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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 26 April 2023

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

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is constitution, external affairs and culture. Should any member wish to request a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button or enter the letters “RTS” in the chat function during the relevant question. As ever, succinct questions and answers to match are much appreciated and will ensure that we get in as many questions as possible.

Workers in Scotland (Impact of Rejoining the European Union)

1. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact on workers in Scotland of an independent Scotland rejoining the European Union. (S6O-02132)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government believes that the best future for Scotland is as an independent country that is a member state of the European Union. We set out in the third paper of the independence prospectus the multiple benefits that rejoining the EU as an independent country would bring to workers, including greater mobility to work in any EU country, a fairer labour market and better regulation and protection of workers’ rights. We will continue to build the case for a socially just, independent Scotland within the EU and to give the people of Scotland the information that they need to make an informed choice about whether Scotland should become an independent country.

Clare Haughey: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the recent findings by the Centre for European Reform that predict that the average worker will be £1,300 worse off as a result of Brexit. Despite Scotland’s voting overwhelmingly to remain, our being forced out of the EU against our will is hitting workers hard. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Tories—and Labour, for that matter—must answer as to why workers in

Scotland are being forced to pay such a heavy price for their Brexit obsession?

Angus Robertson: I wholeheartedly agree with Clare Haughey. The United Kingdom Government—with the support of the UK Labour Party—has imposed an unnecessarily hard Brexit, which is having a damaging impact on businesses and workers in Scotland and is making the cost of living crisis so much harder to bear.

The Office for Budget Responsibility expects that the UK’s gross domestic product will be 4 per cent lower in the long run, which is the equivalent of around £100 billion in lost output and which will damage employment prospects for workers. That further demonstrates why securing independence and getting back into the EU—a market that, by population, is seven times the size of the UK market—is essential for the future wellbeing of people in Scotland.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Earlier this month, Mike Russell, the president of the Scottish National Party and a former constitution secretary, told *The Herald* newspaper:

“I don’t think Scottish independence can be secured right now”.

In the light of that statement, why is the SNP Government wasting time contemplating such hypothetical situations instead of focusing on the real and present priorities of the Scottish people?

Angus Robertson: It should not come as a surprise to Sharon Dowey—or to any members on the Conservative benches, who lost the last Scottish Parliament election—that the parties that won the election were elected on a manifesto to hold a democratic referendum in Scotland. There is no technical reason why the UK Government cannot transfer the responsibility to have a referendum, which is, after all, the policy favoured by the majority of MSPs in this Parliament.

It would be entirely incorrect and false for this Government not to make the necessary preparations. We want people to be as informed as possible, and I would hope that democrats would all agree that, if a Government is elected to do something, it should be able to get on with it.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I must be getting a bit deaf in my old age, because I did not hear the minister set out what the impact of leaving the UK internal market would be on those very same workers. Why is he embracing the obvious benefits of the European Union but ignoring the problems that would be caused by the break-up of the United Kingdom?

Angus Robertson: All that I can say to Willie Rennie is that nobody on these benches is a tectonic separatist. We are in favour of the best possible trading relations across these islands, but

we also want to be part of the biggest single market in the world, which is the European Union's single market.

I am not one of those people—perhaps Willie Rennie is—who are pleading for Scotland to remain dependent on a single market the size of the United Kingdom. Why does he not embrace the credible historical European support of the Liberal Democrats for the European idea and join Scottish National Party members by seeking our place in the European single market?

Edinburgh Festival Fringe

2. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported comments by the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society chief executive that the festival faces an “existential threat”. (S6O-02133)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie): The Edinburgh festival fringe is a top cultural brand in Scotland that attracts global talent every year.

The Scottish Government acknowledges the challenges that the culture and events sector, including the fringe, has faced due to the pandemic, Brexit, lower audience numbers and high energy costs. To support the fringe's resilience and long-term viability, the Scottish Government has offered a combination of loans and grants in recognition of the festival's importance to Scotland's cultural scene. We aim to keep working with the fringe society and the wider culture and events sector to understand how to provide support during these trying times.

Jamie Greene: I am sure that the grants that the minister mentioned will be welcome; perhaps the loans will be less so. I hope that she will join me in welcoming the £8.6 million that the United Kingdom Government has pledged for Scotland's festival economy, which I hope will create a permanent headquarters for the fringe in Edinburgh and year-round opportunities for artists and local talent.

However, we should acknowledge that it is not just Edinburgh that celebrates culture. I would like to hear what the Scottish Government is doing outside the central belt to support regions such as mine, in the west, and rural communities, to ensure that there is a vibrant cultural scene throughout Scotland that is not dependent on large numbers of tourists in the way that the capital is.

Christina McKelvie: I hope that Jamie Greene will also welcome the Scottish Government's announcement in the past few weeks of financial commitments to the culture sector over the months and years to come.

We have been urging the UK Government to recognise the valuable role that Scotland's culture sector plays in the Scottish and UK economies, so any additional funding from the spring budget is welcome. However, although such funding is welcome, the UK Government needs to engage with us in advance to ensure that support is aligned and its impact maximised.

We understand that £7 million of the UK Government's award is subject to a business case being agreed by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and we do not have that yet. That funding is for capital expenditure to assist the fringe society in finding a new home, so that it can offer year-round support to local artists and communities such as the community that Mr Greene represents.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 was not lodged, and question 4 has been withdrawn.

Scottish Connections Framework

5. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how the Scottish connections framework will help to address any demographic challenges. (S6O-02136)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish connections framework seeks to expand links and networks with Scottish people and people with an association with Scotland who live elsewhere in the world.

Scotland faces particular challenges, given that all our forecast population growth is expected to come from migration. That is one of the reasons that the Scottish Government is so concerned about the United Kingdom Government's approach to immigration.

Migration is therefore an issue that is crucial for Scotland's future economic and social wellbeing. Activity under the framework will allow the Scottish Government to project Scotland's attractiveness as a place in which to work, to live, to study and to do business. That will include promoting the talent attraction and migration service, which we aim to launch later in 2023.

Stephanie Callaghan: Does the cabinet secretary agree that encouraging young talent to migrate to Scotland will help to address Scotland's demographic challenges and support our economy and public services? Will he outline how the talent attraction and migration service, which will be launched this year, plans to encourage immigration and the retention of young people in areas of Scotland where tourism is not as prevalent?

Angus Robertson: In 2021, the ministerial population task force published Scotland's first population strategy, a key building block of which is ensuring that Scotland is an attractive and welcoming country. Inward migration supports our community, strengthens our public services and grows our economy. The talent attraction and migration service will encourage more people to come and live in Scotland. It will help employers to navigate the UK Government's complex and, sadly, bureaucratic immigration rules, in an effort to help them to meet their skills needs. The service will provide good-quality information and advice to help people to move here and settle into communities.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Although there are restrictions on what the Scottish Government can do through the connections framework and other work to address demographic challenges through international immigration, due to its reserved nature, there are no restrictions on addressing demographic challenges through attracting people from the rest of the United Kingdom to live and work in Scotland.

What is the Scottish Government doing to take forward the work of the industry advisory group for RUK talent attraction to address demographic challenges and increase Scotland's tax revenue?

Angus Robertson: Ivan McKee raises some important issues. The Scottish Government is taking action to attract people with the skills that Scotland needs from the rest of the United Kingdom. Our RUK talent attraction programme will continue to be informed and supported by the industry advisory group. As a priority action, we are working with the group to develop an aerospace and space sector talent attraction pilot, which includes the implementation of a recruitment toolkit and marketing activities. People moving from the rest of the United Kingdom to Scotland are extremely welcome.

Leith Theatre (Scottish Government Engagement)

6. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it and its agencies have had with Leith theatre. (S6O-02137)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie): I thank Ben Macpherson for the legacy that he left in the role that I have now taken over. Many of the stakeholders have been asking after him. I just wanted to pass that on.

In December, the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, Angus Robertson, chaired a culture resilience round-table

session, which, I am very pleased to say, Leith theatre participated in.

During the height of the pandemic, Leith theatre received £538,000 from our performing arts venues relief fund and the cultural organisations and venues recovery fund. Creative Scotland has had engagement with the organisation and with artists who have presented work at Leith theatre, on a case-by-case basis.

Ben Macpherson: I thank the minister for her kind words and that expansive answer, which highlighted the good work of Leith theatre.

Does the Scottish Government agree that Leith theatre has an important role to play in assisting the Edinburgh festivals in widening their impact throughout the city of Edinburgh and its communities? Would the culture minister agree to visit Leith theatre to learn more about its artistic facilities, community work and plans for the future?

Christina McKelvie: I acknowledge the important role that Leith theatre has played in Edinburgh's festivals, including the successful hosting of numerous contemporary music events at last year's Edinburgh international festival. Leith theatre is part of Edinburgh's rich theatre landscape, and I am sure that festival organisers hear the great case that Ben Macpherson is making for it as a venue.

I invite Ben Macpherson to send me some additional information on the exciting work that is happening at Leith theatre, and I will gladly consider a visit to the theatre with him.

Historic Environment Scotland (Closed Sites)

7. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the Historic Environment Scotland sites that remain closed. (S6O-02138)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie): Historic Environment Scotland has recently announced the reopening of more than 20 properties in care as part of its seasonal reopenings. It has also fully reopened or increased access to more than 40 sites as part of its high-level masonry programme of inspections. The first batch of inspections was completed in summer last year, and work is progressing well on the next batch.

I have asked Historic Environment Scotland to write to Sue Webber with a fuller answer to her question.

Sue Webber: The minister will know that, in 2022, Linlithgow palace had to close due to the masonry inspections that Historic Environment Scotland carried out. It is very much hoped that it

will reopen this summer, but that will be only partially.

Linlithgow palace has recently been victim to vandalism. Conservation teams are working to assess the damage, which will no doubt be costly to repair, and experts will be required to carry out the work.

Can the minister assure me that the closure and lack of full accessibility will not adversely affect Linlithgow's local economy and tourism industry? Can she confirm that the recent vandalism will not hinder the palace's partial reopening date?

Christina McKelvie: As I said, I will get Historic Environment Scotland to write with particular details on timing. I do not have that information to hand. I condemn the vandalism at Linlithgow palace.

We want the programme of assessment to enable all attractions to be opened fully, but we have to err on the side of caution and be safe. However, as I said in my original answer, we are making great progress on that work, and I will get HES to write to Sue Webber on that.

It should be known that the Scottish Government takes heritage crime very seriously, and significant legislation is in place to protect nationally significant historic spaces. Heritage crime can rob us of our history. Linlithgow palace and other places have had enough to deal with over the past few years, with the issues that have been experienced through the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. For the palace to then be vandalised is just not acceptable.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): I, too, would be interested in seeing that reply.

Does the minister agree that the vandalism that took place on Thursday 20 April at historic Linlithgow palace in my constituency is of great concern and highlights the danger of leaving properties closed? That attracts antisocial behaviour and, in some cases, heritage crimes. Does the minister further agree that the reopening of properties does not have just a heritage and tourism role, because properties need to be reopened to promote responsibility around the sites?

Christina McKelvie: Yes. I will ensure that the advice from HES goes to both members who have asked questions.

That act of vandalism in particular and, indeed, any vandalism of our historic sites is completely unacceptable. The incident is subject to a police investigation, so I will not say much more on that. However, as I said, heritage crime can rob us of not only our history but some of our children's future learning, and its impact on communities is enormous. In my new role, I will discuss closely

with Historic Environment Scotland the current safety-related closures at the property, the care required and the impacts of the vandalism, and I will report back to both members on the issue.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On behalf of Conservative members, I welcome the minister to her new role.

I previously asked the minister's predecessor, Neil Gray, about two particular sites in the Highlands and Islands: Kisimul castle on Barra and the Bonawe iron furnace in Argyll, both of which I believe remain temporarily closed. Can the minister give Parliament an update on those sites? Does she recognise the damage to the local economy—especially the tourism economy—of sites across Scotland remaining closed to the public?

Christina McKelvie: I do not have details on those particular sites, but I will get those to Donald Cameron.

I thank Donald Cameron very much for his good wishes. I am looking forward to the work.

It is important to say that we have substantially increased the resource for Historic Environment Scotland in recognition of the impact of not just the pandemic but all the other issues, in particular the impact on its commercial income. The quicker we can get the assessments done, the quicker we can get those places open and the quicker that will have an impact on local economies. Again, I will get the most up-to-date information that I can for Donald Cameron on the two sites that he mentioned.

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the minister on her new role.

At the end of last year, the Scottish Government's budget predicted a fourfold increase in commercial revenue for Historic Environment Scotland. However, at the beginning of this year, 60 Historic Environment Scotland sites remained closed or partially closed to the public. Can the minister advise how Historic Environment Scotland's revenue will rise as predicted if so many of the sites remain closed throughout the summer?

Christina McKelvie: That ties in with the answers to the other questions, the impact that the pandemic and the cost of living crisis have had on those particular attractions, and the issues around the safety and inspection work that needs to be done. As I have said, we have completed one tranche of that work, and we are well on our way to completing the other tranche. That has an impact on the revenue that those attractions can raise.

We have supported Historic Environment Scotland with £72.7 million to maintain Scotland's

heritage and historic environment. That is 82.6 per cent higher than the £39 million of support that it received before the impact of the pandemic in 2019-20. I hope that the fact that we have given that financial commitment reassures the member, but I have also given the commitment to work very closely with Historic Environment Scotland to ensure that we can get all those sites partially, if not completely, open.

Horizon Europe

8. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the constitution secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding engagement with the United Kingdom Government on a potential return to the horizon Europe research programme. (S6O-02139)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish ministers have been clear in their communications that association to horizon Europe is a matter of utmost importance to Scotland and is the best option for the Scottish research and innovation sector.

Given the cross-cutting nature of horizon Europe, many Scottish ministers have an interest in, and engage with their UK and devolved counterparts on, the issue. I attended the interministerial group on UK-EU relations meeting on 20 March, in which I raised the importance of UK association to horizon Europe ahead of observing the trade and co-operation agreement partnership council meeting between the UK and the European Union on 24 March.

The Scottish Government will continue to work together with the UK Government to ensure that Scotland's interests and needs are supported as negotiations are taken forward on EU programmes.

Graham Simpson: The cabinet secretary pledged to press for a return to the programme in last week's programme for government document, so he will be aware that that is the exact outcome that the UK Government seeks, but it must be a good deal for the UK. If that is not possible, there is the alternative pioneer plan, which is backed, should it be required, by the Russell group and others. Will the cabinet secretary commit to working with the UK Government on the horizon and pioneer programmes for the benefit of research and development across these islands?

Angus Robertson: The simple answer to that question is yes. I have worked with UK ministerial counterparts in two recent meetings, the most recent of which I attended with the UK Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly, and Maroš Šefčovič, in relation to a number of normalisations that we

hope to progress in Northern Ireland. I give Graham Simpson and colleagues a commitment that we want a return to the horizon programme.

I will make a minor point in relation to that. We would not be in any of this difficulty if the UK had not left the European Union, and if we, as we voted for in Scotland, had been able to remain in the European Union, we would not be in the difficulty that we are now trying to dig ourselves out of.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary has indicated, the situation with horizon Europe is a product of an unwanted Brexit. However, does he agree that the UK Government should see horizon Europe as part of a process of reopening more doors to our European neighbours and that it should scrap the disastrous Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill and remain aligned with high EU standards?

Angus Robertson: Alasdair Allan is absolutely right: Brexit is, of course, an act of unmitigated self-harm by the UK Government, and it represents a generational disaster for Scotland. Mitigating its impact is a priority for the Scottish Government, and until we are able to rejoin the European Union as an independent nation, we will have to deal with issues such as the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which is reckless, damages legislation and needlessly puts at risk vital protections and standards. It should be withdrawn by the UK Government.

Scotland will continue to align as closely as we can with the safeguards and standards that we benefited from as part of the European Union.

On horizon Europe, the Scottish ministers have been consistently clear that association is a matter of significant importance to the research sector in Scotland.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the conversations that the cabinet secretary is having with the UK Government to rejoin horizon Europe. If Scotland is able to rejoin a European Union programme such as horizon, why is it not making progress towards a replacement for others, such as the Erasmus programme, as has been done in Labour-run Wales, to allow students to come here to study and allow our students the valuable opportunity to study abroad?

Angus Robertson: Frankly, the best way to protect our place in European programmes is to be in the European Union. The last time I looked, the UK Labour Party was supporting the Conservative Party on the UK remaining outside the European Union. That is a statement of fact, and one will hear a lot of that in the months and years to come.

Of course we should seek mitigation wherever we can, but we have to aspire to more than mitigation. Yes, let us do everything that we can do on the horizon programme, and we need to do everything that we can on student mobility across the European Union, but please let us not wave a white flag of surrender and keep ourselves outside the European Union and suffer this damage.

Why does the Scottish Labour Party not return to its pro-European roots and support Scotland rejoining the European Union, which is where it should be?

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): This should be an easy fix, given that the Windsor framework is now agreed. Has the cabinet secretary established in his discussions with UK and EU ministers what the barriers are to ensuring that students will not miss out on the horizon research programme?

