cost-effective form of exercise. We on the Labour benches have called for active travel spending to be increased to 10 per cent of the overall transport budget, to give priority to encouraging and enabling people to get out of cars and on to bikes, and to walk more, which will benefit their health and the health of our communities. We have also called for additional measures to improve women's safety, including a pilot of physical space safety audits and providing planners with guidance on how to make communities safer.

That brings me to cycling, which we believe is a key component of the wider active travel agenda and is highlighted in our amendment. In last year's election, the Scottish National Party promised free bikes to all school-age children who cannot afford them. In August 2020, the Greens called for all

children from low-income families to receive a grant towards bikes and helmets to get to school safely. However, 18 months on, only 238 bikes have been given out, and the Government does not even have the statistics on how many children are using those pilot schemes.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is about to conclude.

Paul O’Kane: I am in my last seconds.

That is a case of something perhaps looking good in a leaflet but not being delivered in reality.

Walking, wheeling and active travel are paramount for our health as a nation and our sense of wellbeing. However, we must do more to encourage more people to get out and about and to get active, particularly in our most deprived communities, and further cuts to local government services and infrastructure will hinder, rather than help with that.

I move amendment S6M-04256.1, to insert at end:

“; recognises that wider cuts to local authority services hamper active travel and the implementation of a gendered approach to safety; considers that improvements to roads and pavements are necessary to improve levels of walking and wheeling, particularly in more deprived areas, and calls again on the Scottish Government to provide access to a bike for every child who cannot afford one by the end of 2022.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Brian Whittle joins us remotely.

16:57

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I apologise to members for not being in the chamber in person. I am delighted to open this debate for the Scottish Conservatives. I, too, thank the many organisations that took the time to send in briefing documents for the debate.

As members would expect, I am a great supporter of any form of physical activity, and I call walking the ultimate low-entry option for increasing physical activity, or even just for beginning the journey to a healthier lifestyle. By that, I mean that the financial cost of participation is very low, and being physically active is one of the best ways of ensuring good physical and mental health. Although it cannot completely negate the possibility of becoming unwell, physical activity can help to stack the cards in our favour and of course help with recovery from illness. Activity can help to prevent heart disease, strokes, diabetes, some cancers and the scourge of obesity, and it reduces the risk of developing depression. The sportscotland briefing highlighted an interesting

statistic from the World Health Organization, which has stated that physical inactivity is now “the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality”.

Walking is a key activity in this battle. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Scotland was the unhealthiest nation in Europe, with the lowest life expectancy. Health inequalities were significant and increasing, and that has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Against that backdrop, it is a worry that the health of the nation has taken a significant downturn during the pandemic, as people’s ability to access physical activity has been greatly reduced.

Obviously, walking activities include rambling and backpacking. We are rightly proud of our incredibly beautiful countryside where those activities can occur, and walking tourism is worth an estimated £1.3 billion to the economy.

However, those activities are not available to all, which is why we will support Labour’s amendment. We need to ensure that activities are available to all, irrespective of background or personal circumstances. There needs to be investment in improving access to organised walking football and walking netball, for example, and in providing safe walking access to the natural environment. It is true that the SNP Government’s cuts to local councils will hamper that work—that is without doubt. Such cuts will result in a false economy. Investment in those kinds of venture will undoubtedly remove costs from another page in the ledger. Failure to provide access to activity will deliver the opposite, and I would rather investment be made further upstream to prevent the cost to our health services down the track.

With regard to people who want to take the opportunity to cycle to work, I highlighted in the previous parliamentary session that there are many more safe cycle paths for those who live in more affluent areas than there are for those who live in more deprived areas according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. Of course, people can cycle to work only if they happen to own a bike, and it is less likely that a bike will be available to children from more deprived areas according to the SIMD. That is why the roll-out—or, to be more accurate, the lack of roll-out—of the Government’s bike scheme is having little impact.

I have talked about the supporting third sector organisations such as Cycle Station in my area, which refurbishes and recycles bikes and sells them on for a fraction of the cost of a new bike. Last year, it managed to sell more than 600 bikes in the local community.

I would like to see the development of safe cycle routes to school, which we—or at least those who happen to be in my generation—all took for granted in our school days. I am not one for

saying, “In my day”, but that is an example of looking back to look forward. How do we get our children walking and cycling to school for the benefit of not only their health but the environment and air quality around schools?

An example of good practice is the park and stride initiative in my area, in which parents drop off their children a distance from the school and the children are supervised by teachers as they walk the remaining distance to school. That also ensures that air quality around the schools is significantly improved.

As the minister highlighted, the daily mile, which was thought up by a Stirling teacher, is a fantastic initiative—even if children choose to walk, rather than run, it. It has really taken off, and we should all get behind it.

Outdoor learning is another key initiative that needs investment. My colleague Liz Smith is developing a member’s bill to ensure that all pupils have the opportunity to access such learning, and I encourage the Scottish Government to back the bill and invest in outdoor learning.

National walking month gives us the opportunity to highlight the great physical and mental benefits of physical activity and the challenges that we face in enabling and encouraging Scots to take part in activity for the sake of their physical and mental health. Although we are right to be proud of Scotland’s natural beauty when walking and cycling in the countryside, we certainly cannot pat ourselves on the back, given the health challenges that remain in Scotland, the huge inequality in access to physical activity and the subsequent health inequalities that stubbornly exist and are growing.

I ask the Scottish Government to accept those challenges and to provide long-term planning and investment that go way beyond any parliamentary session. Planning and investment have consistently been missing from any Government plans. As people say, you can achieve anything as long as you do not mind who gets the credit. The fruits of such investment and planning will certainly not lead to the credit for the outcomes residing in this parliamentary session and with its members, but surely a long-term plan to improve the health of our nation is worth putting political differences aside and working together for better outcomes for Scotland. Outcomes are all that matter; warm words will not make one iota of a difference.

17:03

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Remember the days during the first lockdown when we were limited to 30-minute walks outside our homes, which genuinely felt like the highlight of the day? Everything that we had ever taken for

granted—precious time in the fresh air and with nature—was now limited but ultimately cherished.

As somebody who represents a rural constituency, I have nature and green space all around me, but I am acutely aware that people in urban areas were not quite so fortunate. That is one reason why investment in green spaces should be a priority for those who are in charge of planning in urban areas.

It is well understood that access to green space and nature is a fundamental contributor to our wellbeing, as the minister said in her opening speech. Any community that does not have that access is faced with a fundamental health inequality.

I will use my remaining time to mention three groups in my constituency. Walking and wheeling is essential to the mental and physical wellbeing of those who work with them. The first is PawPalz in Ellon, which was started by Toby McKillop for men who had difficulties with their mental health or who were in recovery from drug and alcohol problem usage. As the name suggests, it was also for their dogs. During the first lockdown, Toby got in touch with me because he was concerned that he would have to stop the group due to restrictions, and he was worried about the impact that that would have on the many men for whom the group is an essential part of their recovery and mental wellbeing.

I worked with the police at Ellon police station who were excellent in reassuring Toby and the PawPalz and gave advice to the group on how they could continue to operate safely. The group operated throughout those difficult periods. It continued to meet and has expanded its network of similar groups for women in the area.

I also want to mention the work of Balmedie Beach Wheelchairs, which is run by volunteers from the Belhelvie Community Trust who give free access to people who need specialist wheelchairs to access Balmedie beach, which is beautiful but often difficult for people who have mobility issues to access. They have a range of wheelchairs available so that people can still enjoy one of Scotland’s most beautiful beaches.