Angus Robertson: To be frank, the biggest blockage and impediment to progress relates to the state of negotiations around Northern Ireland and the UK Government's threat to break international law and international treaties as part of the appalling relations and gunboat diplomacy that it has pursued in past months.

We have now moved beyond that—thank goodness. As I previously mentioned in an answer to a question from a Conservative member, having sat in on a meeting between James Cleverly and Maroš Šefčovič, I know that there is reason to believe that progress can be made now that we have got beyond that stage.

When we meet UK Government colleagues, we will do everything that we can to impress on them the importance of making progress but, to be honest, the biggest impediment that there has been to date has been the appalling relations between the UK Government and the European Union. I hope that we are now beyond that.

Justice and Veterans

Criminal Court Verdicts

1. **John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will consider making proven and not proven the two available verdicts in the criminal courts. (S6O-02140)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced yesterday, proposes to abolish the not proven verdict and introduce a two-verdict system of guilty and not guilty. That decision was based on significant high-quality evidence and extensive stakeholder engagement

during the consultation and policy development process. The alternative of introducing verdicts of proven and not proven was considered, and engagement made it clear that guilty and not guilty are unambiguous and easier to understand than the alternatives of proven and not proven. They are familiar verdicts that provide greater clarity and have been proven to work well in other jurisdictions.

John Mason: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer, and I note the point that she feels that guilty and not guilty are more easily understood, but does she accept that not proven is a more honest verdict than not guilty? After all, someone might have committed a crime but there might not be enough evidence or they might get off on a technicality, so not guilty is surely a subset of not proven, but not proven includes other possibilities.

Angela Constance: It is important that we explain why we support the two-verdict system of guilty and not guilty. In many regards, Mr Mason's questioning demonstrates some of the difficulties with the not proven and proven alternative.

Our evidence is clear that the not proven verdict is not understood by jurors and that it can cause stigma for the acquitted and trauma for complainers. Our consultation demonstrated that 50 per cent of respondents favoured guilty and not guilty compared to 41 per cent who favoured proven and not proven.

Support for guilty and not guilty verdicts was particularly strong among legal organisations and third sector organisations—particularly those that support victims and their families. For example, the senators of the College of Justice commented in their response that the two verdicts available ought to be guilty and not guilty. They are commonly understood concepts that are applied in every other English-speaking jurisdiction.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): As well as the removal of the not proven verdict, the victims bill—an excellent name for the bill, I must say—which was introduced yesterday, also proposes another major change, which is the reduction of jury sizes and the numbers that are required for a majority verdict. That is quite a substantial change to how decisions are made about whether someone is convicted. What was the thought process that went behind that proposal? What consultation took place that said that it was the right proposal and direction of travel to take? Also, more importantly, what did the modelling say about the effect that the change would have on the outcomes of trials? Ultimately, that is the key to its success or otherwise.

Angela Constance: It is important that I reassure Mr Greene that extensive consultation has underpinned the bill, particularly the work that

has been undertaken by the victims task force, and significant research has also been undertaken on matters that impact on juries in Scotland and around the developed world. It is important to stress that matters of verdict, jury size and majority are all very closely related and interlinked. It is important for us to maintain a balanced approach and to consider those matters in the round.

Although there are other aspects of the bill that are focused on improving the experience for victims and survivors, as well as undertaking a pilot to address some of the long-standing concerns that we have had about conviction rates for the most serious of sexual offences, including rape, the issues in and around jury size and not proven are not designed to influence conviction rates, because the not proven verdict, the jury size and the jury majority that is required have to apply for all offences.

I appreciate that it is a somewhat complex area, and I am happy to explore the detail further with Mr Greene directly and also more generally as the bill progresses.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I belatedly welcome the cabinet secretary to her post. I also welcome the publication of the bill. I support the general thrust of the bill in terms of the removal of the not proven verdict. However, she will be aware of the concerns around the impact that that will have on juries.

The Government has carried out quite a bit of mock jury research, but I am aware that Professor Cheryl Thomas at University College London has carried out research with real juries in different areas. Is the Government willing to explore, even at this late stage, the possibility of engaging with Professor Thomas at UCL to undertake further research with real juries on the potential impacts in relation to the confusion that has been referred to?

Angela Constance: I assure Mr McArthur that the research that was undertaken, which was specific to Scotland, was indeed extensive and that there is also extensive research elsewhere in Europe. However, it is of course important that, as we progress with this landmark legislation, we have a debate of the very highest standard about all aspects of the bill, and I would expect the Parliament—including committees—to consider a full range of evidence.

On behalf of the Government, I can certainly say that we are always open to exploring all evidence, because, if we are determined to put victims very much at the heart of our criminal justice system, it is imperative that we focus on what works in the real world.

Law on Culpable Homicide

2. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with the Scottish Law Commission regarding its review of the law on homicide, in relation to culpable homicide. (S6O-02141)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Ministers regularly meet the chair of the Scottish Law Commission to discuss the work programme in general. The last such meeting was held in December 2022.

Claire Baker: Gary Robertson from Cowdenbeath died in 2019 as a result of falling from a platform while working at Longannet power station. Following Gary's death, the demolition firm Brown and Mason was fined just £5,000 in a criminal prosecution. The family received no apology from the company; they were not even allowed to make a statement in court, as it was a health and safety prosecution. The £5,000 did not cover the cost of Gary's funeral.

Through a civil case, Mr Robertson's family received damages, but families who lose loved ones at work should not have to rely on civil cases, which diminish their loss. Gary's wife Karen has said:

"We need to make sure the laws designed to hold people accountable can't be manipulated to let those responsible escape justice ... The first thing Gary's employers sent to me wasn't a sympathy card or a phone call—it was his P45."

As we approach international workers memorial day, what will the cabinet secretary do to ensure that families such as Gary's can get justice, given that no cases in Scotland have been prosecuted under the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007?

Angela Constance: I recognise Ms Baker's long-standing and committed interest in this area. There are existing laws that can be used, such as the common law of homicide, the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and, of course, the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007.

It is important to note that, since 2009, 13 cases have been reported to the Crown Office in respect of corporate homicide as well as other charges. Of those cases, nine have resulted in convictions in court, three remain under consideration by the Crown Office and one led to no further action.

Although Ms Baker is correct to say that there have been no convictions under the 2007 act, the cases that I have just referred to have resulted in guilty pleas to breaches of other legislation such as the 1974 health and safety act. However, it is

an area that I would be more than happy to continue to engage with Ms Baker on.

Autistic Women (Protection from Sexual Violence)

3. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its strategy is for protecting autistic women from sexual violence. (S6O-02142)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): We are fully committed to protecting all women from violence as part of our commitment to the equally safe strategy. The “Learning/Intellectual Disability and Autism: Towards Transformation” plan sets out to shape supports, services and attitudes to ensure that the human rights of autistic people and people with learning and intellectual disabilities are respected and protected and that they are empowered to live their lives, the same as everyone else.

Rona Mackay: A recent report revealed that 90 per cent of autistic women are victims of sex attacks, but very few of those are reported to the police. The Scottish Women’s Autism Network has teamed up with Police Scotland to raise awareness and create strategies to help that situation. Does the minister believe that an early diagnosis of their condition would help women to cope and might prevent them from becoming victims in the first place?

Siobhian Brown: I do. It is essential that perpetrators of sexual violence are held to account and that the onus for change and action is focused on the perpetrator and not the victim. That is why our equally safe strategy prioritises robust responses to perpetrators and aims to change the attitudes that allow such behaviour.

Rona Mackay is correct: support for survivors is vital. A diagnosis can be essential in enabling an autistic person to access relevant information and support. We encourage all victims of sexual violence to report crimes, and we welcome Police Scotland’s work to better understand those with neurological divergence in order to ensure that victims are treated respectfully.

Veterans’ Families (Support)

4. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what support it can provide to families of veterans. (S6O-02143)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Scottish Government fully recognises the importance of supporting the families of veterans where they face challenges as a result of service or events such as the transition to civilian life. We therefore seek to incorporate them into our support for

veterans wherever possible. For example, partners and spouses of veterans are eligible for veterans employability support such as the going forward into employment scheme. We fund the national education officer role to support both service children and the children of veterans, and projects that are supporting veterans’ families are eligible for funding through the Scottish veterans fund.

Christine Grahame: I appreciate that this is perhaps not the minister’s portfolio now.

The wives and partners of people who are serving in the armed forces, such as those who live in my constituency at Glencorse barracks, find it very difficult to sustain employment because of regular relocation. Is there a role for Women’s Enterprise Scotland, for example, in assisting partners to establish their own businesses that they can take with them as they move around?

Siobhian Brown: I will get back to the member about the specific point. Inspired by the Scottish Government’s supportive can do places programme, the Leuchars co-working hub for spouses and partners of veterans opened in 2017. It was the first hub in what has now become the Military Coworking Network, which is a network of co-working spaces that are close to military bases throughout the United Kingdom. The criteria for the women’s returner programme, which assists women who have been out of work for six odd months to successfully return to the workforce, was extended to include female veterans, veterans’ spouses and partners as well as service personnel. Skills Development Scotland continues to work with the service and veterans’ families in order to provide careers information, advice and guidance. For example, SDS advisers work once a month at community centres in Helensburgh and are considering how to set up regular opportunities across Scotland, including the Borders. Mr Dey, the minister with responsibility for veterans, would be happy to meet Christine Grahame to discuss that further.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Glasgow’s Helping Heroes, which is run by the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association—Forces Help, offers a vital service across greater Glasgow, offering holistic support to veterans and their families via its one-stop shop in Govan. For every pound that is invested in that service, Glasgow’s Helping Heroes delivers £6.63 of social value back to the Scottish economy. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of that service, and will it consider allocating funds to scale up the programme as a model of exemplar quality in providing support for veterans in Scotland?

Siobhian Brown: I do not have the information to hand, but I am happy to write to the member regarding the organisation that he mentions.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I can attest to the fact that the Leuchars project working hub is a fantastic exercise.

The education of the children of veterans and members of the armed forces is characterised by constant disruption as the families move from base to base. In England, there is a pupil premium specifically for service children. Should there be a similar one for Scotland, in addition to the pupil equity fund, to help those very children here?

Siobhian Brown: The national education officer for children and young people of armed forces families, a post that is funded by the Scottish Government, has been undertaking a national data collection exercise with accompanying analysis to help put together an accurate picture of the distribution and number of service children in Scotland. The data reports that are collated from that exercise will be shared more widely with key stakeholders and used to improve educational outcomes for service children and young people.

Diversion from Prosecution

5. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress is being made in the use of diversion from prosecution in Scotland. (S6O-02144)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Decisions relating to prosecution policy, including the decision to offer diversion from prosecution are, of course, matters for the Lord Advocate as independent prosecutor. However, with diversion cases at their highest level in the past decade, noting some caution given to the impact of Covid-19, we welcome the recent “Joint review of diversion from prosecution” report and will work with justice partners to consider its recommendations. We know that diversion can allow individuals to address a range of issues or needs that have contributed to their alleged offending behaviour at the earliest opportunity, helping to improve outcomes for individuals and keeping communities safe.

Audrey Nicoll: Diversion from prosecution provides an accused person with support to address the underlying causes of their behaviour and, as the cabinet secretary has outlined, the number of diversion cases commenced rose by 12 per cent between 2019-20 and 2020-21.

The cabinet secretary also referred to the joint review of diversion from prosecution, which found that, although some community justice partnerships expressed readiness to respond to an anticipated increase in referrals, others were

less confident about their capacity to manage an increase against the backdrop of already stretched resources.

I acknowledge that prosecution policy is a matter for the Lord Advocate but, given that future reform of, for example, bail and release from custody is likely to place additional demands on community justice agencies, can the cabinet secretary provide an assurance that the Scottish Government will review funding arrangements to maximise use of diversion at the earliest opportunity, as was recommended in the report?

Angela Constance: The Scottish Government is committed to supporting community justice services as part of our wider focus on reducing crime and reoffending. We continue to protect the community justice budget and, in 2023-24, we will invest a total of £134 million in community justice, including £123 million to local authority justice social work services for the provision of community interventions.

That investment contributes to our long-standing aim of encouraging a shift in the balance between the use of custody and justice in the community where that is appropriate, reflecting evidence that community interventions can be more effective at reducing reoffending and assisting with rehabilitation than short-term custodial sentences. However, we very much recognise the challenging budgetary situation for our delivery partners, including local authorities, and we will continue to work in collaboration to maximise the use of available resources and understand the issues as they arise. Of course, we very much welcome the joint inspectorate review report into diversion from prosecution and will work with justice partners to consider its recommendations and our response to those.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): In the three years up to 2021, hundreds of alleged criminals caught by the police rejected the offer of a fiscal fine as an alternative to prosecution. However, having done so, they faced no further action, despite the previous Deputy First Minister telling Parliament that refusal would be treated as

“a request by the alleged offender to be prosecuted”. — [Official Report, 23 June 2021; c 64.]

Such smoke and mirrors can only shake public faith in Scottish justice. Can the cabinet secretary tell me whether those who refuse are now being prosecuted and provide the most recent figures for comparison?

Angela Constance: I am sure that I do not need to repeat the fact that prosecution—and all issues in and around it—are matters for the Lord Advocate and the Crown Office. I will accept the point that, if our justice system says that we are going to follow a course of action, it is important

that we follow through on intent. I will look at the matter that Mr Findlay has raised with me today and will seek to provide him with further information.

Police Station Closures (North-East Division)

6. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many police stations have been closed down in the area covered by Police Scotland's north-east division since the force's foundation in 2013. (S6O-02145)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Police Scotland has confirmed that, across the north-east division area, 21 facilities have closed since 2013. It should be noted that five of those closures relate to relocations in the same area, with a further two locations having been acquired in Aberdeen.

Service provision is carefully considered by Police Scotland prior to any decision being made, including through consultation. Moving officers to modern, co-located accommodation supports the long-term vision of policing, which includes enhanced partnership working and responding to the changing needs of communities while also maintaining visibility and public confidence.

Alexander Burnett: This month, Police Scotland celebrates its 10th anniversary, but the Scottish National Party's centralisation project has come at the cost of local police on the ground.

In my constituency, Kemnay police station's closure is keenly felt. As the cabinet secretary is aware, a quarter of all Scottish police counters have shut since the forces merged, in 2013, and there are plans for more closures.

Seventy-three divisional offices have been lost from the north-east region, all thanks to SNP neglect. What can the cabinet secretary tell my constituents who contact me about increasing numbers of cases of antisocial behaviour, vandalism, theft and drug abuse—all due to a reduced police presence?

Angela Constance: It is important that Mr Burnett tells his constituents that, since 2017-18, this Government has doubled the capital budget that is available to Police Scotland, which now amounts to around £50 million. It is also important to stress that, although police stations remain important, these are, as he well knows, matters for Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority, particularly in relation to the implementation of their estate strategy, which was published in 2019.

Most people recognise the importance of the co-location of public services and how that improves partnership and collaborative working, which is all to the benefit of improving safety for communities the length and breadth of Scotland. Mr Burnett

might be interested to know that, as of the end of 2022, there are now 64 co-locations, which currently make up 21 per cent of the Police Scotland estate. That surely has to be a move forward.

Child Sexual Exploitation (Prevention)

7. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the justice secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding action to prevent child sexual exploitation. (S6O-02146)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Keeping children safe from sexual exploitation and abuse is a key priority for the Scottish Government, and, in the coming weeks, I will meet the Minister for Children and Young People to discuss the matter further.

We are committed to ensuring that robust child protection measures are in place, and we are working with partners to prevent abuse and to intervene, so that risk and harm to children and young people is recognised early and acted on quickly and effectively. That includes online harms, and we continue to press the United Kingdom Government to ensure that its Online Safety Bill provides robust protection for children and holds the technology industry to account.

Pam Gosal: In East Dunbartonshire, in my region, the number of crimes that are recorded as "indecent photos of children" has increased by 140 per cent since 2017 and by 200 per cent since the year ending 2021. A lot of actions can be taken in the short term to prevent the tidal wave of that horrendous crime. What preventative actions is the Scottish Government taking, and how is the effectiveness of those actions being measured?

Angela Constance: Ms Gosal raises some very important points, particularly in and around measuring the effectiveness of interventions. I am closely interested in that, not just as it relates to the justice portfolio but as a germane matter for all Scottish Government ministers who have responsibilities in this area.

On the action that we are taking, Ms Gosal will be aware of the revised national guidance for child protection in Scotland, which was published in 2021. That provides the most up-to-date information on the work to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation and the support that is available in local areas such as Ms Gosal's to develop effective, evidence-based responses.

The Government's overall response is framed by the Promise, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Scotland's getting it right for every child approach. The matter that Ms Gosal raises around the sexual abuse and exploitation of children on online platforms is

important and is one on which we will continue to engage constructively and collaboratively with the UK Government, bearing in mind where some of the powers rest.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in question 8 if I can get succinct questions and answers to match.

Under-25s Pleading or Found Guilty

8. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many people who have been sentenced for a crime were aged under 25 when they pled guilty, or were found guilty, since 26 January 2022. (S6O-02147)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Data is currently available only up to the end of 2022. From 26 January 2022 to 31 December 2022, 10,725 offenders who were sentenced for a crime were aged under 25 when they pled guilty or were found guilty. It should be noted that, when an offender is subject to multiple separate proceedings, that offender will be counted multiple times.

Murdo Fraser: Without referencing any particular case, the cabinet secretary will be aware that there is widespread public concern that, under current sentencing guidelines, someone convicted of raping a 13-year-old girl could avoid prison and be given a non-custodial sentence because they were aged under 25 at the time of the offence.

I know that sentencing guidelines are set independently of Scottish ministers, but, ultimately, the Parliament has the power to set sentencing, including setting minimum sentences for offences, as it has done in a number of cases. Does the cabinet secretary think that it is acceptable that a convicted rapist should not be sent to prison? If she does not, what will she do about it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I ask the cabinet secretary to respond, I remind all members that a case that might be seen to have been referred to in Mr Fraser's question is a live case, so any references thereto should take into account the law that is applicable to such references.

Angela Constance: For the avoidance of doubt, I will not be commenting on live cases of individual offenders who are either in the community or in our prison establishments.

I assure Mr Fraser that I have a long history in and around the need to tackle sexual offending. It is important to recognise the legislative framework that was passed by the Parliament, which frames the duties and responsibilities of the Scottish Sentencing Council. It is also important to put on record that, under the sentencing guidelines for young people, nothing prohibits the use of

punishment or imprisonment in informing the sentencing that is undertaken by our independent judiciary.

Matters of rape are dealt with in the High Court. The High Court has unlimited powers in such matters and can use life sentencing for rape convictions. I hope that it is of at least some reassurance to Mr Fraser that 98 per cent of all rape convictions across all age groups in Scotland result in a custodial sentence.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): It is the view of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland that young offenders institutions are inappropriate for bairns. What steps are being taken to ensure that young offenders have access to appropriate care and, where it is deemed necessary, appropriate secure accommodation?

Angela Constance: When it is decided that it is appropriate for a child under 18 to be deprived of their liberty, it is the view of the Government that they should be placed in secure accommodation as opposed to a young offenders institution. That is on the basis of our commitments around the Promise and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which are cross-party and cross-parliamentary commitments.

It is also important to put on record that, when deprivation of liberty is required, secure accommodation is the best place to manage risk and the needs of high-risk young offenders.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on justice and veterans. Before we move on to the next item of business, there will be a short pause to allow front-bench teams to shift position, should they wish to do so.

Homelessness Prevention and Housing Supply

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-08685, in the name of Mark Griffin, on homelessness prevention and housing supply. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

14:56

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am the owner of a rented property in the North Lanarkshire Council area.

Yesterday, I joked with the Minister for Housing that not many of his colleagues would be welcomed to their posts in an Opposition motion. However, we and organisations such as Shelter and Homes for Scotland have been calling for a dedicated housing minister for months, and we hope that he will bring a long-overdue and renewed focus on tackling our housing emergency. I appreciated his candour and expertise when we worked together in committee, and I hope that he will take that approach into Government.

Although we welcome the change in personnel, we also need a change in Government direction, because the task is urgent. Since our previous debate on the topic, the housing emergency has, as predicted, become worse. The new homes pipeline has continued to dry up; the rent freeze has failed, with rents increasing at their highest pace in a decade; some 10,000 children are in temporary accommodation, which is a record high; and at least 125 social tenants have been evicted from their homes under the so-called eviction ban.

In addition, the Government's temporary accommodation task and finish group has confirmed what we already knew—that the ambition of the "Ending Homelessness Together" action plan has not matched realities on the ground. Furthermore, the Scottish Housing Regulator now reports that

"there is an emerging risk of systemic failure in ... homelessness services."

In advance of today's debate, Crisis in Scotland has shared with me—and many other members, I am sure—cases of households that it has been supporting. One family is trapped in local authority temporary accommodation that is infested with mice and rats. As a result of damp and mould, children are experiencing recurring viral illnesses,

with their general practitioner recommending strongly that they leave those premises.

In another case, Tracy, a woman in her 40s with Crohn's disease and Asperger's, has spent more than four years in temporary accommodation in Edinburgh. She was left with no hot water for 18 months. However, it was not the lack of hot water but the severe damp and mould that rotted her wheelchair, which led to her being isolated, and destroyed old family photographs, school reports and treasured memories of her children's time as youngsters. In Scotland in 2023, it took Tracy appearing on the STV programme "Scotland Tonight" for her to be offered a new home.

A homeless person in Midlothian faces a 96-week wait for their homelessness application to be closed. Across the country, the average wait is more than six months. Worse still—this is a national scandal—is the fact that at least 157 homeless Scots died in the past year, seemingly without Government response or reaction.

Labour's motion lays down the task at hand for the new minister. If we want to end the homelessness emergency and the crisis in temporary accommodation, we need more homes. We need new social and private homes, and we need empty homes to be brought back into the social sector for living in.

I echo the key recommendation of the temporary accommodation task and finish group report. The Government must set an interim target of delivering 38,500 social homes by 2026. That number has not been plucked out of thin air but is from independent academic research that was commissioned by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, Shelter and the Chartered Institute of Housing, which have demonstrated clearly that that would reduce housing need.

Shelter points out that social approvals are at their worst level since 2013 and starts are at their worst level since 2016. Both are down by 20 per cent. That means that we are seeing progress being rolled back. At the current rate, there is a real fear that the 2032 target will not be met.

We are absolutely clear that targets in themselves will not build a single home. However, they sharpen minds, such as those of the ministers who are appointed to build the homes that we need. Because the wider housing crisis continues, we need an all-tenure target, too. Success in the supply programme cannot be separated from success in supply in the wider market.

Homes for Scotland points to the Government's research that shows that, in 2019, developer contributions were worth more than £30,000 for each private home that was built. Its survey found

that three in 10 affordable homes were delivered because of the building of private homes.

That is why we are calling on Parliament to back Homes for Scotland's call to return to the target of building 25,000 homes annually in order to start making progress on catching up on the homes that should have been built over the past five years.

We cannot support the Government's amendment because it avoids a commitment to supporting the recommendations that are contained in its own group's report. I am sure that the Minister for Housing, having spent time, with me, on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, would not expect me to accept the Government's claim that it is delivering investment in local government core funding—not when the vice-president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities was at the committee yesterday talking about the £1 billion shortfall, and not when Scottish National Party presidents and resource spokespersons at COSLA echo the same call.

The fact that no local authority has been able to fulfil all the rapid rehousing aims shows that, without proper Government support, the rapid rehousing transitions that are envisaged by the Government are impossible. During January's debate, the minister's predecessor repeatedly referred to the work of the group that the Government had rightly set up. Now that it has been given a chance to respond to that group, the Government has all but dismissed the very recommendations that it has made.

That is no fresh start. It is just a long list of rehashed promises—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Griffin, I take it that you are concluding, because you are over your time.

Mark Griffin: Certainly, Presiding Officer.

I hope that that will change with the change of minister. The minister will absolutely have my support if it does.

I move,

That the Parliament acknowledges the recommendations of the Temporary Accommodation Task and Finish Group and urges the Scottish Government to act upon them as soon as possible to tackle the rising tide of homelessness; welcomes the long overdue appointment of a dedicated Minister for Housing to the Scottish Government to focus minds; regrets the cuts to the affordable housing supply programme in the Scottish Government's Budget, in light of the risk that its house building target will not be met; agrees that the Scottish Government should, at a minimum, adequately fund the delivery of new social homes through the Affordable Housing Supply Programme to meet an interim target of delivering 38,500 social homes by 2026; considers that the Scottish Government should commit to a target of building 25,000 all-tenure new homes annually, and presses the Scottish Government to publish a review of

funding of homelessness services, including any identified funding gaps and the provision of continued funding for Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans and the prevention of homelessness.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Paul McLennan, to speak to and move amendment S6M-08685.2.

15:02

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

I thank Mark Griffin for his kind words. Mark and I met yesterday, and I am keen to work with him, Mr Briggs and the other Opposition parties going forward.

The Government's ambition is for everyone to have a warm, energy-efficient and affordable home that meets their needs. That is why, since 2007, we have prioritised housing, and we will continue to do so. It is a key part of our interdependent missions, as published last week, through our mission to prioritise our public services and focus on equality and opportunity.

We are proud of having now delivered 118,124 affordable homes since 2007, over 83,000 of which are for social rent, including 21,313 council homes. That is a first in a generation. To put it in context, that compares with the building of just six council homes by the previous Labour and Liberal coalition Government.

Across the four years between 2018 and 2022, Scotland delivered 59 per cent more affordable homes per head of population than England, 72 per cent more than Labour-controlled Wales and 24 per cent more than Northern Ireland. Over that period, we also delivered nine times more social rented homes per head of population than England. That is the context. However, we need to do more. I acknowledge that, and I will address it later in my speech.

We are working hard alongside our housing partners to deliver on our next target of 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, of which at least 70 per cent will be available for social rent and 10 per cent will be in our remote, rural and island communities. I am keen, as I mentioned before in the members' business debate, to go out and visit rural and island communities in the summer.

That is backed by more than £3.5 billion over the current parliamentary session. That figure has not changed. The Labour motion mentions a reduction in the budget, but the £3.5 billion commitment is still there. Affordable housing commitments need to run over a number of years, which is why we have provided local authorities with resource planning assumptions for future

years, and why we set out our medium-term investment plans in the multiyear capital spending review through to 2025-26.

We know that there are challenges ahead. The impacts of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have increased prices. Alongside the United Kingdom Government's disastrous mismanagement of the economy, that has led to spiralling energy costs and soaring inflation. Alongside the impacts on labour supply and trade due to a hard Brexit, inflation is having a significant impact on our spending power.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The minister has not yet mentioned the report of the temporary accommodation task and finish group. Does he accept what that report says and its recommendations?

Paul McLennan: I will address that point later in my speech.

The 2023-24 budget shows a real-terms reduction of 4.5 per cent in Barnett formula funding since 2021-22. It is estimated that construction inflation, which is incredibly important, is between 15 and 20 per cent at the moment.

However, that will not stop us delivering affordable homes for people across communities. By doing so, we support a total investment package of around £18 billion and up to 15,000 jobs each year while making an important contribution to tackling child poverty and ending homelessness. We have made clear in our "Ending Homelessness Together" strategy that tackling homelessness and ending rough sleeping are an absolute priority.

I turn to homelessness funding that is provided through the local government settlement. We provide local authorities with £30.5 million annually for their work to prevent homelessness. Separately, we are providing a total of £100 million from our multiyear ending homelessness together fund to transform the homelessness system. Of that funding, £52.5 million supports Scotland's transition to the rapid rehousing and housing first approaches.

Homeless households are entitled to support from their council and to temporary accommodation if they need it. That is an important safety net. I am aware, however, that far too many households spend too long in temporary accommodation, and I am determined to see that change. Local authorities work hard to meet the needs and preferences of homeless households, but I acknowledge that some areas, particularly our large cities, face significant challenges in sourcing settled homes of the right type and size.

I will be meeting the key local authorities—the City of Edinburgh Council and Glasgow City

Council. I know that the previous cabinet secretary, Shona Robison, also met them, and I will continue that. Specifically, we will work on the nuances that are needed in those areas. Fourteen local authorities have had reductions in the use of temporary accommodation, and it is important that we learn lessons from the local authorities that have done well in that regard.

It is important that we remember that not all temporary accommodation is unsuitable and that local authorities try where possible to convert or flip temporary accommodation to permanent tenancies. That reduces transitions for homeless households, but it relies on the property being of the right size and type to meet the household's needs. Our statistics show that, on average, households with children spend longer in temporary accommodation compared with those without children. That is because local authorities take a person-centred approach to finding the right permanent home for each family. Doing so allows families time to adjust in difficult periods in their lives and helps to minimise the potential disruption to their established support networks and links to their community.

I am grateful for the work of the temporary accommodation task and finish group. We are considering its recommendations and we will respond shortly.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, minister.

Paul McLennan: I conclude by reinforcing the commitment to work closely with housing partners as we seek to reduce the numbers of people in temporary accommodation and continue to deliver affordable homes so that everyone in Scotland has a place that they can call home.

I move amendment S6M-08685.2, to leave out from "urges" to end and insert:

"agrees that the Scottish Government should respond positively to tackle the unacceptable numbers in temporary accommodation; recognises the expertise and partnership working between local and national government, third sector organisations and those with lived experience to tackle, prevent and end homelessness, building on existing strong homelessness and housing rights; welcomes the continued investment through local government core funding and the Scottish Government's £100 million Ending Homelessness Together transformation fund to continue with a rapid rehousing and housing first approach; acknowledges that Scotland leads the way in delivering affordable housing, with 118,124 affordable homes delivered since 2007, 83,291 of which were for social rent, including 21,313 council homes, and welcomes the Scottish Government's continued investment of £3.5 billion over the current parliamentary session for the delivery of more affordable homes towards its 2032 target."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Miles Briggs to speak to and move amendment S6M-08685.1. You have up to four minutes, Mr Briggs.

15:08

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this debate on housing in its debating time. It follows the debate that the Scottish Conservatives brought to Parliament in January, calling on the Scottish Government to declare a homelessness emergency. I thank the organisations that provided the very helpful briefings ahead of today's debate, and I also thank them for the work that they do across Scotland. They undertake life-saving and life-changing work in all our communities, so I pay tribute to them, especially for the work that they do here, in the capital, which is in my region.

At the beginning of this week, the *Edinburgh Evening News* reported on the 40 homeless deaths in the capital in 2022, which compared to an estimated 21 deaths in 2019. I express my condolences to the families and friends of those individuals. That shows that the crisis here, in the capital, is only getting worse.

Edinburgh is at the epicentre of the housing and homelessness crisis in Scotland today, and we need the same concerted efforts that there have been regarding the drug deaths crisis. The challenges that the capital is facing are extensive. Edinburgh has a quarter of all children in Scotland who are living in temporary accommodation today. The number of homelessness applications has risen to a record level, with Edinburgh having the highest number of live homelessness applications—6,198 in the past year alone.

After 15 years of Scottish National Party Government, Scotland is facing a housing and homelessness emergency, and we need the Government to act on it. The fact is that, in Scotland, a household becomes homeless every 18 minutes. As Shelter states in its briefing for today's debate, a record number of children—almost 10,000—are trapped in temporary accommodation. That represents a 120 per cent increase since 2014. We are seeing rising levels of homelessness, with a 40 per cent increase in the number of households—14,458 of our fellow Scots—having to live in temporary accommodation compared with when the Government came into office. As the Scottish Housing Regulator has warned, homelessness services in Scotland today are

“at emerging risk of systemic failure”.

We therefore need a new approach and new solutions to be developed. Here, in the capital, we need an Edinburgh-specific focus. I welcome what the minister said in that regard, because I know that, in last week's members' business debate, MSPs said that they wanted such an approach to be taken urgently.

Delivery of the homes that Scotland needs—both social homes and private homes—needs to be planned in a way that it has not been planned to date. We need a fresh focus on the true reality that people in Scotland face today. I do not think that the Scottish Government has grasped the issue of hidden homelessness—that is certainly not counted in the statistics.

I believe that new extra-care housing models can make a real difference, so I want the Scottish Government to focus on that area. Following our conversations, I hope that the new minister will prioritise that. Recently, I attended the official opening of Rowan Alba's Thorntree mill properties in the city, which provide nine homes for formerly street-homeless men. I pay tribute to Helen Carlin, the founder and chief executive officer of the Edinburgh-based charity, who stepped down after working in this field for 26 years. Helen started Rowan Alba in 1997 with the aim of creating a new approach to tackling homelessness. The work that it is doing in the capital should be rolled out across Scotland, so I hope that the minister will agree to visit the charity with me.

The new minister faces many challenges on all fronts, including a record number of children living in temporary accommodation, rising levels of homelessness, the negative impact of the rent control act—the Cost of Living (Tenant Protection) (Scotland) Act 2022—the lack of a cladding accord, local government and housing budget cuts, house building targets not being met and the potential collapse of the rental market in Scotland. I wish the minister well—and Scottish Conservatives will work with him—but it is now time for the SNP-Green Government to pause and reflect on what has gone wrong in Scotland. The Parliament needs to recognise that we face a housing emergency. Collectively, we need to act not only to save lives but to give everyone in Scotland the home that they deserve.

I move amendment S6M-08685.1, to insert at end:

“; notes that there has been a 12% decrease in new home starts in the year to end September 2022, compared with the previous 12 months, which adds to the housing shortfall of more than 110,000 homes since 2007; calls on the Scottish Government to look to develop new extra-care housing models to provide for people with additional support needs, and further calls on ministers to spearhead an urgent Scottish Housing Emergency Action Plan.”

15:13

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The number of children in temporary accommodation is at its highest level since records began. The number of households in temporary accommodation has gone up by a third in the past 10 years, and such households are stuck in that accommodation for a month longer than they were

just five years ago. That means that more families have their lives in limbo for much longer.

However, the Government is failing to meet its own interim target to provide 38,500 social homes, and the Government's response has been to cut the capital housing budget. That is all that we get from the SNP Government after 15 years. It is an absolutely woeful record.