I also want to mention the walking group of the CLAN Cancer Support centre in Inverurie. The group is open to anyone whose life has been affected by cancer, whether they are undergoing treatment, recovering from the disease or are a friend or family member of someone who is living with cancer or who has sadly lost their life. The friendship and support that the walking group offers is an indication of the therapeutic benefit of getting outside and also of spending time with people who have a shared experience.

The value of walking comes up a lot in the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, not only from a physical exercise point of view but from social prescribing perspective. Referrals to walking or wheeling groups as a type of complementary treatment is becoming more accepted and recognised as a way of improving physical fitness and mental wellbeing, and of combating social isolation.

The roll-out of community link workers into general practices across Scotland in terms of accessing opportunities for walking, wheeling and sometimes even accompanying individuals to that awkward first date can literally be a life saver.

During the last parliamentary session, I said how much I cherish my walk into the Parliament every day. Having had no option but to drive with all the other people into Aberdeen city for 25 years has made me extremely grateful for that opportunity, and I am convinced that my mental health is all the better for me taking my twice-daily walk across Holyrood park while admiring the community's many dogs.

If we all continue to take the half-hour walk that we cherished in 2020, what would the impact be on our wellbeing as a nation? It would be significant, I am sure.

17:07

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate in recognition of national walking month. We have had a number of briefs for today's debate that show evidence of all the massive advantages and health benefits of regular exercise, and walking is one of the easiest and most relaxing forms of exercise.

As Ramblers Scotland say, walking also helps to prevent many illnesses and diseases. It also points out its economic function through tourism.

Key to this debate is how we as politicians encourage people to walk more and what actions we can take to support them to do so. Government has a role to play, but first I want to highlight some of the good practice out there where people are supporting others and coming together to make things happen.

The Scottish women's walking group on Facebook is an excellent example of a group providing support, friendship and motivation and of helping others to overcome isolation. It also provides general guidance, as well as a platform for organising group walks. There are many groups like that one the length and breadth of the country, run by volunteers, and I believe that the impact they have is immense. Therefore, we need to talk to and listen to those groups and their members, as they have more first-hand

experience and expertise than many in the chamber.

There are many things that we as policy makers can do to support those groups. I believe that local authorities are key to providing new infrastructure and maintaining existing infrastructure. Poorly maintained paths, walkways and the state of pavements are all important, as is getting people out of their cars, which requires better public transport alongside access to safe and well-maintained routes.

I am afraid that the persistent cuts to council budgets have had a devastating impact on all that. Although it is fine to speak in the motion about doubling funding, it will not make up for the impact of the cuts to local councils.

I was surprised to read from the Paths for All briefing that the Scottish household survey revealed that, among younger people, walking as a physical activity dropped dramatically in the 20 per cent most deprived areas to just 66 per cent compared to 89 per cent in the 20 per cent least deprived areas. In those deprived areas, 29 per cent of adults did not participate in any kind of physical activity. Those are the kinds of challenges facing Government at every level. If we are to improve the amount of walking in Scotland and, indeed, the level of health, social prescribing to get the right support to local community groups will be key. We can be better at joined-up thinking and working.

I challenge ministers to say how we are going to do that. How do we ensure that Government is joined up? For example, social prescribing has been talked about, but how are we going to move towards working with general practitioners and NHS boards and talk about what social prescribing means? How can the Government support health boards, GPs and health practices to deliver? Those are the kinds of steps that we have to take.

I want to finish where I started. I have talked to constituents who tell me that some of those social media groups are their lifelines. They provide support, bring people together and get people working together. Let us also talk to them and work with them for a healthier Scotland.

17:11

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): For our own health and wellbeing, not to mention for the good of the planet, we all need to give walking and wheeling greater priority in our lives. How each of us buys into the aspirations of national walking month in the Government motion will differ from person to person.

As a former transport minister, I have been particularly keen to rise to the 20 per cent cut in

car kilometres challenge. I found that having days when the car sits parked up is easy, as is reducing the number of avoidable vehicle journeys. Cutting the car kilometres in favour of walking, particularly as an MSP for a rural constituency, is, to be honest, more difficult. For me, it is fair to say that it is still a work in progress.

As far as walking more per se is concerned, being gifted a step-counting watch by my daughter a year past January has proved to be significant motivation. Some might say that I have become obsessed; I will leave it to others to judge. However, if it assists my colleagues in coming to a conclusion, I will share the following: by election day last year, my average daily step count was sitting at 16,500, albeit that it dropped off a bit after the end of the campaign to an average for the year of 13,150, and for 2022, it stands at 14,458—not that I am counting, you understand.

Walking to and from Parliament when possible contributes to me cutting down on my use of the lifts in this place, and it all helps, as does election campaigning. Although I support others doing it, I cannot claim to be an avid walker of distance for recreational or exercise purposes, unless we can count pounding the golf course.

Mark Twain once famously described golf as “a good walk spoiled”, and I tend to view lengthy walks as a dull substitute for hitting a wee white ball around a golf course. I am one of those people who will spend three and a half hours walking the golf course in a heartbeat but who would not dream of committing a third of that time to walking just for the sake of it.

I will not be alone in finding my own way of buying into the health and wellbeing ask that is to be made of us all here. I urge that we recognise and respect the fact that different people will get walking in different ways.

It is absolutely right that we promote walking for the health and climate reasons that we all know about. However, we should also acknowledge that people will come at this from entirely individual perspectives. Golfers, particularly older male golfers—older than me, for the record—are a case in point. Many in their late 60s or 70s would not dream of going for a walk, as such. In fact, they would not think that they were capable of walking distances. However, once, twice, maybe three times a week, they will head for the golf course where, depending on how much time they spend searching the rough for balls, they might clock up 11,500 steps, or 5 miles, without noticing it. As a result, they stay fit and active and receive the multitude of benefits that that brings.

Having made clear what I freely admit is a vested interest, I want to conclude by focusing briefly on a fundamental flaw in the Labour

amendment. It would be impossible to give a bike to every child who requires one by the end of 2022, not because the will is not there or because the pilot projects will not report before August, but because there has been—and, I believe, still is, to an extent—a global shortage of bikes and bike parts. Therefore, the amendment’s concluding demand cannot be met. That being the case, the amendment should be rejected.

I ask members to support the Government’s motion but to oppose the amendment.

17:15

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):

The benefits that walking and wheeling in the outdoors can have for mental and physical health are widely recognised. That was undoubtedly impressed on all of us during the pandemic, when we were not able to exercise and explore the outdoors as we usually would.

In that regard, it is worth noting that we are very fortunate to have the amount of green space that we have in Scotland and that, because of the passing of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, we have the right of access to most land and inland water. It is vital that those rights are protected and upheld so that everyone can continue to benefit from Scotland’s rich natural environment.

I was proud that, as part of the Bute house agreement between the Greens and the Scottish Government, it was announced that there would be at least one new national park in Scotland, as one of the many ways in which we recognise the important part that experiencing, and exercising in, nature plays in people’s wellbeing.

People who spend quality time walking and wheeling in nature are happier and more likely to care about the local environment and climate change. Walking can also widen access to sport. Many sporting bodies have created walking versions of their sports, such as walking football, to encourage more people to take part, regardless of their age and fitness level. That can help to tackle social isolation, as well as helping people to get or stay active.