None of that is my analysis. All of it comes from the Government's wonderfully titled task and finish group, which was appointed by the minister. Its findings were published on the Government's official website and were damned by its own advisers. The report's recommendations are equally sound: more social housing, better use of existing stock and more support to help people to move on.

The new housing minister needs to have a laser-like focus on building more social housing. He needs to look at the whole pipeline, including skills, workforce supply, planning blockages, access to land, unit prices and so much more. It is a lot of hard graft, but that hard graft could make a difference.

I am a strong supporter of social housing, but that will not solve the crisis on its own. We also need a healthy private rented sector with new builds, and we need to create the right business environment for investment in that to happen. I want a mix of properties including mid-market rents. Creative housing associations can be part of that mix as well. Let us create that positive partnership with house builders, the private rented sector and housing associations to tackle the challenges together.

I was pleased to see yesterday's announcement on housing for workers in rural areas. There are acute problems in areas such as mine, in the east neuk. We supported the introduction of control areas for short-term lets, even though we opposed the heavy-handed licensing system, but we are really frustrated at the snail's pace of implementation of those control areas. We also support the council tax proposals for second homes, but they simply do not go far enough. I want to explore the use of licensing and planning to control the numbers.

My constituents on modest incomes do not get a look-in when it comes to buying those properties, which are also up for sale as holiday lets or second homes. They are simply priced out of the market—and they have no chance of getting on the council house waiting list, where demand is through the roof. They are forced to live in overcrowded and often damp housing, which is often miles away. Or, worse, they simply have to move out of the area altogether. That deprives local employers of good employees and hollows

out the community, threatening the future of shops, schools, libraries and other public services.

I want second homes and holiday lets—I am clear about that—because they bring economic wellbeing. However, too much of a good thing is a bad thing, which is why we need controls. It is why I am desperate for control areas, more social housing and a healthy private rented sector.

My final plea is for the use of rural housing burdens and the Communities Housing Trust, which allows people to get on the housing ladder but anchors those homes for local people. The trust needs support from enlightened landowners but also from an enabling Government.

With all of that together, we might have a hope of tackling the housing crisis that exists in Scotland. I hope that the minister is up to the challenge.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise the chamber that we are tight for time. Members will therefore have to stick to their time allocations. We move to the open debate.

15:17

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): My casework is currently inundated with constituents experiencing housing issues. Families are stuck on waiting lists for permanent homes. Individuals are stuck in unsuitable temporary accommodation, living with damp, mould, mice and rats. Students are presenting as homeless because they cannot find affordable accommodation where they study. With the appointment of a specific housing minister, it appears that the Scottish Government is beginning to take this homelessness and housing crisis seriously.

Scotland is experiencing a housing emergency, with a record number of children trapped in temporary accommodation. As of September 2022, 9,130 children were reported to be living in temporary accommodation, which is an increase of more than 100 per cent on the figure a decade ago. The number of families presenting as homeless has also increased massively, with 40 per cent more households in temporary accommodation than was the case in 2014.

The City of Edinburgh Council alone is facing a £65 million bill for tackling homelessness. Local authorities across Scotland will also be buckling under the weight of the overflowing housing sector. No local authority was able to meet its rapid rehousing aims within the projected five years. Without allocated resources from the Scottish Government, local authorities will continue to fall short of their housing aims.

The temporary accommodation task and finish group has made distinct recommendations about

how to begin to solve the homelessness crisis, and the Scottish Government must take significant action now to address those recommendations. If it does not act now and provide resources to meaningfully implement the recommendations, they will not be worth the paper that they are written on.

Homelessness can affect any group. It is not just families that are suffering in the current housing crisis. Yesterday, I asked the Scottish Government what its response was to a recent report by NUS Scotland that said that a fifth of international students in Scotland had experienced homelessness during their studies. The report found that international students were almost twice as likely to find themselves homeless as home students were. That is unacceptable, and the Scottish Government must act now to ensure that international students are welcomed into Scotland and looked after during their studies.

In January this year, I hosted a student housing round-table event to address problems that students are having in sourcing accommodation. I was told a similar story of students being unable to source accommodation, with many having to sleep on friends' couches or to source accommodation far outside the city that they were studying in.

The Scottish Government must also do more to hold universities accountable for the housing needs of their students. Further investment in overpriced purpose-built student accommodation will not solve the problem. The Scottish Government must act now to begin solving the multitude of problems in Scotland's housing sector.

15:21

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I, too, welcome another debate on the issue of housing and how we realise high-quality dwellings for all our constituents as a right and not just a commodity.

In preparing for the debate, I reflected on a meeting that I had earlier this week with two people who used to run prominent housing associations here in the capital over several decades. We talked about the pressures that we face and the causes that have brought us to this point. They have worked through the different stages of the context that we are in and what we have gone through as a society.

First, we had the post-war expansion of social and council housing, which was followed by the selling off of that stock by many providers. Although that realised a successful outcome for individuals, it presented a challenge for us as a society that was not met. We then had the realisation of devolution and the huge positive

impact that that has brought for social and council housing here in Scotland. A greater quantity of affordable homes has been provided since 1999. Since 2007, 118,000 affordable homes have been built, such that we have 30 per cent more homes per 10,000 of the population compared with elsewhere in the UK. In addition, in 2014, the right to buy was ended, which means that we are constantly increasing the stock that is available to citizens.

We have also had the implementation of the innovative housing first programme, which has been very successful here in Edinburgh and elsewhere, the strategising behind "Housing to 2040" and the commitment, which is still being maintained, of £3.5 billion-worth of investment.

However, despite that positive progress, as we have heard from members across the chamber, demand continues to grow and there is still a challenge, particularly here in Edinburgh. That is due to a variety of factors, and inflation has added to that. Indeed, this month, it was reported that, on average, 43 per cent of the income of people in Edinburgh is spent on rent. That is a very significant figure. As well as presenting a significant challenge for people in affording housing here in the capital, that takes money out of other aspects of the real economy.

We need more housing. In the private sector, the situation is influenced by a number of external challenges to do with investment, the inflationary pressures on building materials and the monetary effect of the availability of credit. We must continue to work with partners to increase the provision of private housing. It is clear, as others have said, that we need to build more social housing. That has been emphasised by the Government.

In a position of significant challenges for the public finances, we need innovative solutions, as has been argued, and we need to consider how we raise more finance. Devolution of capital gains tax and dividend income tax would certainly be welcome. In addition, is there more that we could do with land and buildings transaction tax, such as a surcharge on overseas buyers, as the UK Government has had for a number of years?

I believe that now is the time that we should work together collectively towards a land value tax. That will take time to realise, and we will need political consensus, but the benefits that that could bring to the public finances and the change that it could bring in terms of more equity of wealth would be significant.

Housing is a holistic issue. It is great that the three housing ministers are here. The issue is also about land reform, planning and finance, so I am glad that the Government is taking a holistic

approach. I look forward to working with the housing ministers and colleagues across the chamber to realise affordable housing as a right, not a commodity—as a home, not just a house.

15:26

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Mr Griffin and the Labour group for using their parliamentary time to discuss the recommendations of the temporary accommodation task and finish group, which I have read with interest.

Let us look at the situation in which we find ourselves in Scotland, specifically in regard to temporary accommodation. The latest Scottish Government figures, from the end of September 2022, state that there are 14,458 households in temporary accommodation in Scotland, which is an increase on the previous year's figure.

The same Scottish Government report advises that 9,130 children are recorded as being in temporary accommodation, which is the highest level recorded so far, with the figure increasing year on year. Out of the almost 15,000 households in temporary accommodation, 7,010 of them have at least one additional support need identified—in simple terms, that means that they need support on a day-to-day basis. In temporary accommodation, there are 903 households in which at least one person is living with a physical disability and 529 households in which at least one person is living with a learning disability.

What is not mentioned in those appalling figures and is not mentioned anywhere in the 15 recommendations is concern for women's homelessness and the causes behind it. Although homelessness has many common triggers, ranging from household disputes, relationship breakdown, financial problems, being asked to leave the family home and so on, the most common trigger for women is domestic physical or sexual abuse.

I strongly agree with Scottish Women's Aid when it states that it is

“very disappointed that this important opportunity to consider the distinct gendered differences and underlying causes of women's homelessness and, correspondent approaches to prevent it, has not been taken”.

We should be taking this opportunity to deal with the scourge of women's hidden homelessness, but again we find that the concerns of women are not recognised. I am worried that the Government's amendment removes the need for urgency, because women's homelessness must be addressed now.

Scottish Women's Aid goes on to say that “homelessness is inherently gendered”. An

understanding of the distinct experiences of women and children and the underlying causes of their risk of homelessness is essential if we are to develop effective responses in Scotland to tackle and prevent it.

It is concerning that statistics for gender-based homelessness are not included, but that is understandable when we know that that type of temporary accommodation is not registered. Many women look to sofa surf, using friends' generosity to remove themselves from the perils of an abusive relationship.

If we do not focus on the specifics, we miss the chance to make necessary transformation for everlasting change, and all of these good intentions become obsolete if the housing stock is simply not there to ensure safe and permanent accommodation. Therefore, housing stock must be addressed urgently.

Paul McLennan: I will be brief, because I am aware of the time. Scottish Women's Aid's “Policies Not Promises” report, which came out on 25 April, mentioned some of the issues that the member talks about. We have already arranged a meeting with Scottish Women's Aid to discuss the report in more detail. I have information on why people are asked to leave, and domestic abuse is an element of that. Domestic abuse is an issue that I take seriously, and I am meeting Scottish Women's Aid to discuss it shortly.

Roz McCall: I sincerely welcome that, and I am glad to hear that the Government is actually doing something about it. However, it is very relevant that it is mentioned in the debate.

I welcome the Scottish Conservatives' amendment and its call on the Scottish Government to develop new extra-care housing models to provide for people with additional support needs, which will intrinsically change the process by taking into consideration the specific needs of the individual.

I hope that we will now get a guarantee from the Government that it will implement processes to ensure that gender-based homelessness is seen as a specific need and to eradicate women's hidden homelessness in Scotland.

15:30

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Our housing system is broken. Record numbers of children are trapped in temporary accommodation, and the homelessness rate is rising. Not only is that damaging to the health and wellbeing of people who are experiencing those appalling conditions, but the knock-on effects are felt throughout our society, in our schools and workplaces and, of course, on our streets.

We know that education, employment and health outcomes are all linked to our fundamental need for homes that we can thrive in. As Ben Macpherson has said, that basic need is also our right. Because housing is devolved, there is no excuse for this Parliament not to act. The housing emergency that we face is entirely avoidable. What it needs is political will from the Government and the resources to tackle it.

Ben Macpherson: I have yet to hear any suggestions about moving capital resource from another part of the budget into housing, and I am genuinely interested to hear the member's proposals.

Mercedes Villalba: If the member is suggesting a meeting to discuss how we can use public investment to generate wealth for the whole of society, I would be very happy to take that meeting.

In the private sector, tenants are repeatedly faced with landlords who are reluctant to make improvements to the quality of housing, despite continuing to charge excessively high rents. That leaves tenants bearing the costs of rising energy bills and living with damp and mouldy housing and the stress of choosing whether to heat or eat.

However, it is not just tenants who pay. The housing emergency impacts us all, and our cash-strapped local authorities are having to pay the private sector to house people in temporary accommodation for years at a time while they and the Scottish Government provide grants to pay private energy bills to try to prevent people having to leave their homes in the first place. We are looking at the widespread use of public funds to enrich the private sector, every penny of which could be better spent on upgrading and expanding our council housing stock.

As my colleague Mark Griffin has detailed, local authorities would benefit hugely from being able to provide more affordable council housing, and an industrial strategy for housing could see the creation of many well-paid, secure, unionised jobs to build and maintain the homes that we so desperately need.

Therefore, if the First Minister truly aims to deliver a green wellbeing economy that reduces poverty, that must start by ensuring that every person in Scotland has a warm and secure home that they can afford to live in. However, the current pace of retrofitting old housing stock and building new homes is not meeting Government targets or public demand, and local authorities are struggling to provide homelessness support while their resources are stretched so thinly. Therefore, the Government must work with councils, and, crucially, it must provide fair funding to fulfil these ambitions.

That is why Labour welcomes the Scottish Government's move to increase council tax on second homes. However, the Government has had that power since April 2013, and it has taken a decade to decide to consult on that once again. It cannot be another decade before we actually see the measure implemented.

We are faced with an emergency in housing, the scale of which can be addressed only with a response of the same magnitude. That means a co-ordinated mass roll-out of council house buy-back, retrofitting and building. It is the only way to ensure that public money, which is our money, is spent on what people need most: warm, secure, affordable homes—not subsidised private profits for a select few.

15:34

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Despite, rightly, moving to a housing first solution wherever we can in Scotland, having places where people can sleep safely while a more suitable long-term arrangement is identified remains vital. As the minister acknowledged, it is clear that families should not be in temporary accommodation if it can humanly be avoided.

The reasons for homelessness across the UK are inseparable from the wider picture of poverty, austerity and benefits changes. The recommendations that have been set out by the temporary accommodation task and finish group represent a key opportunity to make progress. As is set out in the report, we must see more social housing built, existing housing stock maximised and the provision of suitable support put in place for those who are moving on.

Homelessness is often viewed as an urban issue, but in my island constituency house prices and rent increases, coupled with high numbers of second homes and short-term lets, mean that even people working full time can find themselves needing temporary accommodation in some form.

Backed by significant Scottish Government funding, the local authority and housing association, as well as community landowners, have made steady progress on house building across the Western Isles in recent years. Even small projects, such as adding five to 10 homes to local housing stock, can make a huge difference to businesses being able to employ people in a community, and therefore to the viability of that community.

However, demand still outstrips supply in many island areas, particularly for social housing. For example, individuals on the housing waiting list in Stornoway have to endure a similar length of time to people who are on the Edinburgh list, and they often wait more than two years before being able

to secure housing that is close enough to their place of work. People in other areas of the islands often confront the reality that little or no social housing exists at all.

Of course, global supply chain issues continue, and the impact of inflationary pressures makes it impossible to make housing budgets go anywhere near as far as they could even 12 months ago, but the need for more social and other affordable housing is one of the key issues in my constituency. When working-age people cannot access affordable housing in their area, they are forced to move away, contributing further to depopulation and the drain on suitable employees for essential local services.

That is why I whole-heartedly welcome the Scottish Government's recent commitment of £25 million to bring empty homes back into use in rural and island areas to enable them to be used by key workers and others. I also hope that, following the on-going consultation, councils will be given the power to increase council tax on second or empty homes.

Finally, I believe that measures to allow for limits to be introduced on the proportion and number of second homes in specific communities would represent a key step in helping to ensure more equitable access to the local housing market and avoid the imminent hollowing out of some communities, which other members have alluded to. I look forward to discussing that in more detail with the new housing minister at our meeting in a fortnight's time.

Addressing housing issues across Scotland requires co-operation, commitment and creativity from all levels of government and working collaboratively with local communities. I hope that the temporary accommodation task and finish group's recommendations will help shape our response to this specific and real problem while work on wider housing issues continues apace.

15:38

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss homelessness and the housing challenges that Scotland faces with our new housing minister.

Although we made good progress on addressing acute homelessness such as rough sleeping during the pandemic, I fear that we have yet to acknowledge the scale of the hidden homelessness that is present in many of our rural communities.

The causes of and solutions to the housing crisis in the Highlands and Islands, especially in its rural communities, are complex. A lack of supply, an ageing population, high land values, an

imbalance between local wages and house prices and poor transport infrastructure, especially for public transport, all play a part, and are all areas that Greens in government seek to address.

The more I have worked on housing and planning issues, the more I have become a champion of the community-led housing model and its potential to transform housing provision—particularly in rural communities. We must improve access to the rural and island housing fund and provide on-going financial support for rural housing enablers, such as the Communities Housing Trust, which make community-led housing projects achievable by local communities.

Homelessness in rural areas does not just mean the lack of a roof over someone's head; it also means the loss of community, of young people of working age and of language and culture. With no homes available close to friends and family, young people increasingly feel forced into our cities and towns, which adds to housing issues there. We need to ensure that we create homes that enable people to become rooted in their communities—if that is what they want—and provide the workers and families who we need to keep local communities thriving and viable.

In rural areas, especially, we lose homes to the holiday and second-homes markets. The Scottish Government is right to regulate and introduce stricter planning rules on short-term lets and to work with councils to bring empty homes back into use. I welcome the consultation on council tax for both empty and second homes. Not only does increasing council tax on second homes create a new source of income for councils, it helps to level the playing field between property investors and those who need a home to live in. The change will affect more than 9,000 properties in my region, the Highlands and Islands.

During this parliamentary session, Greens in government will also deliver a mechanism for capturing for public benefit a share of the increase in land value that occurs when a development is supported through the planning system. Adopting a plan-led approach through the new national planning framework means that local authority, regional and national plans align and drive the right kind of development in the right places, instead of the current situation, which is driven by developers and their profit motive.

I welcome the recommendations of the temporary accommodation task and finish group report that call for greater collaboration between the Scottish Government, COSLA and health and social care partnerships to ensure better planning and joined-up thinking. That is the kind of systemic change that we need to see that puts housing and people first.

The social housing and not-for-profit sectors are keen to address the challenge in innovative ways, and not only in rural areas. In Inverness, I have seen first hand the great work of Albyn Housing's recent Bailey Place development, and the work of non-profit Highland Housing Association to retrofit and repurpose the Merchant house in the city centre. It transformed a derelict historic building into eight affordable, energy-efficient homes.

Scotland's housing sector needs long-term solutions and a culture change away from housing as an investment to housing as something that creates homes for all our people. Greens in government will continue making the case for change and adequate funding to ensure that everyone in Scotland can access a safe, affordable and warm home in their local community and that our rural areas remain places to dwell as well as places to visit.

15:43

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): We should all be deeply troubled by the housing crisis in Scotland today. We are a rich country with so many resources at our disposal, yet homelessness still continues to shame our country. It is 2023, but there are still people on the streets who have no other option, no roof over their head and no place to call home.

I know, living in Springburn, that so many people are struggling to access homeless services. They feel let down—even abandoned—by a broken system that seems to be working against them and not for them. I hear from constituents every week who, almost always through no fault of their own, are struggling to get a home of their own or, in many cases, who are struggling to find somewhere to stay—even just for that night. It is heartbreaking, and in this day and age it should not be this way.

Beyond Springburn and Glasgow, the scale of the crisis is apparent across Scotland in dozens of tragic statistics.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Annie Wells: I do not have enough time; I have only four minutes—sorry.

The number of open homeless applications is at its highest level since data collection began in 2002. There are 14,450 households in temporary accommodation, the number of children in temporary accommodation has reached a record high and—worst of all—more than 14 homeless people die in Scotland each month.

It is past time for action to address this crisis; everyone deserves a roof over their head. There

must be affordable housing to help people who are struggling to make ends meet and there must be clear, accessible routes for people to get on to the property ladder.

The Government does everyone in the country a disservice when all that it does is try to deflect blame and dodge responsibility on this issue. The Parliament has the power to tackle the housing crisis and to help people out of homelessness. It has the budget and it has all the levers that it needs to act yet, too often, all we hear from SNP ministers are excuses and passing the buck. They make excuses and blame others because the Government's record is one of failure after failure. Targets have been missed; the number of affordable homes started has decreased by almost a quarter in the past year; the number of affordable homes approved has fallen to its lowest since 2013; rents in Scotland are rising faster than in the rest of the UK; and a £1 billion plan designed to address the housing crisis was halted because of the short-sighted SNP-Green rent cap.

What has the SNP Government done in response to the crisis? It has cut the housing budget by £166 million in cash terms, making the problem even worse. That record should shame ministers, but the SNP Government seems to be so out of touch and detached from reality that it will not even accept that it can and must act.

As my colleagues have said, there are actions that the SNP can take to start tackling this crisis. The Scottish Conservatives have outlined what could be done. The Government could develop new extra-care housing models to provide for people with additional support needs; it could spearhead an urgent Scottish housing emergency action plan; it could introduce compulsory sales orders for long-term unoccupied properties to bring them back into use; it could relax planning laws and allow the redevelopment of unoccupied businesses into housing; and, most simply of all, it could provide the funding to build more affordable and social homes.

Emma Harper rose—

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Annie Wells: I am out of time.

Instead of pointing all the powers of this Parliament towards tackling the housing crisis, the SNP Government wants to point the finger of blame elsewhere; I urge MSPs to back Miles Briggs's amendment to force the Government to accept its responsibility.

15:47

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The debate was pretty consensual until what we heard from the previous speaker.

I thank Shelter Scotland, Homes for Scotland and all the other organisations that provided briefings for this debate. I also thank them for all the work that they do to support the needs of people who are experiencing homelessness. I welcome the minister to his new role, as well.

The housing supply and tackling homelessness are crucial issues if we are to become a fairer nation that is focused on advancing the wellbeing economy. In the UK, Scotland has led the way in delivering affordable and social housing. More than 118,124 homes, to be accurate—as the minister said in his opening speech—have been delivered under the SNP since 2007, compared with six, I think, under the previous Labour Administration. If Labour is serious about tackling homelessness, it must recognise that the Scottish Government is working to tackle poverty with one hand tied behind its back.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Emma Harper: I am sure that I do not have time.

The director of the Child Poverty Action Group, John Dickie, said:

“Scottish Government policies are making a big difference to families. But the harsh reality is that soaring inflation and real terms UK benefit cuts means the gap between incomes and the minimum cost of raising a child is widening horribly.”

It is true that many of the actions that the Scottish Government takes are simply undermined by the UK Government cutting vital support—for example, cutting the £20 universal credit uplift. Scotland is at the mercy of UK Government decisions in tackling poverty, which is a root cause of homelessness. I hope that Labour agrees and acknowledges that.

People across Scotland are paying a steep price for the reckless economic mismanagement of the UK Government. That inevitably means more people falling into poverty and experiencing homelessness. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, disposable incomes are predicted to fall by around 7 per cent in real terms in this year and the next.

The Scottish Government is investing £100 million to transform the homelessness system and implement the updated “Ending Homelessness Together” action plan. More people with high support needs have been helped into settled housing, and local authorities have now provided more than 1,000 housing first tenancies across Scotland. However, we have particular challenges in rural Scotland, including in Dumfries and Galloway in my South Scotland region. I will pick up on the rural aspects that the minister mentioned in his opening remarks.

Good-quality housing is essential to attract and retain people in Scotland’s remote, rural and island communities. That is also a focus of Alasdair Allan. The Scottish Government has delivered almost 8,000 affordable homes in rural and island areas since 2007, and there is a clear commitment to deliver 11,000 more by 2032. That includes 4,484 affordable homes and 1,605 housing association properties in Dumfries and Galloway. That is bolstered by programmes such as the £30 million rural and islands housing funds.

A remote, rural and islands housing action plan is also in development. I ask the minister for a commitment that that plan will have a particular focus on prioritising building on former brownfield sites, such as vacant, abandoned and derelict land, and not just on greenfield land, which could be used for agricultural activity.

I am conscious of the time. I know that there are VAT issues that UK Government ministers have been contacted about. As far as I am aware, there has been no response. VAT reduction would be an incentive for redeveloping brownfield sites and would help to bring those back into housing use.

I support the Scottish Government’s amendment.

15:51

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): It always takes Opposition parties to debate housing. I congratulate Labour on doing so again.

At the heart of Labour’s motion is the issue of the lack of supply and the scathing report of the temporary accommodation task and finish group. What a shame that the minister could not commit to its recommendations. We need look no further than the report’s opening lines to see the scale of the problem that we face. It says:

“Scotland is in the grip of a homelessness crisis that is damaging the lives and opportunities of thousands of families with children and young people across every community in Scotland.”

It talks of a “broken housing system”, and it says that, six years ago,

“the Scottish Government and COSLA convened the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group.”

It says that that group proposed

“a Rapid Rehousing approach to reduce the need for temporary accommodation and the ... adoption of Housing First”

to help those with complex needs.

I was on the Local Government and Communities Committee at that time, and we produced a report that also proposed following the housing first model. That followed a visit to Finland, where we saw how that country’s

approach had helped to cut homelessness to as near to zero as possible.

The task and finish group said:

“The ambitions of that plan have not matched up to the realities on the ground ... we have rising rough sleeping, record numbers of people trapped in the homelessness system for longer and the national scandal of nearly 10,000 children in temporary accommodation.”

That is disgraceful—there is no other word for it.

None of us lives in temporary accommodation. However, in September last year, 14,400 households in Scotland did. That is the highest number on record. That is a statistic that should shame the Government. The average time that was spent in temporary accommodation was 207 days. Try to imagine that, and tell me that we live in a caring Scotland.

Ultimately, we need to build more homes of the right type and in the right places. For as long as I have been an MSP—and even longer—we have known that. The temporary accommodation task and finish group knows that, and so does Shelter Scotland. The task group’s report says that the solutions are straightforward—namely, we need more social homes,

“we need to use the homes we have more effectively and we need to fund”

homelessness

“services properly to treat people with dignity and respect.”

Of course, that should have been happening already. Part of the problem is funding for councils, whose budgets have been systematically slashed year on year by the SNP. Recently, the Scottish Housing Regulator said that homelessness services in Scotland are at

“emerging risk of systemic failure”

due to the pressure on the system, with councils increasingly unable to meet their statutory duties.

Funding, which was mentioned by Mercedes Villalba, is also a serious issue for those who are trying to deliver social housing. The minister really needs to look at the way in which funding is delivered, because it seems to be deemed too high a risk for some people to get involved in building those vital homes.

We have heard a number of good speeches. Roz McCall spoke of the problems that women face with homelessness, and Miles Briggs spoke about the situation in Edinburgh. Also, it was great to hear Ben Macpherson, freed from the shackles of SNP groupthink, coming up with ideas such as land value tax—he will get into trouble for that.

The message is that the Government needs to do better, so I support the amendment in the name of Miles Briggs.

15:55

Paul McLennan: I thank everyone who has spoken today. I welcome any debate on housing—I genuinely mean that. This is a short debate, and I wish that it could have gone on a little longer.

This Government is committed to preventing and ending homelessness and ensuring that every person in Scotland has access to a safe, warm and affordable place that they can call home. Homes are so much more than just bricks and mortar—Mr Simpson touched on that. They are where we feel most comfortable and where we spend most of our time. Housing has a huge influence on our health and wellbeing.

Last week, the First Minister was clear that the Scottish Government wants to tackle poverty and improve the life chances of people across our country. Of course, we want to deliver the public services that our communities rely on, including affordable housing, so that we can create a fairer society and drive opportunity for the people of Scotland.

I want to touch on a few points that have been raised by a few speakers. I cannot touch on all of them, due to time, but one of the key things that I want to mention is the fact that there were no amendments lodged regarding homelessness funding during the last budget process. It is important to highlight that.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Paul McLennan: I have only four minutes, so I would like to continue. This is a short debate, but I am happy to take up the member’s point afterwards.

Mark Griffin mentioned the 10-year target of 25,000 homes. With regard to affordable homes targets, the Scottish Government must work with Homes for Scotland, and we are trying to develop more housing in that regard.

Miles Briggs mentioned the need for a focus on Edinburgh, and we had a meeting this morning to talk about that. I know that Alex Cole-Hamilton is looking to set up an Edinburgh summit. That is important. Miles Briggs also mentioned extra-care housing, and he might be aware that I hosted a parliamentary reception for a group of people with an interest in the issue and have set up an extra-care task force. It is an issue that I take seriously.

I say to Mr Rennie that I will have a laser focus on the issue that he raised. I reached out to him last week in relation to the broader issue around it.

To Mr Simpson, I say that I reached out to the cross-party group on housing and offered to meet it. I want to be as collaborative as I can be—that is

my message to any member who has an issue that they want to raise.

Although temporary accommodation is a vital safety net for some homeless households, it should only ever be short term. We know that lengthy stays in temporary accommodation are not good for the health and wellbeing of families, which is why we want to see people in settled homes that meet their needs as soon as possible.

Earlier, I mentioned that 14 local authorities have reduced the number of households living in temporary accommodation and that nine local authorities have reduced the number of children living in temporary accommodation compared with the previous year. We want to learn the positive lessons from that, and I will continue to meet housing conveners in that regard. I will discuss with those who are under most pressure proposals that might provide some relief. I have already reached out to Mark Griffin and Miles Briggs, and I will continue to engage with them.

The new prevention of homelessness duties, which are due to be introduced as soon as possible after the summer recess, will be an important milestone in achieving our commitment of preventing homelessness at source.

As I mentioned before, rapid rehousing is an approach that gets people into a settled home quickly with the support that they need to make it work. It therefore reduces the need for many forms of temporary accommodation. I am pleased that all 32 local authorities have rapid rehousing transition plans and that 26 of them now have housing-first programmes, with the result that more than 1,400 housing-first tenancies are in place. Housing first is aimed at people with multiple and complex needs and a history of rough sleeping and repeat homelessness.

Roz McCall mentioned complex needs, and I want to set up a ministerial oversight group in that regard, because, as people have mentioned, people in homelessness require support with their complex needs. There must be a broader Government look at that, so that is one thing that I will do.

I will close by acknowledging that more work needs to be done to achieve the goals. Scotland already has the strongest rights for homeless households in the UK, and we are taking important steps towards strengthening the rights of tenants and preventing homelessness. Tackling homelessness and achieving our ambition of a settled home for all cannot be achieved in isolation. It will take collaborative working, and it is crucial that this Government works across portfolios, as I mentioned before, as well as with our valued partners and stakeholders, to come

together to find solutions that are based on our common goals.

As the Minister for Housing, I look forward to the role that I will play in building affordable homes and in helping to prevent and end homelessness in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alex Rowley to wind up the debate.

16:00

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): As Mark Griffin said at the beginning of his speech, the Scottish Labour Party is pleased that the Government has finally listened and has appointed a dedicated housing minister. Sadly, there is a new minister but the same old script. We actually need action to tackle Scotland's housing crisis.

Today, Emma Harper again rolled out a misleading statement about what Labour did 16 years ago, when it was in power. It was misleading because—to put it to bed once and for all—between 2001 and 2007, 28,988 houses were completed in Scotland as social housing for rent.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Alex Rowley: No—I want to finish my point.

Is it not a tragedy that, after 16 years of the SNP being in power, we have a major housing crisis in this country and the best that SNP MSPs can do is attack a previous Government from 16 to 20 years ago? What about the people who are living in damp housing up and down Scotland right now and the people who cannot get housing and are on the waiting list? Is that the best that they can expect from the SNP Government? It is an utter disgrace. What we need now is action.

Shelter sets out Scotland's housing emergency:

"Record numbers of children ... trapped in temporary accommodation – a 120% increase since 2014

Rising homelessness with a 40% increase in households ... having to live in temporary accommodation compared to 2014

Homelessness services 'at emerging risk of systemic failure', according to the Scottish Housing Regulator"

Shelter Scotland and the regulator say:

"If urgent action is not taken, we will be unable to address child poverty and will not improve health, education and employment outcomes. Social justice cannot be achieved if people do not have a home they can thrive in."

Let us stop the rhetoric. After 16 years, Scotland is in crisis and we need to build houses. Mercedes Villalba said that we need an industrial strategy. If

the Government said today that it was going to spend hundreds of millions of pounds to tackle Scotland's housing crisis, there would not be enough sparkies, brickies or joiners to do so. We have a major skills crisis across Scotland and we do not have the people with the skills to build the houses.

Paul McLennan: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Rowley: I will, if it is brief.

Paul McLennan: I think that that is a vital part of the process, but does the member not acknowledge that his party's support of Brexit exacerbates the problem?

Alex Rowley: We have a crisis in which thousands of people up and down Scotland cannot get accommodation and in which tens of thousands of children go home at night to temporary accommodation and are expected to do well the next day in their education. At the same time, we have a skills crisis, so we do not have people with the necessary skills to build houses, but we are not giving children the opportunities to get those skills. When will this Government accept some responsibility? When will the Government turn round and say, "We will tackle that. We will put a 20 to 30-year programme in place. We will give local authorities the powers that they need over planning and acquiring land, and we will put the people of Scotland first by building houses for all of Scotland's children"?

That is where we need to go with this. If the Government is unable to do that, it is time that it—

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Rowley: I will, if it is brief.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is winding up, I am afraid.

Alex Rowley: I thought that I had five minutes, Presiding Officer, but there you go.

I appeal to the Government to start taking the matter seriously. Labour will work with the Government, because we want to tackle the housing crisis. Let us take it seriously, sit down and look at how we will do it. I say to the Government: stop blaming others, take responsibility and tackle Scotland's housing crisis.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on homelessness prevention and housing supply. Before we move to the next item of business, there will be a brief pause while members on the front benches change over.

Scotland's Finances and the Cost of Living

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-08686, in the name of Michael Marra, on Scotland's finances and the cost of living. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as possible.

I advise members that we have no time in hand; therefore, all members will have to stick to their speaking time allocation. I am sure that you will lead by example, Michael Marra.

16:06

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Financial crisis is gripping families across Scotland. Soaring food prices, interest rates, energy and fuel prices and stubbornly high inflation are driving the cost of daily life up and up. Over those few fateful days in Downing Street last September, that scandal was turbocharged by Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng's disastrous mini-budget and the rest of the Tory party who backed them. There, we have a governing party that is morally bankrupt; here, we have a governing party that is going bankrupt.

Recent events have shown the depth of the culture of secrecy and cover-up that has festered at the heart of the Scottish National Party for years. The party treasurer resigned in 2021 over a lack of access to financial information. In any legitimate organisation, we would expect the treasurer to be able to see the books. Fortunately, though, the continuity First Minister does not believe that the SNP is a criminal organisation. He has never had a burner phone, expensive pens, pots and pans, jewellery or a fridge freezer—it is like the conveyor belt on "The Generation Game".

No wonder the auditors resigned last year. That, too, was hidden, even from the SNP's Westminster leader. Those auditors were concerned as to the extent to which

"the audit was considered capable of detecting irregularities, including fraud."