Recent data published in the Scottish household survey has shown that walking has grown in popularity—that is not shown only by Graeme Dey’s obsession with his Fitbit. It is encouraging that the survey found that 89 per cent of respondents aged 16 to 24 were likely to take part in walking as a recreational activity. Of those who were surveyed who had a disability, 61 per cent regarded walking or wheeling as their most common activity.

However, the survey also revealed stark differences with regard to areas of deprivation. It found that physical activity dropped by 20 per cent to 66 per cent in the most deprived areas, compared with 89 per cent in the least deprived areas. That must give us pause to reflect and ensure that public spaces and the natural environment are welcoming to all.

As I have said, the mental and physical health benefits of walking and wheeling outside are well known. Reflecting the point that Gillian Martin made, meeting many of the dogs around Callendar park in Falkirk undoubtedly boosts my mental health, but if people do not have a space or route nearby where they can walk or wheel while feeling safe and free from heavy traffic, pollution and blocked pavements, they will simply not do it. We have much work to do before Scotland's streets are truly accessible.

The World Health Organization states that physical inactivity is the fourth leading risk factor in global mortality. Walking and wheeling might not be the silver bullet to fix poor health outcomes, but they can make an important contribution to maintaining and even improving health across the nation, and the removal of barriers must be prioritised.

During the pandemic, the importance of walking and other active travel infrastructure became clear to many of us. The continuation of measures such as the spaces for people scheme represents recognition that active travel, including wheeling and walking, must be an accessible option as part of our everyday lives. Such schemes simultaneously promote active travel and reduce our impact on the environment through having fewer polluting cars on the road, and can minimise congestion across Scotland's towns and cities when they are applied well.

Supporting the development of 20-minute neighbourhoods will also reduce the need to travel and will ensure that people can walk, wheel or cycle to most places that they need to go to.

Going forward, we must prioritise measures such as reallocating road space to people and supporting the creation of low-traffic neighbourhoods, so that walking, wheeling and cycling are accessible, practical and significantly safer. Programmes such as the safe to school initiatives, which aim to ensure that every child who lives within 2 miles from their school is able to walk, wheel or cycle there safely, could be a catalyst for ingraining more walking and wheeling in the everyday lives of Scotland's children.

In national walking month, it is important that we acknowledge and celebrate the many benefits that walking and wheeling can have for our mental, social and physical health, because there are

many such benefits, but we must also renew our efforts to ensure that those benefits are felt by everyone across Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: Karen Adam is the final speaker in the open debate.

17:20

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): As previous speakers have stated, the pandemic restrictions certainly highlighted the desire for human beings to connect, not just with each other but with our nature and surroundings. A path that we just used to take to get from A to B became much more than a route; it became a space for contemplation. For once, we did not just put one foot in front of the other; we looked up and around. We breathed in the air and noticed seasonal changes in a more pronounced way than before. We saw signs of wildlife and appreciated what we had perhaps taken for granted, all because we were forced to slow down and confine ourselves, and to see what we had around us—a connection to place.

Many people in the professional field of mental health speak about the disconnect that occurs during poor mental health moments. The connection not just to people but to place can have enormous benefits in reconnecting and grounding us. Many of us might be familiar with the technique to calm down during anxiety attacks: the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 method. That involves five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste. That is a fantastic way for anyone to connect while out walking.

There is one thing that we can certainly taste when walking by the coastline: the salty sea air. For those of us who live around the coast, such as in my constituency of Banffshire and Buchan Coast, our outdoor space became more important than ever over the past two years. This enhanced relationship is set to continue, motivated by those triggers, with a real connection.

I will share a practical illustration of how walking coastal trails—the paths that line our beautiful coastlines—can be a hook for motivating and empowering local communities. In my constituency, one such project that has been developed is the coast Aberdeenshire initiative, which builds on the concept of coastal paths. It is indeed about walking, but it is so much more than that. Running from Logie Head and Cullen to Peterhead, and stretching about 1 mile inland along the north-east coast, coast Aberdeenshire provides support through a dedicated council team to empower local communities, involving joined-up working with council services and specialisms. Council staff have a dedicated officer group, which

facilitates connections, with support for organisations and advice and help with funding applications where appropriate.

All of that encourages community groups to identify a route or a related project, supporting local commitments, and to take ownership in the long term, developing, repairing, maintaining and promoting. Like any aspect of walking, that is ultimately about reconnecting, exploring and understanding. It is also about a local community looking after its history and coastal environment, thus emboldening a sense of community and connectivity. Walking can play a key role in the future survival of our towns and villages, our businesses and our farms and estates, and it can take in wild land and shoreline.

The potential for tourism on our coastline is vast, with visitors coming from near and far. Not only do we get to show off our stunning landscape and shoreline, we have the economic benefits that tourism brings.

As well as the very local connection to place, there was a huge increase, with international travel restrictions, in what many people call a staycation. During my childhood, my granddad called it the “costa del backie”. That was his running joke every summer. With ageing wisdom, he saw what he already had around him. I want to take that wisdom and apply it in a broader sense to my constituency. Oor backies can extend miles beyond our fences.

To finish, I will read a quote made famous by Jack Kerouac. He stated:

“There was nowhere to go but everywhere”.

The Presiding Officer: We now move to the closing speeches.

17:24

Paul O’Kane: I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Labour Party.

I think that we have found consensus in the debate. I believe that, across the Parliament, we are committed to improving and enhancing the uptake of walking across Scotland. We have heard many strong examples, particularly from the lockdown period, of people rediscovering the joy of walking, as I spoke about in my opening speech.

However, we have to be honest about the barriers that exist and the work that is still required to make sure that walking activities are accessible to all, and we offer our amendment in that vein. I note Brian Whittle’s contribution and Edward Mountain’s intervention on the cuts that local authorities have experienced to budgets for place and space. The roles of working co-ordinators, outdoor access officers and countryside rangers

are often the first things to go when there are decisions to be made.

I return to the importance of safety measures for vulnerable people, particularly in urban communities, where parks and canal routes are often dangerous, particularly for women. We have called for additional safety measures to improve women’s safety. In my opening remarks, I spoke about the importance of piloting physical safety space audits, but it goes further than that. We need to provide planners with guidance on how to make communities safer, including on safe walking routes in urban communities and in new estates across Scotland.

Gillian Martin and Gillian Mackay, who are my colleagues on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, made important points about the importance of walking for good mental health. It is good to hear about what is being offered in different parts of the country, and I was particularly taken with the examples that Gillian Martin shared about dogs. I know that Gillian Martin is a dog lover, as am I.

Supporting our third sector in a sustainable way is key in all this, because many third sector organisations are struggling to maintain their services, which are often provided free of charge to the public. My colleague Alex Rowley made some excellent points on that. If we are going to get walking strategies right and encourage a broader uptake of walking, we have to listen to the groups who are supporting walking, day in and day out, across our country. That is about sustainable funding that can help them to expand and grow the services that they offer.

Labour members want to see active travel budgets more widely being put towards assessing and developing safer routes in combination with using the planning system to ensure less car use and make residential areas low-traffic neighbourhoods by reducing speeds and considering volumes of traffic, while maintaining local access for those who need it.