Yesterday lunchtime, Colin Beattie MSP was not capable of detecting a 2-tonne camper van, let alone fraud. By teatime, he had managed to recognise his own signature. In the approach of the SNP Government, crucially, we find the same patterns of cover-up, secrecy and spin. Disingenuous tactics of dither and delay from this Government meant that the teachers strike dragged on for far longer than parents, pupils or teachers could afford. For months, the cabinet secretary branded a deal "unaffordable and

unsustainable”, yet when her own constituents were targeted, like a rabbit from a hat, the cabinet secretary found the extra money, but was very light on detail. That is familiar to members across the chamber as typical of the Government’s approach to budgets.

The result of that haphazard budgeting is clear—more than £3.7 billion in wasted public money under the SNP. I ask that members do not just take my word for it—Audit Scotland has sounded the alarm for years about the opacity of this Government’s finance. A raft of reports and audits have criticised the Government’s lack of transparency. In its 2020-21 audit of the Scottish Government consolidated accounts, Audit Scotland said that without greater transparency, it was

“difficult to form an overall picture of the performance of the Scottish Government.”

In November 2022, Audit Scotland’s report, “Scotland’s public finances: Challenges and risks”, said that

“a comprehensive and transparent assessment of the state of Scotland’s public finances”

was needed. That warning was followed in December 2022 by the audit of the Scottish Government consolidated accounts, which stated:

“The Scottish Government needs to do more to improve the quality and transparency of its financial and performance reporting.”

Take the infamous ferry contract. Audit Scotland said that there is “insufficient documentary evidence” to explain why the decision was made to proceed with the contract. Audit Scotland’s March 2022 report on arrangements to deliver vessels 801 and 802 was also clear that this Government should

“improve the transparency of its investment decisions”.

Furthermore, just last month, Audit Scotland raised concerns about bonuses paid to senior managers at Ferguson Marine’s shipyard, stating:

“It is not clear how their performance was assessed, nor were appropriate frameworks and governance in place.”

Yet more wasted money, and no action from this Government to stem the tide.

We all remember that the SNP came to power on a promise from one of its disgraced former First Ministers to reduce the size of Cabinet and save the public money. Today, we have a Cabinet of 10, and a further 18 ministers. That is the biggest ever. The public purse is holding together a party in which a majority voted for the other two candidates. The public know that they are not getting value for money.

New figures that were published from the Scottish household survey just this week show

satisfaction with public services plummeting. Today, not a single institution in Scotland is stronger than it was 16 years ago. All have been weakened, and some have been decimated, by a perfect storm of 16 years of SNP incompetence and 13 years of Tory austerity.

While the SNP crumbles, the people of Scotland are paying the price for a distracted Government that is mired in scandal. Ask the one in seven Scots on a national health service waiting list. Ask the teacher overwhelmed by their workload. Ask the islanders whose livelihoods are destroyed. Nothing is working as it should.

The reason for that is clear: we have a Government that is rudderless, cast lazily adrift on an ocean of incompetence. However, change is coming. The people will have their say in 2024 and in 2026. They can choose to elect a Government that will restore competence, integrity and transparency to our public finances. They can choose to elect a Government that will rebuild treasured institutions such as our NHS for generations to come. They can choose to elect a Labour Government. That is the change that Scotland needs.

I move,

That the Parliament considers sound financial management and the responsible use of taxpayers’ money to be key priorities for any government, and that this is especially important at a time when households and businesses face increased bills and expenses due to the ongoing cost of living crisis; understands that the record of the Scottish Government over the last 16 years has been characterised by failed financial interventions, incompetence, waste and inefficiency, which have to date cost in excess of £3.5 billion of public money; recognises that Audit Scotland has repeatedly highlighted the need for greater transparency, including during the audit of the Scottish Government’s consolidated accounts for 2021-22; considers that a culture of opaqueness and secrecy has prevailed in the Scottish Government in recent years, and that this has had a detrimental impact on the ability of the Parliament and the public to hold the government to account and ensure that value for money is being delivered; believes that, in these uncertain economic times, taxpayers across Scotland must have confidence that their money is being spent wisely, and calls on the Scottish Government to commit to prioritising openness, transparency and competence in the management of Scotland’s finances.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Marra. I call Tom Arthur to speak to and move amendment S6M-08686.2. You have up to five minutes, minister.

16:12

The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance (Tom Arthur): As Parliament will be aware, last week, we published our policy prospectus, “Equality, opportunity, community: New leadership - A fresh start”, which sets out

how we as a Government will address the challenges that we face and build on our strengths. It sets out how we will drive equality, how we will seize the opportunities of an economy that is fair, green and growing, and how we will deliver for our communities with first-class public services to which we all aspire.

We have outlined the steps that we will take during this session of Parliament to deliver on that vision, and we are committed to routinely and transparently reporting on our performance against those aims and outcomes.

As a Government, we have been open and transparent with the Parliament on the fiscal challenges that we are managing, both last year and as we developed the budget for this year. The on-going impacts of the pandemic and soaring inflation caused by the war in Ukraine, which has been exacerbated by Brexit, combined to create the most challenging financial situation ever experienced by this Parliament and, indeed, ever experienced by the people we are honoured to represent.

Against that backdrop, we have successfully demonstrated careful budget management year after year, taking the hard decisions that are necessary to live within our means, despite the challenges that we face.

All Scottish Government spend is reported in our accounts, and those are audited against international accounting standards by Audit Scotland.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Tom Arthur: Not right now.

The Auditor General's report on the 2021-22 accounts confirmed an unqualified clean audit opinion on the accounts for the 17th consecutive year. We have delivered the most progressive tax system in the United Kingdom and delivered a social security system with fairness at its heart.

Michael Marra: Will the member give way?

Tom Arthur: Not right now.

Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that was published during the Scottish budget, showed that, as a result of our decisions, the poorest 10th of Scottish households are set to have incomes £580—4.6 per cent—a year higher than they would be under the systems in England or, indeed, in Wales.

We present a draft Scottish budget and budget bill each year to the Parliament for scrutiny, debate and agreement. We engage openly with Parliament on these spending proposals, and meet with appropriate members. Indeed, I am looking forward to meeting Opposition members in

coming weeks, including Mr Marra, who I welcome to his new position. We also work with the Parliament and its committees to improve the information that is available to support its scrutiny of the annual budget. We also publish information on the Scottish budget that is understandable and accessible to a wider audience, principally through our publication "Your Scotland, Your Finances" on the Scottish Government website.

We seek to be responsive and listening as a Government, as is demonstrated through our work with key stakeholders and structures such as the equalities and human rights budget advisory group and the open government fiscal transparency commitment group.

During each financial year, we also present at least two budget revisions to Parliament, to agree any new movements within the Scottish budget. These are considered in detail with the Finance and Public Administration Committee. That committee has also acknowledged improvements in information in that regard. For example, in March 2022, the committee convener, speaking on behalf of the committee, complimented the amount of detailed information that was provided in the spring budget revision. I want to put on record my thanks to the committee for the work that it does, and to say that the Government will vote for the amendment in the name of Liz Smith, in recognition of the important work that the committee undertakes.

That is because, as a Government, on matters of financial transparency and presenting information as clearly as possible, we will always seek to improve. We will continue to engage on how transparency can be further improved in our accounts, in particular in relation to the points made by Audit Scotland.

We are committed to improving the understanding of the public finances by the public, their representatives and other interested parties, from the revenue that we raise to the outcome that it achieves. That is demonstrated through our fiscal transparency programme, which is at the heart of the wider commitment to improve fiscal openness and transparency and was co-created with civil society partners in Scotland's third open government action plan. The plan looks at ways to improve the accessibility of our current fiscal data and information by using more data visualisations, infographics and open data. It commits us to improve the accessibility and usability of our data and information on public finances, benchmark our fiscal openness and transparency against international best practice, and improve engagement and participation in the public finances.

This is hard and complex work, and much of the critical change that we want to see will take time.

However, we will continue to work with the Parliament and civil society partners in this. As a Government, we are committed to delivering on-going budgetary transparency and to working with the Parliament, and in particular the Finance and Public Administration Committee, to improve the scrutiny of Scotland's finances.

I move amendment S6M-08686.2, to leave out from "failed" to end and insert:

"balanced budgets, unqualified accounts and, since 2018, the most progressive income tax system in the UK; considers that this is in stark contrast to the decade of austerity that Scotland has faced from successive UK governments; recognises that the Scottish Government has worked constructively with Audit Scotland, the Scottish Fiscal Commission and the Scottish Parliament's Finance and Constitution Committee to improve the budgetary process and parliamentary scrutiny of Scotland's finances, and calls on the Scottish Government to continue to prioritise openness, transparency and competence in the management of Scotland's finances."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call on Liz Smith to speak to and move amendment S6M-08686.1.

16:17

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to hear that the Scottish Government is going to support the amendment in my name, because it raises very specific issues about some inconsistencies in data sets that have been used for financial analysis.

We will also—unusually, perhaps—support the Labour motion, because it is important. It deals with an extremely important topic in relation to transparency and scrutiny. In fact, I do not see why any MSP would want to oppose the motion, because it is essential, most especially in these difficult economic times, that we do everything possible to ensure that we get better value for public money and that we do so in as open and transparent a manner as possible.

On the Scottish Conservative benches, we believe that the public deserve no less. They surely have a right to know exactly what their money is being spent on and, just as important, why elected members of this Parliament make certain choices. We need to be held fully accountable for every decision that we make, especially when it comes to the public finances.

Daniel Johnson: As a fellow member of the Finance and Public Administration Committee until recently, I ask Liz Smith whether she recognises the minister's characterisation of the committee's views on transparency.

Liz Smith: I have to say that there is a little inconsistency on that, and not just in relation to detail. There was inconsistency in the minister's comments. Mr Johnson has sat on the committee

for as long as I have—it is a very important committee of this Parliament, for obvious reasons—and one of the important issues that we have raised time and time again is transparency and openness and the ability to scrutinise the numbers on a consistent basis.

Mr Marra referred to lessons that we should have learned. Some of those lessons actually go further back. I remember the previous Auditor General, Caroline Gardner, talking about exactly the same issues. She blamed the Government—it was not directed particularly at the Scottish National Party; it was about Government in general—for a lack of willingness when it came to the scrutiny that is essential to make the Parliament work effectively. There is a wider issue that is about not just the numbers—although we know that the SNP is not very good at numbers just now—but the scrutiny that we need to make the Parliament work properly.

Earlier this week, the Finance and Public Administration Committee convener wrote to Maree Todd to express the committee's on-going concerns about the lack of a financial memorandum to support the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill. That is just another example of a lack of adequate transparency that prevents the Parliament from engaging in proper scrutiny. That cannot be right.

I am not too sure why the SNP amendment tries to place the blame on Westminster, because I do not think that that is right. Michael Marra cited a figure of, I think, £3.5 billion for failed and profligate spending, and that is a Scottish Government failure relating to Scottish Government projects. I do not really see how that is the UK Government's fault.

Tom Arthur: Will Liz Smith give way briefly?

Liz Smith: Do I have time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I cannot give you any extra time, I am afraid.

Liz Smith: Right. I will draw my remarks to a close, then.

I will finish on an important point. Openness and transparency are not only good practice to enable best value for taxpayers' money to be measured, but essential if there is to be renewed trust between Government and the public. There is much media comment about how politics and Government have lost their integrity. That is not good for society and it is certainly not good for rebuilding Scotland.

I move amendment S6M-08686.1, to insert at end:

“, and further calls on the Scottish Government to address the concerns about the inconsistency in financial

data sets that were set out by the Scottish Parliament Finance and Public Administration Committee in paragraph 43 of its report, *Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2023-24: Scotland's Public Finances in 2023-24 and the Impact of the Cost of Living and Public Service Reform*."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise, but we are very tight for time.

16:22

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister kept a commendable straight face when he talked about "careful budget management". Let me go through some of the greatest hits. The troubled GFG Alliance, owned by Sanjeev Gupta, duped the SNP Government into providing a £586 million guarantee in return for 2,000 jobs. Those jobs have never materialised in Lochaber, but it was a fantastic picture for the First Minister and Mr Gupta. There was £50 million to save 1,500 jobs at Burntisland Fabrications but the money and the jobs have gone. However, it was another fantastic photograph with the hard hats and orange jumpsuits. The Government is on the hook for millions of pounds for the potential environmental clean-up at the Lanarkshire steel mills, if Mr Gupta's empire collapses, but there was another gritty photograph for the former First Minister in return.

I turn to the icing on the cake—or, as they say in Port Glasgow, the painted-on windows on the ferry. I am talking about the running sore in our collective bank account, the insult to the workers at Ferguson's and the agony of never-ending cancellations on the islands. The work is over budget and over time and is a national embarrassment but, boy, it was the best photograph ever. The project was such a success that the next lot of ferries are being built in Turkey.

This SNP Government has been an expensive spin machine from the start. It does not do Government for the long term; it does Government only in its own short-term interest. Public money, which has been hard earned by people working in shops, businesses, schools and hospitals, should be carefully stewarded but, too often, the SNP uses it as its plaything and for expensive stunts and press releases. It is an embarrassment; it is not a Government.

Instead, we need change. We need a new economic plan that focuses on long-term progress rather than short-term stunts. Our universities are an economic generator, with global talent working in excellent research. The USA exploits its talent with the careful nurturing of intellectual property, a culture of spin-outs and investment in the best research and talent. However, Scotland is slipping. We used to attract 15 per cent of the funding from Research Councils UK. In the latest round, we attracted only 12.5 per cent, because of the

Scottish Government's mismanagement. We need to reverse that decline.

Our colleges must be restored to strength in order to provide the skilled workforce that employers need. The apprenticeship programme must grow to meet demand, and the apprenticeship levy needs to be reformed to incentivise more training, not less. We need the skills landscape plan now. It has been promised for years, but we still do not have it.

Our renewables potential is huge, but we need a proper plan to rescue the potential of ScotWind. We need to invest in Scottish yards and to help Scottish firms to keep construction and servicing jobs here in Scotland.

To keep the best talent in Scotland, we need to build confidence in the Government's taxation policy, which should always be evidence based, balanced and certain. Prudence should be our watchword.

We need good public services to keep us healthy and educated, and we need a clean environment in which we can all thrive. That means expanding early learning and childcare. It means shorter waiting times for mental health treatment and accessing a general practitioner. It means cleaning up the sewage from our rivers.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I must ask you to conclude, Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: It is essential that we have a long-term plan, not short-term photo ops and stunts. We need to use our public money carefully.

16:26

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this extremely important and timely debate and to speak in support of the motion in the name of my colleague Michael Marra.

As we have heard from the opening speakers across the chamber, we face two huge crises in Scotland. There is the cost of living crisis, which has been created in part by the Conservatives' reckless attitude to the economy, and there is the crisis across the NHS in Scotland, which is widely seen and felt. In fact, the crisis is not just in our NHS but across all our public services.

The reality is that Scotland is being failed by two Governments—a Tory Government that has become morally bankrupt, has not taken the action that is required to support and protect people and has contributed to economic recklessness that has driven our economy over a cliff edge, and an SNP Government in Scotland that has grown bloated and out of touch and is now mired in internal party scandals.

Why is that important? It is important because the people of Scotland are being left behind. I will read out a quote:

“I already have days where there is no gas or electricity in the property, and we already skip meals and go without basic items. I am worried that this is going to happen more often and on a lot more days of the month.”

That testimony is the painful reality that is felt by thousands of Scots every day. New research by the Trussell Trust has revealed that the need for food banks in Scotland has reached its highest ever level. Parents are skipping meals to ensure that they can feed their children.

However, that issue did not arise solely from a cost of living crisis. The Trussell Trust has concluded that

“neither the Covid pandemic nor the cost-of-living crisis are the key drivers of need for food banks.”

I think that we all know that they are symptomatic of wider issues including the wide and deep, endemic poverty that pervades in Scotland, which has not been sufficiently addressed across our communities.

Indeed, people who were already in poverty have been pushed to the margins. They are being ignored by both Governments—the one at Westminster and the one at Holyrood. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found that 460,000 people in Scotland are now living in very deep poverty. That figure has increased significantly over the past two decades.

Presiding Officer,

“making poverty history in Scotland will be the core of everything our Government does.”—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2008; c 5744.]

Those were the words of the then Deputy First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, in 2008. Of course, every member in the chamber should share the aspiration of making poverty history, but it is one thing to say it and another to focus all the Government’s attention and resources on doing something to make it a reality.

After 16 years, the level of child poverty remains the same as it was when the Government came to power. It has had 16 years with access to the levers of power to make fundamental change, but the reality is that, since entering government in 2007, the SNP has failed to address the issues in a serious and substantive manner. That is why we are seeing these issues. Of course, as we have heard, that is also against the backdrop of a Conservative Government at a UK level that has made matters worse.

The reality is that we need change. We need a Labour Government at a UK level that will invest in a meaningful windfall tax, take action on the cost of living and support families across the country.

We also need change with a Labour Government here at Holyrood that will reprioritise and move away from waste and Government bloat, finding the triggers and levers and using them to make a difference.

Next week, we will participate in the poverty summit that was announced by the First Minister. We welcome any action to address poverty. However, let us be clear that there have been many summits and this is yet another one. It must not be another talking shop. Despite all its encouraging and positive rhetoric and all its photo ops, the SNP has failed over the past 16 years to use the powers of this Parliament effectively—the Parliament that we created—to make tackling poverty a top policy priority. After 16 years, people need less talk and more action from this Government.

16:31

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in today’s debate, which gives us the chance to contrast Labour’s management of finance with that of the SNP; and, of course, we can look at the Conservatives as well.

In the first place, I am willing to accept that almost every individual and every organisation makes mistakes and wastes money at times. Who of us has never bought food that we did not eat or clothes that we seldom wear? The Edinburgh trams cost far too much, although that was a decision that was forced on the SNP by other parties. The ferries, clearly, have not been a total success story, although if the Scottish Government had not intervened, presumably Ferguson’s would now be completely closed and, with it, commercial shipbuilding on the Clyde. I assume that that is not what Labour is arguing for.

Let us look at other capital projects that have been incredibly successful. For example, the Queensferry crossing was originally costed at some £3 billion to 4 billion but cost £1.4 billion. Prestwick airport remains open and is operating profitably, whereas without the Scottish Government it would presumably have closed, and with it would have gone some 2,000 jobs.

Then we come to revenue spending, where we see some considerable SNP successes, including the Scottish child payment, lifting 50,000 children out of poverty, and 1,140 hours of early learning and childcare for all three and four-year-olds, not to mention free prescriptions, free personal care and the continuation of no student tuition fees.

Of course, we do not know what Labour’s policies are. Both Keir Starmer and Anas Sarwar have been very policy light. It seems that they want to avoid real policies or commitments that

they could eventually be held to account for. Nothing in Labour's motion for debate says anything about the different decisions that Labour would have made.

Paul O'Kane: Will the member take an intervention?

John Mason: I am sorry; it is a four-minute debate so there is no time. [*Interruption.*] Labour chose the four-minute debate.

Would Labour have made different decisions about Prestwick and Ferguson's and allowed them both to close? What we know is what Labour has done in the past, when it had its hands on the purse strings. In Glasgow, it failed to settle the equal-pay claims of female staff and allowed the liability to run up year after year. Only when the SNP came to power and settled the claims did we discover the kind of bill that Labour had run up—£770 million. And how about Labour's building of this Scottish Parliament building? The initial costs that were estimated by Donald Dewar were £30 million to £40 million; the final cost was £414 million. Was that competence in management?

As another one for Labour, how about the private finance initiative schemes?

The Presiding Officer: Mr Mason, could you give me a moment, please? There are conversations happening across the aisles. I would be grateful if members could desist. Mr Mason, please continue.

John Mason: I am glad that I am stirring them up a bit.

There were construction costs of some £5.6 billion for schools, hospitals and so on, but our councils and health boards are now having to pay back more than five times that, and it is rising with inflation, with some £15 billion still outstanding. Was that competence in management?

The last time I looked, Labour also continues to support nuclear weapons and £167 billion—according to Reuters—for the upcoming submarine programme. Is that really a priority when ordinary people in the east end of Glasgow are facing a cost of living crisis?

Before the Conservatives start feeling too pleased with themselves, what was the cost of hiring boats that did not exist? It was £13 million. How is high speed 2 going? The Euston tunnel has been delayed indefinitely, with the likely cost having risen from £2.6 billion to £4.8 billion, and the cost of the overall project has gone up from £72 billion to £98 billion.

I just hate to think where Scotland would be now if Labour had been running the show for the past 16 years.

16:35

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): This is an important debate, and it is a timely one, given the myriad of claims and accusations that face the Scottish Government and the party that leads it.

Transparency and accountability in government should be a core principle of government, so that decisions are made in an open manner and, when things go wrong, there is a clear record of how decisions were made and who was responsible for making them. However, that is not how the SNP Government works. Accountability appears to be a foreign concept to SNP ministers.

It was not always like that. In 2010, the then transport minister Stewart Stevenson fell on his sword because it was the right thing to do. If we fast forward to 2023, we find that no one in the Scottish Government has paid the price for the disastrous ferries procurement scandal. We have a Government that is happy to hold important meetings without minuting them, and we are forced to scabble around searching for those minutes that it did take.

Those unfinished ferries are just one example of a Government that is as transparent as a black hole, and an issue on which decisions were made for political reasons. The SNP has wasted millions of pounds of taxpayers' cash on buying what must be the most expensive pre-conference headlines ever.

The ferries scandal and the situations regarding BiFab and Prestwick airport are all examples of a Government that not only made dubious investment decisions but made them behind closed doors and then defended them from behind a smokescreen.

In my region of the Highlands and Islands—Willie Rennie mentioned this—the SNP Government's dealings with Sanjeev Gupta and the GFG Alliance over the aluminium smelter in Lochaber are another example of how the Government often operates in the shadows. Time and again, the Scottish ministers have hidden behind commercial confidentiality to avoid answering questions on a deal that resulted in more than £0.5 billion of taxpayers' money being put at risk, and following which the promised new jobs have failed to appear and millions of pounds' worth of assets were signed over to a business that is now being investigated for fraud and whose auditors resigned last year. That sounds familiar.

Why would we expect anything less from this SNP-led Government? A lack of openness is endemic in the party. Is it any wonder that a party for which transparency and accountability are such alien concepts has formed a Government in its own image?

The SNP has claimed to have spent £3 billion in tackling the cost of living crisis, but the Scottish Parliament information centre has estimated that the SNP has spent less than 20 per cent of that figure, with most of it coming from the UK Government.

The SNP has claimed to have increased support to Scotland's councils, but Scotland's councils have rubbished that. It has even claimed that Scottish gross domestic product has grown by more than UK GDP has done when, in fact, it has presided over GDP growth that has lagged behind that of the rest of the UK, and it has allied itself with a party that does not even believe in GDP in the first place.

In its amendment to the motion for today's debate, the SNP claims that Scotland has

"the most progressive income tax system in the UK".

There is nothing progressive about making Scotland the most taxed part of the United Kingdom, nor is there anything progressive in an approach that, according to the Scottish Fiscal Commission, could result in Scotland's 2024-25 budget being reduced by £732 million, as a result of lower than expected tax receipts in 2021-22. That would mean that even more financial pressure would be put on public services.

I am grateful to the minister for giving us all a good laugh today. I can picture him sitting in St Andrew's house surrounded by his advisers, instructing them to put a line in the amendment about the SNP-Green Government being open, transparent and competent. It is good to see that the minister has not lost his sense of humour. However, I am afraid that Scotland does not see the funny side, after 16 years of SNP incompetence and 16 years of SNP mismanagement of public funds, and when the only thing that is transparent about the SNP Government is its contempt for public accountability.

16:39

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): As someone who has fought hard for this devolved Parliament, I care about how it looks 20-plus years on. Right now, it looks to most people as though the current procedures are failing to help to hold the Government to account. One of the areas in which Scottish Labour believes that change is needed is that the Presiding Officers should have more powers to compel more accurate answers from ministers, where necessary, instead of the self-policing circus that we have at the moment, whereby ministers can avoid answering questions or can provide inaccurate or inadequate answers. The only current route for politicians now—I know that this is a matter that the Presiding Officers are

concerned about—is points of order. The current framework is not fit for purpose and it must change if we care about this Parliament at all.

There is a pressing duty on this Government to change the quality of parliamentary answers, and change course on its poor financial management and commit to a culture of openness and transparency that shows taxpayers clearly where all their money is allocated and spent. That is the case more now than ever. Ordinary people, as Michael Marra has said, question the Government more than ever. They have seen their party of government laid bare in recent weeks in scenes that have rocked the governing party to its core. Unfortunately, that has impacted on the standing and reputation of this Parliament.

I say to the SNP that it owes it to the people of Scotland to overhaul its approach to openness and accountability in this Parliament and in its finances. A culture of secrecy in Scotland's finances has developed in the Scottish Government for far too long.

The words that I am quoting here are from the Scottish Parliament information centre. It said:

"Audit Scotland have repeatedly called on the SNP Government to improve transparency and accountability in recent years, and the Finance and Public Administration Committee have also urged the government to improve budget transparency."

In recent years, the Finance and Public Administration Committee has also urged the Government to improve budget transparency. When the Government published its resource spending review in May 2022, it committed to publishing details around planning for public service reform, including the direction of travel for public sector employment. However, the expected plans were notable omissions from this year's budget, which is another barrier to parliamentary scrutiny, as has been said already.

Public sector pay accounts for £22 billion of the Scottish Government's budget. Not having a steer on pay parameters leads people to question why the Government was not open in the first place, given that we have had more than a decade of wage stagnation. The unions and the public want to know where the Government stands on its allocation of budget for something so important to the people of Scotland.

For anyone interested in a higher standard of parliamentary scrutiny of our human rights budgeting approach, the need for transparency means that we have to do an awful lot better than what we are faced with now. In the main budget documentation for this year, there is little comment on or description of the data underpinning budget decisions or how the decisions impact on different groups. There are no accompanying documents

that are aimed specifically at accessibility, and none with a simple breakdown of the budget. Many supporting documents are not linked to and are hard to find on the website. As a Parliament we have to do better, and the Government needs to do better.

The Scottish Government needs to do more to improve the quality and transparency of its financial and performance reporting. One example in my justice portfolio is the rolling out of body-worn cameras, which is a fundamental requirement for police accountability. We cannot see whether there could have been a decision to make the roll-out happen quicker. Now we have the only force in the UK that will not fully use body-worn cameras. It is time for change.

The oversecretive approach of the Government—

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

Pauline McNeill: Sorry, I could not see the clock. I will conclude by saying that the Scottish Government must be more open and accountable for the sake of the people of Scotland.

16:43

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): I want to take this opportunity to highlight some positive aspects of the Scottish Government's stewardship of the nation's finances, and to identify opportunities for improvement.

All organisations suffer from inefficiencies; my colleague John Mason gave some excellent examples. Another example is the hundreds of millions of pounds that have been spent by the UK Government on questionable personal protective equipment contracts, which can be contrasted with the Scottish Government's rapid and cost-effective deployment of locally manufactured PPE.

All organisations have opportunities for improvement. No matter how good they think they are, they can always do better. I have some familiarity with that from my previous life as a turnaround professional, which involved taking poorly performing organisations and dramatically improving service delivery for substantially lower costs. We created continuous improvement cultures that value employees and knowledge of how best to do the job, that delegate responsibility beyond layers of ineffective management, and which combined that with modern structured improvement methodologies and adoption of latest technologies. That is very much aligned with the Christie principles of participation, empowerment, partnership, prevention and reducing duplication.

One of the core arguments in favour of independence is that smaller countries are more

agile, nimble and responsive to opportunities, and are more efficient at service delivery, thereby benefiting from shorter lines from organisations to service users. That is demonstrably true, and it is one of the reasons why smaller countries benefit from an average growth rate that is 0.7 per cent higher than the growth rates of their larger comparable neighbours.

In order to persuade people of the benefits of independence, we need to demonstrate that we can run efficient high-quality public services within budget. For example, Scotland's health service performs better than its UK counterpart on many measures, but much more needs to be done.

Health is one area where reduced organisational complexity, the scope for technology adoption and leveraging preventative spends offer significant scope for improved delivery within budget. I and my colleagues will produce a paper shortly to give more detail on our thoughts on that.

There are some clear examples of where we need to do better. Our service delivery mechanisms are overcomplicated, with there being more than 100 public bodies, much overlap and duplication, serial management overheads in systems and complex interfaces. The Government finds comfort in talking about inputs. There is no easier headline than one about the creation of a new fund or organisation to deliver it, but all that does is create more complexity and cost in the system, thereby reducing the amount of money that finds its way to those who need it.

The Scottish Government's annual spend on the core civil service is now more than £700 million, and there have been significant increases in recent years. The alignment of workforce and budget controls falls short of best practice. It is worth noting that the majority of the additional revenues that are raised from this year's tax-rate rises will be spent on funding increases in Scottish Government civil service costs.

The adoption of hybrid working has rightly led to overprovision of real estate, and the scope for significant cost reduction in that regard needs to be realised as leases expire. In that context, the construction of new premises, such as the proposed Glasgow community hub, would seem to be a misuse of scarce capital resources. The Scottish Government should also take forward at pace the creation of the Victoria Quay technology and creative hub and make use of redundant Government-owned estate to boost local economies and national clusters.

The public sector reform agenda is important. The work in the Government on culture change, empowerment and adoption of best practice in modern technology is critical. The external expert

advisory group adds significant value on that, so I am concerned by reports that the Deputy First Minister has delegated engagement with the group to officials.

My constituents want to see the money getting to the front line and delivering high-quality cost-effective services, not being swallowed up in organisational complexities before it gets there. There are hundreds of millions of pounds to be redirected in that regard, and I have every confidence that the Scottish Government will deliver on that agenda.

16:47

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to Michael Marra for using one of his party's business slots to give Parliament time to consider the challenges of managing our public finances during a cost of living crisis. As others have said, fiscal sustainability is a major area of interest for our Finance and Public Administration Committee and, of course, the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

On one level, fiscal sustainability in a devolved context should be pretty simple. We do not have the option of running a deficit—we cannot accumulate debt like a normal national Government—but the considerable constraints on our powers and on the budget that is available to us create serious challenges of their own.

Investing in infrastructure is one of the most effective ways to spread economic prosperity, but Scotland's capital budget has been cut significantly by the UK Government, and we do not have the meaningful capital borrowing powers that any normal nation would have for exactly that kind of investment.

The effect of that lack of funding has short-term and long-term impacts. A group of MSPs from the Greens, Labour, the SNP and the Conservatives met last month with Jubilee Scotland to discuss the impact of the private financing of public infrastructure under the private finance initiative model. I do not have time to go into the detail of that, but I commend to members the latest report from the Scotland against public-private partnerships campaign. I hope that, through the Scottish National Investment Bank and other pathways, we will be able to make progress on providing far better value for the public purse in the future than has been the case with PFIs.

However, in the context of the review of the fiscal framework between the Scottish and UK Governments, and the development of the new framework between the Scottish Government and local government, I hope that we can build consensus across Parliament on the need for greater direct capital borrowing powers to sit here,

and for some further reform of the borrowing powers that are available to local councils.

That review of the fiscal framework needs to deliver significant reforms beyond just borrowing powers. For example, the operation of the Scottish reserve is absurdly limited. The £700 million overall limit, the £250 million resource drawdown limit and the £100 million capital drawdown limit are all entirely arbitrary numbers, and they now reflect a far smaller proportion of the overall budget than they did when they were originally agreed. Reform of the reserve should be obvious, and I hope that it will be a source of consensus between the Scottish and UK Governments.

On a somewhat related note about the operation of the reserve, another area where change is needed, for the sake of transparency and public understanding, is reporting and discussion of our annual underspend. That is not because there is anything inherently wrong with the Auditor General's reports, but because they are clearly and consistently being misunderstood.

Let us be honest: some of that is wilful—that is politics—but if we take the 2021-22 budget as the most recent example, the reported figure of a £2 billion underspend repeatedly resulted in claims being made that there was a £2 billion pot of cash that went untouched for some deliberate but unexplained reason, and which could therefore be spent in 2022-23. The reality is that much of that underspend was technical. It was the result of a variation in the student loans market, which—as the Audit Scotland report made clear in the very next line—did not actually mean that there was cash left over.

Much of the rest of the underspend was one-off ring-fenced Covid funds that could not be entirely spent on time for reasons that we all understand, and funds for specific projects that were delayed by the pandemic, which meant that the money was not literally going unspent. Rather, the spending was just being rolled into the next financial year because it could not be delivered in that one.

Despite all that, I lost count of the number of teachers whom I spoke to during their pay dispute who could not understand why we were not making a higher offer to them, because they had heard that we had an extra £2 billion in the bank just sitting there unused. Communicating that nuance is a challenge for Audit Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Parliament.

Openness and transparency in the handling of public finances are of critical importance to every nation, and the work of our Parliament's Finance and Public Administration Committee has demonstrated that there is much here on which we can find consensus. This afternoon's debate has not quite hit on consensus to that extent, although

a number of strong points have been made. That is politics. However, I hope that, through the committee system and other avenues, we will continue to make progress on our financial governance, which is so essential to maintaining the public's trust in relation to what is ultimately its money.

16:52

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)
(Con): The debate serves as an important reminder of the responsibility of all Governments to spend public money as effectively as possible. Today's motion is right to speak about the waste and failed financial interventions that we have seen over the past 16 years of Government.

We have heard in the debate about the hundreds of millions of pounds that have been wasted on two ferries that have yet to see active service. Indeed, the final cost of those ferries is not yet known and continues to rise.

I have spoken before about the SNP's failure to properly use the financial levers that it holds, such as its powers over income tax. The SNP's amendment proudly talks about Scotland having the

"most progressive income tax system in the UK".

However, the truth is that the SNP's decision to hike taxes again for 2023-24 means that Scots are paying massively in additional taxes, thanks to higher rates and lower thresholds. As analysis by the Scottish Fiscal Commission shows, that will result in just £325 million in additional revenue, due to slower earnings and employment growth here than in the rest of the United Kingdom.