I enjoyed the majority of former minister Graeme Dey’s contribution, although I confess that I am not a golf fan. I particularly enjoyed what he said about the campaign trail and the steps that he is achieving. Perhaps in future elections, Presiding Officer, we should have a competition between members to see who can do the most steps. Given his comments on the shortage of bikes, it would be helpful to know why the free bike pledge has appeared in the manifestos of the SNP and the Green Party. I believe that the pledge did not feature in the coalition agreement, so it would be good to understand: if not now for free bikes and provision of access to bikes, when?

I am rapidly running out of time, so I will conclude. Active travel is vital to improving health inequalities, but proper funding for councils must mean proper funding for the infrastructure that makes walking a reality.

17:28

Brian Whittle: I am delighted to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. It has been a good and consensual debate; we are looking for the same kind of outcomes. The benefits of physical activity have been well explained by members across the chamber, but, as I said in my opening remarks, the debate takes place against the backdrop of Scotland being the unhealthiest nation in Europe and increasing health inequalities. All those things have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

We have talked about how physical activity allows interaction, which is to the benefit of our mental health. We encourage participation in activity and sport not necessarily to produce sportsmen and sportswomen, but to educate through activity and sports. However, as Paul O’Kane alluded in his summation, there are barriers, and they must be accepted and systematically tackled by the Scottish Government.

As I said in my opening remarks, outcomes are all that matter. Waxing lyrical about what the Scottish Government is doing on those issues matters little if the outcomes are not achieved. We need to be creative, and we should not necessarily be prescriptive, because one size does not fit all. The outcomes that we are looking for are continuing improvement in the health of the nation and a reduction in health inequalities. A consistent redistribution of healthcare budgets could improve health outcomes and support our healthcare workers—and a healthier nation means greater productivity for the country.

Alex Rowley’s point about social prescribing was well made. The initiative is crucial and has been discussed for as long as I have been a member of this Parliament, but I do not think that we are any nearer to developing a national strategy. That would require investment in information technology to create a connected system for our GPs to use.

Graeme Dey probably did not realise that I was listening intently to him when he talked about inequalities. He talked about how using wearable tech and playing a game of golf can motivate people to be active—I do both. As for the idea that golf is a good walk wasted, I think that there are two types of person: the people who enjoy a game of golf and the people who are wrong. I would be delighted if Mr Dey fancied a game, because

playing golf is a great way of getting out and being active. Of course, doing that takes money—that is where the inequalities kick in.

Mr Dey also mentioned bike parks. I was looking at the issue the other day and I think that he is right: bike and skate parks are a great way to encourage young people to be physically active, but they require investment.

Physical activity is an outlet for someone who is stressed. I am lucky to have had that tool all my life, and we must ensure that it is available to everyone. That will take investment and political will.

It is time that members across the chamber made investment in physical activity a priority. I am not making a political point when I say, as I did in my opening speech, that we are an increasingly unhealthy country with life expectancy that is way behind where it should be. That is not a political point; we have to accept that that is the case. Only then can we take the steps that are required.

Investment in physical activity is investment in our future. Not investing, or trying to save money in the area, is a false economy. We need to move our investment further upstream, to prevent health issues and health inequalities. Surely it is not beyond the wit of members of this Parliament to come together and consider solutions that would benefit our country.

17:32

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants’ Rights (Patrick Harvie): I thank all the members who have taken part in the debate. I am told that this might be the first time that Parliament has debated walking, specifically. If that is true, it might be because, for most of us, for most of our lives, walking is so natural and casual that it does not need to be discussed. However, the views that members across the chamber have expressed show that the issue needs to be discussed and that there is great value in the debate.

I do not know whether it is entirely a coincidence that a debate on national walking month comes at the end of what all members know to be national canvassing month. Graeme Dey made that connection and—as it is for him—it is canvassing that is keeping up my step count at the moment. Members talked beautifully about the places and landscapes that they are walking through on the election campaign trail. Most of the views that I have seen have been of tiles and windows in Glasgow tenements. Beautiful though they are, I hope to get a bit of a change over the summer and to see some more of the country.

I think that all politicians and the thousands of political activists whom we work with, who have been out campaigning and canvassing around Scotland, are encountering more and more the barriers to walking that exist for people in their communities. Whether the barriers are physical, cultural or economic, or relate to the important points that Paul O’Kane made about women’s safety, in particular, we need to address them, and we need to recognise that we have a political responsibility to do so.

However, we also have an incredible opportunity. Several members, including Paul O’Kane, Gillian Martin and Karen Adam, talked about the experience during lockdown—the really different context in which people were “permitted” daily exercise and when people went out for a walk for that very unusual reason. That was about encountering their communities in a different way and experiencing them in a new way. That gives us all a responsibility to ensure that communities become more accessible, more inclusive and safer places for people to walk.

There has been, I think, more consensus in the debate than there has been disagreement, so I hope that members from across the chamber will work constructively with the Government on what we are taking forward.

We are working with Paths for All to lead the refresh of the walking strategy. In keeping with what several members have said, there is real scope to look at that strategy not in isolation but in terms of how it connects to the Government’s other strategic objectives, whether around health—physical health, mental health, and issues around loneliness and isolation—around the climate and the need to cut car kilometres by 20 per cent, or around reinvigoration of our local economies as they recover from the pandemic. That cross-cutting approach is very much in keeping with what Alex Rowley and others said about taking a joined-up approach.

I hope that Mr O’Kane will acknowledge our not supporting his amendment; we will continue to have disagreements about wider local authority funding. We believe that we have protected local authority funding significantly. Opposition parties will say that we have not done enough on that, but there is simply no question but that we have dramatically increased direct funding to local authorities for active travel, and not just in relation to what the Scottish Government spends. This year, the cycling, walking and safer routes funding has increased to £35 million. That is a £10 million increase in one year alone.

There is also the work that we are doing with Sustrans on the places for everyone programme. There are other funding streams and there is the work that Maree Todd mentioned through

increased funding in sport and active living budgets. There is direct funding to local authorities that is allowing them to take the work forward.

In relation to the free bike pilots, I am genuinely sorry to hear that the very clear repeated public commitments from the Scottish Government have somehow not been acknowledged. The pilot schemes that we committed to were up and running within the first 100 days, as promised. They will be evaluated later this year, as promised—and they need to be. We need pilot schemes so that we can evaluate a wide range of issues.

Graeme Dey was right about issues in the supply chain. They are not unique to Scotland, but they are certainly issues that we need to understand and overcome.

There are a wide range of other issues. We are looking to ensure that young people who—for whatever socioeconomic reasons and whatever their background—need access to free bikes have that access and our support in that. They will be the same young people for whom issues around storage are an additional barrier. They also need access either to repairing skills or to a repair service to make sure that their bikes can be repaired when they go wrong.

We also need to make sure that we increase the range of available adaptive bikes so that it is an inclusive programme for young people with a wide range of disabilities. We also, as others have said, need to increase skills in, and the capacity for, recycling bikes to ensure that we increase supply.

We need to work with pilot schemes, so I hope that Labour and others will work with us, instead of making unrealistic demands with impossible timescales. Let us work constructively with the many organisations that are enthusiastically developing the pilots and will report to us later this year.

Whether walking is for recreation, for tourism, for health, to see more of our beautiful country or just to get about on our daily trips; whether it is part of a journey that involves other modes of travel; and whether it is a whole journey in its own right, there is huge potential to make sure that more people feel able to walk. The Scottish Government has made an unprecedented commitment to active travel, both in funding and in policy. However, as Gillian Mackay argued, what we do has to be inclusive. Walking, wheeling and cycling address all the diverse needs of our people and realise a positive vision of safe, healthy and thriving local communities in every part of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the debate on walking: improving health and strengthening communities.

Business Motions

17:39

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-04270, 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 10 May 2022

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee Debate: Inquiry into the Scottish Government's International Work

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 11 May 2022

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Justice and Veterans;
Finance and Economy

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 12 May 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: Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Coronavirus (Recovery and Reform) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Tuesday 17 May 2022

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

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 18 May 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 Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 19 May 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:
Rural Affairs and Islands

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Long Covid

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 9 May 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.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-04271, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on stage 2 timetabling of a bill. Any member who wishes to speak against the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Miners' Strike (Pardons) (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 24 May 2022.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:40

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-04272, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Requirements) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 6) Regulations 2022 (SSI 2022/123) be approved.—[George Adam]

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

Decision Time

17:40

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-04256.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-04256, in the name of Maree Todd, on walking: improving health and strengthening communities, 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.

17:40

Meeting suspended.

17:44

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment S6M-04256.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is now closed.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)

Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 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)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (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)
 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)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-04256.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, is: For 27, Against 66, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-04256, in the name of Maree Todd, on walking: improving health and strengthening communities, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises National Walking Month and agrees that everyday walking and wheeling play a huge role in improving the health and wellbeing of people in Scotland; notes that the Scottish Government is committed to inclusive opportunities for everyone to walk and wheel, helping to connect and strengthen communities, reduce some of Scotland's biggest health inequalities and reduce pressure on the NHS, and further notes that the Scottish Government is committed to doubling investment across sport and active living, allocating record levels of investment to active travel, working with partners to reduce barriers to walking and wheeling and helping to make these the default choice for short journeys, leisure, socialising or as part of longer public transport journeys in Scotland, which will also contribute to Scotland's journey to net zero.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-04272, in the name of George Adam, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Requirements) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 6) Regulations 2022 (SSI 2022/123) be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

International Day of the Midwife

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-03813, in the name of Audrey Nicoll, on international day of the midwife, 100 years of progress. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises the International Day of the Midwife on 5 May, which will celebrate 100 years of progress throughout the global midwife community; understands that this has included advocating for quality midwifery care to improve newborn and maternal health; recognises the vital role of midwives in Scotland in aiming to deliver person-centred, high-quality care for mothers and babies throughout pregnancy, birth and following birth; commends the positive impact that midwives can have on the health and life chances of women and babies; recognises what it considers the commitment of midwives caring for women during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on maternal mental health as midwifery services were modified, thereby impacting women's choices during pregnancy and birth; acknowledges the policy, *The Best Start: A Five-Year Forward Plan for Maternity and Neonatal Care in Scotland*, to make care locally accessible, with midwives providing high-quality care to women across Scotland in homes, communities and midwifery-led and consultant-level services, and recognises what it sees as the pivotal role of educators, researchers and students, including those based at the Robert Gordon University in the Aberdeen South and North Kincardine constituency, in supporting the delivery of midwifery services in Scotland and beyond.

17:49

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I thank all members from across the Parliament for their support for the motion, and I extend my thanks to the members who will speak today in support of international day of the midwife, which will take place tomorrow, on Thursday 5 May. I realise that members will want to get up the road quite quickly this evening. I acknowledge the support for preparing for today's debate from Fiona Gibb of the Royal College of Midwives and Andrea Lawrie, a former colleague of mine at Robert Gordon University.

I want to celebrate the role that midwives play globally in the holistic health and wellbeing of mothers and babies; the outstanding care and professionalism that was shown by midwives during the Covid-19 pandemic; and the important role of education in supporting the global midwifery body in their practice and in providing holistic maternal healthcare.

The theme of this year's international day of the midwife is 100 years of progress. The theme marks the centenary of the International Confederation of Midwives, which currently comprises 143 midwives associations, representing over 1 million midwives across 124

countries. European midwives first came together at international meetings in the 1900s. In 1920, they formed the International Midwives Union, which later became the International Confederation of Midwives.

The ICM works closely with the World Health Organization, the United Nations, the International Council of Nurses and other global healthcare and non-governmental organisations to advance midwifery globally and improve sexual and reproductive, maternal, newborn and child and adolescent health through the delivery of a range of projects, including supporting education and training, strengthening services and capacity building, and developing leadership and advocacy skills, particularly for young midwives.

The publication “The Best Start: A Five-Year Forward Plan for Maternity and Neonatal Care in Scotland” sets out a vision for maternity and neonatal care that puts women, babies and families at the centre. The plan aims to support strong family relationships and to help reduce inequalities and deprivation, which can have longer-term health consequences for families.

Over the past two years, midwives have faced the extraordinary challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic. During a recent debate on perinatal mental health, I spoke about constituents who were worried for the mental wellbeing of their partner, sister or daughter who had just given birth or who was struggling with the choices that they faced as they awaited the birth of their new baby. Women have faced difficult decisions about the Covid-19 vaccine and the risk of adverse pregnancy outcomes. Black, Asian and minority ethnic women are at disproportionate risk of adverse outcomes from Covid-19, which is compounded during pregnancy.

There have been modifications to services such as home births. Sometimes, no birth partner has been present or women have attended scans or received devastating news alone, all of which profoundly impact on maternal mental health. The removal of choice and the prospect of giving birth alone significantly impact on holistic maternal health. Women in rural areas, who are already more likely to experience perinatal mental health problems, have faced particular challenges in accessing services. In that debate, I welcomed the minister’s response regarding the Scottish perinatal mental health pathways into care. In this week, which is also perinatal mental health week, I am delighted to acknowledge the new NHS Grampian community perinatal mental health team.

I turn to the wider global context. Although nearly 300,000 women die annually from preventable causes at or around childbirth, progress has been made to reduce preventable

maternal deaths. According to the United Nations Population Fund, since the year 2000, the global maternal mortality ratio has fallen by 38 per cent, from 342 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in the year 2000 to 210 in 2017. Many countries have halved their maternal death rates in the past 10 years. However, every death is a tragedy.

The United Nations report “The State of the World’s Midwifery 2021” highlights the positive impact of high-quality midwifery care on women and families and recognises midwives as core members of the sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn and adolescent health workforce. In the face of Covid-19 restrictions and overburdened health systems, midwives became and remain vital for meeting the sexual and reproductive health needs of women.

Of course, delivery of high-quality care relies on high-quality education and training. I commend all our educators for the crucial role that they play in developing and delivering high-quality contemporary education to undergraduates, those already in practice and those returning to practice.

Scotland has a long history of innovation in midwifery education, with Joseph Gibson appointed the world’s first chair of midwifery by Edinburgh Town Council in 1726. The textbook for midwives that was written in the 1950s by Margaret Myles, a one-time resident in Aberdeen, has become a globally recognised essential text, which is now in its 17th edition.

The school of nursing, midwifery and paramedic practice at Robert Gordon University in my constituency has a strong reputation for producing skilled and compassionate graduates. The university was the first in Scotland to receive the United Nations Children’s Fund baby-friendly initiative gold award. That was a recognition of the university’s world-class training and commitment to global best practice.

Although today’s debate is celebratory, it is right to acknowledge the challenges that the profession faces with workforce shortfalls and service transformation. The Scottish Government has been committed to addressing those and other challenges, and I look forward to perhaps hearing a bit more about that from the minister in her response.

I could not be prouder to stand today for midwives and their associations ahead of international day of the midwife, as they stand for the rights, dignity and health of women, newborns and families everywhere. I hope that this milestone will offer an opportunity to value how global midwifery has evolved over the past 100 years and to acknowledge the next 100 years and what we as members can do to ensure that midwives in

Scotland and beyond receive the enabling environment and support that they deserve.

17:57

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I congratulate my friend and colleague Audrey Nicoll on securing this evening's debate and I thank her for advocating on behalf of the global midwife community and for highlighting the significant progress that has been made over the past 100 years in the fields of neonatal and maternal health. The debate gives us all the opportunity to recognise the crucial contribution that midwives make. We can all agree that our midwives are highly educated and skilled in ensuring that women and babies have safe and effective maternity care, and that babies receive the best possible start in life.

Although many people accurately picture midwives as supporting women in childbirth, they contribute far more, including antenatal and postnatal care, family planning services and breast and cervical cancer screenings. With counselling and information, they can also help to prevent female genital mutilation, support gender-based violence survivors and provide reproductive health services to adolescents.

It is not unusual for midwives to play the role of surrogate mother or partner for those who do not have close family nearby. That role has been particularly valuable throughout the on-going pandemic, during which expecting and new mums have faced the additional challenge of going through pregnancy without the usual support network that would ideally be available to all.

In my view, midwives, maternity support workers and student midwives have been the unsung heroes of the pandemic, putting their health at risk to provide excellent care to women and their families. Their impact on the mental and physical wellbeing of new and expecting mothers is impossible to quantify but, to say the least, we would be hard pressed to find a mother who is not thankful for the presence of their midwife, especially in the past two years.

When I had my daughter 32 years ago, the trainee midwife who looked after me at the time urged me to convince her supervisors to allow her to stay on after her shift had ended, just so that she could see the birth of my daughter through to the end. She was with me the whole time, and I was truly grateful for the kindness and support. That is just my personal experience but, even after all these years, that one act of kindness has always stayed with me. She could have just gone home after her shift finished, but instead she stayed. I know from countless other stories from parents that that is indeed business as usual, with

midwives regularly going above and beyond their call of duty out of the goodness of their hearts.

Sadly, as recent headlines suggest, misogyny remains an ever-present issue that plagues our society. Thankfully, issues that specifically affect women are increasingly being given the attention that they deserve, but historically they have been denied. Globally, over the past 100 years, midwives have been on the front lines against misogyny, faced with the challenge of caring for and supporting mothers in societies that have often undervalued both midwives and women in general.

Fortunately, the midwifery profession is beginning to receive the praise and support that it deserves, partly because of the increased recognition of national health service staff as a result of the pandemic and just maybe through television shows such as "Call the Midwife". Perhaps that has contributed to the 4.2 per cent annual increase in the number of midwives in Scotland.

However, with over 6,500 midwifery and nursing vacancies left to fill, which is a record high in Scotland, it is important that we all fully support international day of the midwife on 5 May, to show all potential and current midwives that they are valued, respected and needed. The absolute minimum that those in the midwifery community deserve is a day to recognise their contributions to Scotland and the rest of the world. Therefore, to all midwives out there, I say, "Happy international midwife day—you have more than earned it."

18:01

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): It is an honour to speak in the debate. This is my tribute to the extraordinary midwives in Scotland, in the UK and around the world—including my own sister, Cath, who has been a midwife for some 40 years. She says that she was "born a midwife". For Cath, midwifery was a calling, and I know that it will forever remain a part of her, as it is for many midwives.

There is a remarkably special bond between women and their midwives. From antenatal appointments to the delivery room and the early postpartum period, midwives and the women in their care navigate the journey to new motherhood together. It is a truly unique partnership, and the Covid-19 pandemic brought that into sharp relief as pregnant women accessed antenatal services without the support of their partners. For many women, their midwives were all that they had.

Midwives provide care to mother and baby from those early weeks of pregnancy to the post-birth period, but they do so much more. It is a highly skilled profession, but their value too often goes

unrecognised. They listen, they offer emotional support, they facilitate and they advocate. They see women at their most vulnerable and at their most empowered.

The journey is not always straightforward. Midwives help to bring new life into the world, but they also bear witness to the fragility of life. Debilitating pregnancy symptoms, complications during pregnancy, the devastating emotional and physical aftermath of baby loss, difficulties during and after delivery—those are just some of the profound and distressing challenges that a midwife must contend with.

During my own pregnancy, I had pre-eclampsia—a condition that affects more than 2,500 pregnancies in Scotland every year. My midwives spotted the signs and intervened. They saved my life and they saved my son's life. I am eternally grateful to them for their wonderful and professional care.

Midwifery can be rewarding work, but it is often highly pressured and stressful. The past two years have been extremely difficult for midwives. They have continued to provide exceptional care to pregnant women and new mothers not just in hospital, but in the community, visiting new families in their homes, carrying out newborn check-ups and providing breastfeeding support at the height of the pandemic.

The Royal College of Midwives recently surveyed its members on their experiences in the workplace. The full results of that survey will be published next week, but a preview of its findings makes for alarming reading. Midwifery is “near breaking point”; three in four RCM members are considering leaving their posts; 88 per cent reported experiencing work-related stress; and 92 per cent worked without breaks over the past 18 months. Only 6 per cent of RCM members believe that their workplace is consistently safely staffed.

For the health and wellbeing of midwives, for the student midwives whom they train and for mothers and their babies, I implore the Scottish Government to respond to those findings. The Scottish Government's five-year plan for maternity and neonatal care in Scotland, “The best start: five-year plan for maternity and neonatal care”, emphasises:

“The health, development, social, and economic consequences of childbirth and the early weeks of life are profound, and the impact, both positive and negative, is felt by individual families and communities as well as across the whole of society.”

Midwives have issued a clarion call. I do hope that the Scottish Government will act.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Carol Mochan is joining us remotely.

18:06

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Audrey Nicoll for bringing this important debate to the chamber and the members who have spoken so far for their contributions. On behalf of Scottish Labour, I also welcome international day of the midwife, which is being marked tomorrow, and pay tribute to all those who have contributed to the development of the field as we celebrate 100 years of progress throughout the globe and the global midwife community.

It is right that I begin my remarks by noting and commenting on the work of midwives during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic put significant pressure on all aspects of our health service, but midwifery is a very obvious example. In many cases, the partners of women who were giving birth were not able to be with them in the room, so a midwife would be their closest support during childbirth. For many of those women, their midwife would also be their trusted confidante when it came to taking up the offer of a Covid-19 vaccine—something that many pregnant women were understandably sceptical about in the early stages of the pandemic.

On that note, I pay tribute to the Royal College of Midwives for its strong calls for everyone to get the vaccine, importantly noting the impact that severe Covid-19 symptoms could have on both mother and baby and the potentially negative impact of women entering maternity wards without having been vaccinated. The work of midwives throughout the pandemic has been admirable. They have kept services running during the most difficult of times and have provided the support that has been required by so many.

However, there are clear and significant problems in midwifery surrounding the fact that there are over 5,000 vacancies in nursing and midwifery in Scotland at the moment and the feelings of many of those who are already employed in nursing and midwifery that they are underpaid, underresourced, and undervalued. It is expected that agency work will be relied on, in some instances, to fill the gaps. However, the scale of the agency support that is being provided to the Scottish NHS is simply unsustainable. More investment must be put into education and training to ensure that more young people who are leaving school consider a career in midwifery. It is an excellent career for many people.

The Scottish Government must act to pay nursing and midwifery staff the wages that they deserve, ensure that the workplace conditions that they experience daily are improved, and support a workforce that has been under pressure during the pandemic.

Ahead of last year's Scottish Parliament elections, the Royal College of Midwives, as well as asking for the midwife staff shortages to be brought to an end, called for investment in midwifery to tackle social deprivation. As I have said many times in the chamber, health inequalities remain one of Scotland's biggest challenges. I would encourage the minister to consider how midwifery services can continue to provide the best start in life for children, protect women as they go through pregnancy, and remain in contact with both mother and child in order to protect mental health and wellbeing and to promote choices for healthy living.

There has been significant progress in the global midwife community in the past 100 years, which is evident in the first-class treatment and services that many members have mentioned today, which are provided by midwives across Scotland and beyond. However, to ensure that, in 50 or even 100 more years, when similar debates are had again, we must have a collective endeavour to overcome the challenges that currently exist in workplace environments and in vacancies. Moreover, we must show collective ambition to use midwifery as a vehicle for tackling the social and health inequalities that continue to grow in our society.

Again, I welcome international day of the midwife and the contributions from all members, and I thank all the midwives in my region of South Scotland and beyond for the incredible work that they have done and continue to do in serving their communities.

18:10

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I congratulate my friend and colleague Audrey Nicoll for securing this debate to mark international day of the midwife, and I pay tribute to the work that she did when she was at Robert Gordon University Aberdeen, working with our student midwives and nurses.

Not so long ago, people could not study midwifery specifically; we trained nurses and they would go on to specialise in midwifery. It is a massive step forward that midwifery is now recognised as a complex and substantial clinical discipline in itself and that it is offered in Scotland as an undergraduate degree combining tutorials and lectures with comprehensive placements in all the disciplines within midwifery, from community midwifery and working on postnatal and antenatal wards to theatre work, infant feeding teams and perinatal mental health work, to name but a few. The Scottish Government has prioritised the training of midwives, along with the training of nurses and paramedics, for the allocation of support in the form of a non-means-tested

bursary. Scotland is the only nation in the UK to do so.

We must, however, recognise that Robert Gordon University Aberdeen, Edinburgh Napier University and the University of the West of Scotland, which are the only universities offering this specialised undergraduate course, cannot currently meet demand because of the number of applicants who want to enter the field. I am therefore hugely supportive of more universities providing this specialist training. Action on the availability of training places might go a long way towards relieving the pressures on our existing workforce.

As Audrey Nicoll mentioned, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee undertook an inquiry into perinatal mental health, which we reported on at the start of this year. Inevitably, a lot of the lived experience that we heard about came from mothers who had given birth during the pandemic. I will not rehearse the points from that debate, but it pointed to a wider theme that midwives in postnatal wards often cannot have the time that they would like to have to spend with new mums. It also highlighted that issues around infant feeding could give rise to anxiety and could be a precursor to more serious mental health issues. I want to praise, in particular, the work that is done in Aberdeen maternity hospital by the two-woman team of midwives, Gill Swinscoe and Karen Morrison, who spend time with new mums to give them the support that they need to breastfeed. The importance of that support cannot be underestimated.

As it stands, not every midwifery student gets to do a placement with an infant feeding team, but it is an area of expertise whose importance cannot be underestimated in the care of a new mother and baby. If feeding is going well, not only does baby get the best nutritional start in life, but the wellbeing of mum is significantly better, too. It may be billed as the most natural thing in the world, but it can be very hard and it does not automatically come naturally. Our midwife-led infant feeding teams in hospitals and our home-visiting community midwives are worth their weight in gold, not just because they safeguard the physical health of mother and baby, but because they identify perinatal mental health issues as well.

I will conclude—probably quite embarrassingly for one particular person—by declaring an interest, as my 19-year-old daughter Eve is currently in her second year of midwifery studies at Robert Gordon University Aberdeen, which is in Audrey Nicoll's constituency. Eve is taking part in placements all over Scotland, from Raigmore hospital and Aberdeen maternity hospital to the communities in Aberdeenshire and, this month, in Edinburgh. It was all that I could do not to make

my entire speech about her experiences and enthusiasm for her chosen profession—or, indeed, my incredulity and pride that, to date, my baby has herself delivered 14 other people’s babies. What a rewarding career awaits her. I wonder whether, in the years to come, I will be talking about her having had a lengthy career in midwifery such as Tess White spoke about.

It is not just the new recruits whom we must cherish; it is the existing experienced staff, of whom we have asked so much, particularly in the past two years. We must address the reasons why so many of our midwives feel burnt out, and we must act to address their concerns so that we can keep them in the service. Their experience is too precious to lose. I again thank Audrey Nicoll for the chance to pay tribute to them today.

18:15

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I thank my friend and colleague Audrey Nicoll for bringing this, her first members’ business debate, to the chamber. It gives us the opportunity to celebrate the hard work and importance of midwives in Scotland and around the world.

Having a baby is one of the most exciting times in any woman’s life, but it also comes with anxieties and fears, especially for first-time mums. The supportive role that midwives offer is key to women’s experience of their journey from pregnancy to holding their newborn baby and beyond. As the NHS Scotland website says,

“One of the most important aspects of the job is making sure mothers and their babies have a positive experience.”

Tomorrow is international day of the midwife, when we take the chance to celebrate 100 years of progress and the amazing role that midwives play in bringing a baby into the world. We look back at the long history of midwifery, from the howdie of the 17th century, to the nurse midwives of the 1950s and 1960s as depicted in “Call the Midwife”, to the midwives of today.

A woman’s journey to motherhood may be exciting, but it is also very scary. I remember that all too well from my pregnancies—the highs and the lows and often having to speak to my midwife to seek reassurance and make sure things were okay. At my first meeting with my midwife when pregnant with my first child she said, “After this you are gonnae be greeting at everything.” I laughed and said, “That is just not me”. Guess what? She was right. Midwives do know a thing or two.

We must also recognise that being a midwife is not an easy job. They also support women through traumatic events, including miscarriage and stillbirth. Their job, as Audrey Nicoll and others have already said, has been particularly difficult

throughout the pandemic, when the support of partners, family and friends was not available due to Covid-19 restrictions.

The Scottish Government’s five-year plan, “The Best Start”, was a hugely positive development in this country’s maternity and neonatal care. The education and training body of NHS Scotland, NHS Education for Scotland, reported in March 2021 that implementing person-centred, relationship-based care as prescribed in “The Best Start” could bring significant benefits, such as reducing intervention, preterm births and foetal loss. That would ultimately reduce dependency levels and consequently workforce demand. The long-term effect of that could be significant, benefiting new mums while alleviating the pressure on our midwives, who are suffering due to high workload and burn-out. As our population changes and more women with varying needs are having children later in life, I welcome a continued focus on implementing “The Best Start” plan.

In conclusion, a midwife on the BBC’s brilliant docu-series “Yorkshire Midwives on Call” said:

“Every time I see a birth, I just think, ‘women are incredible’. Women really are amazing.”

My response is that midwives are incredible and midwives really are amazing. I, for one, certainly could not have done without mine.

18:19

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I feel like the token male, although it is important to hear a male voice in the debate. All the speakers have rightly said how good midwives are with the expectant mother and baby, but let me tell you, they are also very good with the fathers who are standing there probably causing more problems than the expectant mother.

I will make two brief points at the conclusion of the debate. The month of May is important for my family: my twin girls’ birthday is at the end of it. My wife went through quite a difficult pregnancy and I know the support that she and I received, and that we as a family received while going through that. As many people have said, midwives go the extra mile and they stay on longer. Both my sister and my mother-in-law were midwives. In fact, my mother-in-law was a midwife in Gateshead in the 1960s and 1970s and she still tells the story of waiting around for 24 hours in someone’s house for a child to be born.

We can see from watching things like “Call the Midwife” how things have progressed and the improvements that have been made in the last 30 or so years. It is important to acknowledge the work that goes on day in, day out, often unseen. We need to look at whether more universities

should offer midwifery courses, because we do need more midwives in Scotland.

May, however, is also a difficult month for our family. Next Tuesday, 10 May, will be the 13th birthday of my little girl who was born asleep. The minister and I have spoken about this previously and I know that the SNP Government is moving on this, but when we look at what progress there has been, I think that more needs to be done for those who go through stillbirth or whose babies are born asleep. I know that the minister is looking at different reviews, but I would encourage her and the Government to move as quickly as possible on this. Again, I think that there has been progress, even in the last number of years, in regard to ladies going through stillbirth being able to be away from where other babies are being born. That is really important, as is the support that the third sector is getting in regard to supporting mums and dads when they go home. However, there is more that can be done. I know that the minister wants to do more and I encourage her and her colleagues to move on that.

The loss of any child is devastating. The death of a baby who is born asleep is hard. It is hard for the mum not just when it happens, but can go on for many years and can affect people's lives. I welcome what the Government is doing, but encourage them to keep moving quicker.

18:22

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I am very pleased to be able to respond on behalf of the Government this afternoon as we mark the international day of the midwife. I thank Audrey Nicoll for lodging this important motion.

As my colleagues have highlighted, it is important to reflect as we celebrate 100 years of progress. In Scotland, we are very fortunate to have a highly educated, skilled and compassionate team of midwives who lead and deliver high-quality care that is so valued by women and their families during their pregnancy and, as we have heard many times today, as they prepare for their birth and the first few precious days and weeks with their baby. Our midwives support the whole family. We heard that very powerfully from Jeremy Balfour. That matters, because evidence tells us that experience in the early years can make a real difference to health and wellbeing later on in life, and support for new parents needs to start pre-birth.

I acknowledge of course that one of the greatest impacts and challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic in the last two years has been marked changes to maternity care, so let me begin by thanking every single midwife in Scotland and every young

midwife in training—including Eve, and it was lovely to hear an update of her progress—for their dedication to the role and to the people of Scotland.

Despite those changes, colleagues have highlighted how midwives throughout the pandemic sustained their efforts to deliver person-centred, high-quality care for mothers and babies throughout pregnancy, birth and following birth. The pandemic has placed and continues to place demands on all front-line staff in a way that was previously unimaginable.

Tess White: Does the minister agree that the latest RCM survey findings are alarming, with three out of four midwives considering leaving their post and only 6 per cent—that is 6 per cent—believing that their workplace is staffed safely? Will the minister please say what she will do to hear the midwives and act on what they are telling her?

Maree Todd: Government will absolutely pay attention to that survey. We are in regular contact with the profession. Just yesterday I met a group of 12 midwives to hear some of their concerns about the implementation of “The Best Start” report in the area where they are working. I am absolutely determined that we will listen, we will learn and we will make sure that midwifery is sustainable well into the future, because it is a very precious resource.

We are absolutely incredibly proud of the midwifery response to the pandemic, they had to—as everyone else did—adapt to rapid change and demonstrated fully what a critical role the profession plays in very difficult times.

Midwives make a vital contribution to the quality and safety of maternity care. That is why the Scottish Government has invested over £16 million in reforming maternity care in Scotland, as set out in “The Best Start” report. It sets out a future vision for maternity and neonatal care that focuses on putting women, babies and families at the centre, and ensuring that they receive the highest quality of care according to their needs.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of certain aspects of “The Best Start” model of care and accelerated progress in many areas, such as providing care closer to home, the importance of partners' support and involvement in care, and the ability of staff to work flexibly and across traditional boundaries.

The Scottish Government recognises the staffing challenges being experienced and the challenge that this presents in being able to implement a continuity of carer model. Midwives play a central role in making sure that women receive the care that they need, when they need it most. That is why, as part of that priority work, we

are working with delivery partners to ensure that Scotland has the right midwifery workforce, in the right place, with the right skills and competencies. Growing our workforce is absolutely crucial. Student intakes have increased over 10 consecutive years, culminating in a target intake of 301 midwives for 2022. That is a 5 per cent uplift on 2021. It is absolutely vital that we have new midwives coming into the profession.

Midwives play a central role in all circumstances of pregnancy. Last year we committed to improving miscarriage care in Scotland in our Programme for Government. That included taking forward the recommendations made in *The Lancet* series "Miscarriage Matters", alongside a commitment on the provision of dedicated facilities for women who are experiencing unexpected pregnancy complications. To enable us to gain a better understanding of health board readiness to implement both the Scottish Government commitments and *The Lancet* series recommendations, we have designed and are imminently to launch a questionnaire to gather information on the current service provision across Scotland.

We really appreciate respondents within the NHS taking the time and effort to complete the questionnaire so that we can better understand and improve miscarriage provision. We have already spoken with families who have gone through miscarriage and will consider how more women and their partners with lived experience can have an opportunity to inform the work and make the services stronger. I want to place on record my thanks to those families for speaking to us about such traumatic issues.

Colleagues have spoken today about the unique opportunity that midwives have to identify those at risk or in need of more support and the work that midwives do to ensure that those individuals get the care that they need at the earliest opportunity. The pandemic was a challenging time for women and their families, but all maternity services in Scotland were committed to offering women choice, taking account of their individual needs and the best available evidence for care options.

It is really important, as Tess White said, that we listen to staff on the ground and it is vital to learn from what is working well, to help services manage pressures effectively. The Government is committed to doing that and to strongly supporting recovery to improve satisfaction for women and midwives and, most importantly, to improve outcomes for women and their babies.

We have introduced the National Wellbeing Hub website for the whole health and social care workforce, their families, carers and volunteers, with advice, tips and signposting on a range of issues, including sleep, mental health and finance,

and made over 1200 hours of coaching available to staff. We have also set up a dedicated wellbeing support phone line for NHS staff, hosted by NHS24, and are working with boards to ensure that staff have access to welfare facilities set up during the early stages of the pandemic.

We have lots to celebrate in Scotland and the international day of the midwife is a time for us to do that. We know that the public values and admires midwives but we may not always truly articulate their role. I really encourage midwives to proudly tell their stories so that we all develop a better understanding of the breadth and diversity of midwifery roles and expertise, and the impact that the profession has on individual people and on our society as a whole.

Presiding Officer, I would like to close the debate by thanking those who have shared today. I also want to recognise the dedication of educators, researchers and students, including those based at the Robert Gordon University and beyond, who are all working with us to ensure delivery of the best midwifery services.

I absolutely agree that our midwives are a precious resource and I am delighted to celebrate them. I assure them that the Government values their work and the difference that they make to Scotland.

Meeting closed at 18:30.

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