My colleague Liz Smith challenged the First Minister on that issue last week, and was told that "detailed analysis" is carried out on all tax-related decisions. When it comes to justifying those tax policies, which ultimately risk slowing growth and lowering total tax revenue, it is not at all clear what that "detailed analysis" looks like.

That is just the latest example of this Government failing to be truly transparent when it comes to its finances. Other financial blunders include, from memory, the £30 million overspend on last year's census. That was not the first time that the SNP's insistence on doing things differently has ended up costing the Scottish taxpayer money.

Examples of all kinds of financial mismanagement can be found in every year that this Government has been in power. This Government's mismanagement of public money is far from a thing of the past—it is very much on-going.

Despite many stakeholders opposing its plans, the SNP is still pushing forward with its national care service. That will cost an additional £1.6 billion at the worst possible time. That funding would be far better spent on overstretched local care services—they need that money and they need it now.

Although we heard that plans such as that have been kicked further down the road, it is still the case that the SNP will not scrap plans and wastes money continually.

It is perhaps no surprise that the SNP has come to the chamber and attempted to paint a very different picture of the Government's record on Scotland's finances. The main issue, and the main thrust of its amendment, appears to be that there is nothing to see here—absolutely nothing. However, as today's motion set out, the truth is far less convincing.

Holding the financial levers of power is a tremendous opportunity for any government. It is high time that the Green-SNP Government recognised that and started taking its responsibilities much more seriously for the people of Scotland.

16:55

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie)
(SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate in support of the amendment in the name of Tom Arthur. There is no doubt that this is a very difficult time for public finances in Scotland. The Tories' crashing of the economy, the disastrous Brexit and now the policy of our Labour colleagues are all stretching budgets to the limit. Inflation has rocketed and, as well as affecting Government budgets, it is having a terrible impact on our constituents. Food inflation is at an astonishing 19.2 per cent, which is the highest level in 45 years.

In the face of that challenge, the Scottish Government has set balanced budgets and has invested in supporting many policies to assist during these very difficult times. Unlike south of the border, people in Scotland can claim the Scottish child payment, have access to free prescriptions, pay no tuition fees and have lower council tax bills. Labour apparently previously labelled some of those policies as those of a "something for nothing" country. That was because it did not have the vision and compassion to recognise that the policies were crucial in keeping many households afloat.

High pay offers for teachers in Scotland and increased investment in education from the SNP Government mean that spending per pupil is now more than 18 per cent higher than it is in Tory-run England and Labour-run Wales, which spends

£7,200 per pupil compared with more than £8,500 in Scotland. It is correct that we need to continue to deliver budgets that allow that investment to continue, and that is what will be seen from the Government. We can contrast that with Labour's record, because we know that, when it came to budget competence and stewardship, Labour confirmed its incompetence in writing. We all remember the letter that was left by the chief secretary to the Treasury, Liam Byrne, when Labour was removed from office. It said:

"Dear chief secretary, I'm afraid there is no money. Kind regards – and good luck! Liam."

Some of us are old enough to remember Labour's record in government in both Scotland and the UK—okay, all of us are old enough to remember that. We are even still paying for its record. Its disastrous public-private partnership schemes have cost Scottish taxpayers £30 billion, forcing us all to pay more than the original costs of the projects. It is estimated that there is still £15 billion left to pay for that economic madness. Also, do not forget the millions of pounds that it took away in supporting people grants from charities and third sector organisations in West Dunbartonshire; I will never forget that.

My Glasgow colleague John Mason reminded us of Labour's refusal to pay equal pay to working women in the city—absolute shame. Unpaid carers will not forget Labour's record either. Since 1976, when it was initially introduced as the invalid care allowance, successive UK Governments refused to align the amount paid with other earning replacement benefits. The Parliament needed to step in to right that wrong—a wrong that is owned jointly by the Labour Party and the Tories. Since the launch in 2018, a total of 833,425 carers allowance supplement payments have been paid to 141,565 carers totalling £231.8 million, which is another cost of mitigating Labour and Tory failure. Think about where that money could have been spent.

We cannot rely on the pro-Brexit and austerity Labour Party to put the people of Scotland first, and the Tory-inflicted cost of living crisis tells its own story about their incompetence, which is unprecedented since records began. Instead, it will be down to the Scottish Government to manage its budgets carefully, set progressive rates of taxation within our powers, and continue to invest in crucial services for the people of Scotland.

16:59

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I fear that Michael Marra was enjoying himself just a little bit too much at the start of the debate, trolling the SNP front benchers about their party finances but, as Jamie Halcro Johnston mentioned earlier,

at least Tom Arthur has demonstrated that he has a sense of humour, talking in his amendment about "unqualified accounts" and "openness, transparency and competence". I assume that his tongue was firmly in his cheek when he drafted those words and I am surprised that no well-paid special adviser or civil servant said, "Minister, do you not think that that wording is just a little bit courageous, given current events?"

However, Michael Marra was right to highlight the lack of transparency in relation to this Government's financial decision making—and people do not need to just take the word of the Opposition for that. Liz Smith quoted the previous Auditor General for Scotland, Caroline Gardner, who raised her concerns back in 2021 about transparency around loans to private companies. Stephen Boyle, the current Auditor General, produced a report in December 2022 asking for more transparency in four respects: first,

"fully costing spending commitments, and reporting them clearly in budgets";

secondly,

"greater transparency over capital borrowing plans and how they apply to projects";

thirdly,

"more transparency over how reserves are used to help manage cost pressures";

and fourthly,

"increasing transparency within the accounts around the balances held within the Scotland Reserve."

Those are the four areas where the Auditor General has called for greater transparency, but it does not stop there, because even within the Scottish National Party, we see criticism. We have Kenneth Gibson, convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee—who I do not think is in the chamber this afternoon—writing just the other day on behalf of the committee that committee members are

"increasingly concerned over the lack of information on the financial implications"

of the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill—it is a flagship policy of the SNP and there is no financial memorandum to accompany it. That is extraordinary, from a Government that tells us that it believes in transparency. The Minister for Community Wealth and Public Finance tells us that this Scottish Government prioritises "openness, transparency and competence" in the management of Scotland's finances. The evidence, I have to say, tells us something different.

We heard from a number of members—Willie Rennie, among others—who highlighted the wastage in the Government. There is BiFab,

Prestwick airport, and Ferguson Marine. Upwards of £300 million has been spent, and there are still no ferries being delivered and our island communities are being let down, yet we learned just the other week that Pentland Ferries is now loaning the MV Alfred from the Orkney route to CalMac Ferries to help to service some of the communities on the west coast that have been let down, for a cool £1 million a month—nice work, if you can get it—for a ferry that costs £17 million to purchase. I make that an annualised return on investment of 71 per cent. Pentland Ferries will be laughing all the way to the bank, at the expense of the Scottish taxpayer. I would think that the public finance minister should be just a little bit embarrassed about the deal that he or his colleagues struck for the Scottish taxpayer there. Then we have the guarantees to Sanjeev Gupta and the GFG group for the Fort William smelter, adding up in total to £3.5 billion wasted just so that the Scottish Government could get some nice photo opportunities. That is not the way to steward the public finances.

My time is short. Trust in politics is important—that applies to the finances of political parties, as it applies to the finances of the Government. However, Governments are using public money and that is why they have to demonstrate a proper record of transparency. That is not happening at the moment. That needs to change and the complacent approach that we have heard so far from the Government front benchers has to be improved on.

17:04

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): In the midst of a cost crisis exacerbated by economic mismanagement by the UK Government and facing the most complex and difficult budget in the history of the devolved Parliament, this Government is using the powers that it has to tackle inequality and poverty. We are a Government that is focused on equality, opportunity and community and on making a real difference to people's lives.

On equality, we will continue to tackle poverty in all its forms. We have substantially reduced child poverty. On opportunity, we will use all the powers that we have to their maximum effect to support economic growth, to help businesses and trade to thrive and to maximise the opportunity for a fair, green economy. On community, we are focusing on the delivery of key public services.

The Scottish Government recognises the pressure on household budgets, which is why, last year and this year, we have allocated almost £3 billion to support policies that tackle poverty and support people during the on-going cost of living crisis. The Government's second tackling child

poverty delivery plan, "Best Start, Bright Futures", reaffirms our sharp focus on working with partners to support those who are at the greatest risk of poverty. The plan commits to wide-ranging and ambitious action to provide immediate support to families and to deliver transformational change in the longer term in order to break the cycle of child poverty in Scotland.

Of course, that includes Social Security Scotland delivering 13 Scottish Government benefits, including the winter heating payment, which launched in February this year. Seven of those benefits are entirely new forms of financial support and are available only in Scotland, including the game-changing Scottish child payment, which took 18 months from inception to delivery, which is unprecedented—no benefit in the UK has ever been delivered so quickly. It is a response to the cost of living crisis, too. Last year, we increased that payment by 150 per cent within eight months, from £10 to £25 per week for eligible children under 16. That payment is making a real difference for children and families.

In 2023-24, we are investing £5.2 billion in benefits expenditure to support more than 1 million people, which is £770 million above the level of funding that is forecast to be received from the UK Government through the block grant adjustment. That money will go directly to people who need it most and will support households on low incomes as well as carers. It will also provide help for disabled people who are living independent lives. In April, we uprated all Scottish benefits by 10.1 per cent, in line with inflation. All of that is being delivered by the Government within our fixed budget and limited powers, which shows the political choices that we are making to support people and that we are making a significant investment in the people of Scotland.

Of course, that also includes offering free school lunches during term time to more than 280,000 pupils in primaries 1 to 5. It includes maintaining our investment in the Scottish welfare fund and our continued investment in discretionary housing payments and free bus travel, which now applies to more than 2 million people and includes all children and young people who are under 22. It also includes £350 million a year to deliver the council tax reduction scheme, and our support for the carers allowance.

We have heard a great deal from the Opposition parties. Opposition debate speeches come without cost. However, if Opposition parties seriously wish to engage with the Scottish Government on practical, costed proposals, our door is always open. If not, this is unfortunately yet another afternoon that we have spent listening to hot air and nothing more. In the meantime, the

Government will get on with delivering for the people of Scotland.

17:08

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

Let me pick up where the cabinet secretary left off. If I am not mistaken and she wants practical solutions, let us look no further than the pledge of £12 an hour for social care workers, which not only was adopted by Kate Forbes but has now been made by the current First Minister. If our suggestions are so impractical and so wildly unaffordable, why are they being adopted by the Government? Frankly, the statement that the cabinet secretary just made lacks any credibility. She knows fine well that the budget is not fixed, because the Government controls income tax and other levies—it has a variable budget. It cannot change the budget in-year, but it is not true to say that it is a fixed budget.

Ross Greer: Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: I apologise to Mr Greer, but I need to make some progress.

Perhaps the most interesting point of difference in the debate came not from members on the Opposition benches but from Ivan McKee. I agree that we need a lean, agile Government that uses the best technology. However, that is not what we have. I would contrast what he said with Tom Arthur's account that everything is fine and is done according to best practice. That shows a level of complacency that stands at odds with what this Government needs to do and embrace, as well as with the findings of Audit Scotland, whose recently published report "How the Scottish Government is set up to deliver climate change goals" said that there are ill-defined goals and lines of accountability and overlapping responsibilities, which are leading to poor outcomes.

I suggest that, if the Government listened to people such as Ivan McKee, it would do a little less of the things that it is currently doing, as evidenced by Audit Scotland's report. That is perhaps why Ivan McKee was pushed out—because those challenging voices are not ones that this Government can tolerate. That goes to the heart of what the debate is really about, because a Government that makes progress is one that is honest about mistakes, where it needs to make improvements and the challenges that it faces. That is not what this Government is interested in doing.

We need look only as far as the recent Cabinet reshuffle to see proof of that. This Government—which, granted, is in its infancy—is remarkable for very few things. It cannot even claim the prize for self-inflicted crisis and disaster, because that prize

goes to Kwasi Kwarteng and Liz Truss. No, the only thing that it is remarkable for is its sheer size. This is a Government that has doubled in size. Almost 20 per cent of parliamentarians sit on the Government front benches, and most of us do not even qualify. The front-bench members represent almost half of the SNP group. The SNP members who are not on the Government benches might need to ask themselves why they have been overlooked. It is ridiculous.

In the UK Government, the number of ministers is capped, yet, in the Scottish Government, the SNP seems to ever grow that number. That makes for bad government because—as we know—it is about increasing the payroll vote. And it is part of a wider pattern. This Government's approach is about increasing its level of control, increasing secrecy and controlling the narrative. However, that ultimately leads to bad decision making and waste.

"We need to create a leaner, more efficient Government that is focused on delivering results and cutting waste."

Those are not my words but the words of the SNP's first First Minister. I know that the SNP does not like to quote its former First Ministers, but he was right, was he not?

The Government is going wrong not only in relation to ministers. Do we remember the bonfire of the quangos? Since that phrase was uttered, the number of quangos has increased. There has been a 29 per cent increase in the number of executive board members, and 223 new positions have been created by the Scottish Government, taking the total number of those positions to 774. There are now people whose description on LinkedIn of what they do professionally is "professional public board member". Of course, when we have so many boards in such a small country we need people to double up, but it is a sign of waste and of confused objectives. It is about outsourcing and abdicating responsibility, and it ultimately leads to bad outcomes for the public and the public purse. Just last year, Labour published details of £3.7 billion-worth of Government waste, and that was not an exhaustive list, because it did not even include, for example, Angus Robertson's travel budget.

The thread that runs through all the issues that I have mentioned is poor planning and poor objectives. It goes from the spiralling costs due to the complete inability of this Government to implement a workforce strategy in the health service, which has resulted in delayed discharge spiralling out of control and hundreds of millions of pounds being spent on agency staff, to what Willie Rennie described as the "greatest hits"—I cannot put it better than that—of transport disasters and industrial interventions.

The Presiding Officer: Please conclude, Mr Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: Mr Rennie's analysis was absolutely right, because those issues are driven by that same culture of secrecy and of putting politics over delivery. That is why this Government needs to go. We need a Government that is focused on the key issues—housing, schools and our industrial strategy—and, ultimately, on prioritising delivery over spin, which is something that this Government is incapable of doing.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on Scotland's finances and the cost of living.

Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-08663, in the name of Sue Webber, on the appointment of the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland. I call Sue Webber to speak to and move the motion on behalf of the selection panel.

17:14

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): As a member of the cross-party selection panel that was established by the Presiding Officer under our standing orders, I am delighted to speak to the motion in my name, which invites members of the Parliament to agree to nominate Nicola Killean to His Majesty the King for appointment as the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland. The Presiding Officer chaired the selection panel and the other members were Bob Doris, Kaukab Stewart and Martin Whitfield.

As part of the recruitment process, in addition to being interviewed by the cross-party panel, the candidates were interviewed by a panel of young advisers who had collaborated with children on setting the questions that the candidates were to be asked. Our thanks go to all of those who were involved—especially to Meghan, aged 11 and Sandy, aged 10, for their particularly challenging questions.

We had the pleasure of meeting the young advisers and getting their feedback on the candidates, which was an invaluable part of the process. On behalf of the panel, I thank them all very much for their time, commitment and absolutely excellent feedback. I am delighted that one of the advisers is in the public gallery this afternoon, watching the debate.

As members might be aware, the role of the commissioner is to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people in Scotland. In particular, the commissioner must promote awareness and understanding of the rights of children and young people; keep under review the law, policy and practice relating to the rights of children and young people; promote best practice among service providers; and publish research. The commissioner also has powers to investigate some issues that affect children's human rights.

I turn to the panel's nominee, who is in the chamber with her family. Nicola Killean is the chief executive officer of Sistema Scotland, which delivers the social change programme Big Noise in five cities across Scotland, using music and nurturing relationships to support more than 3,500

children and young people. I am sure that a number of members will have engaged with Sistema and will know of its very valued work in their communities. Its newest project is in Wester Hailes. I have seen at first hand the benefit that it has brought to that community, and I hope to visit the project again very soon.

Nicola Killean graduated from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama with a degree in music education, and, throughout her career, she has had a particular focus on creating opportunities for children and young people from disadvantaged communities. The panel believes that Nicola's blend of skills, knowledge, experience and commitment to children and young people will make her an excellent commissioner.

Lastly, I will mention the outgoing commissioner, Bruce Adamson, who has served since 2017. Bruce had a considerable impact as the commissioner, and I am sure that we would all like to thank him for his many achievements during his term of office and wish him the very best for the future.

I move,

That the Parliament nominates Nicola Killean to His Majesty The King for appointment as the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland under section 2 of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2003.

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

Business Motions

17:17

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-08701, 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 2 May 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Tackling Social Isolation and Loneliness

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 3 May 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy;
Finance and Parliamentary Business

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 4 May 2023

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Net Zero and Just Transition

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Moveable Transactions (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 9 May 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by The Coronation of The King and The Queen Consort
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 10 May 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands;
 NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Patient Safety
 Commissioner for Scotland Bill
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 11 May 2023

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:
 Social Justice
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Charities (Regulation
 and Administration) (Scotland) Bill
followed by Financial Resolution: Charities
 (Regulation and Administration)
 (Scotland) Bill
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 1 May 2023, 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 motions S6M-08702, on a stage 1 extension, and S6M-08703, on a stage 2 timetable.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Charities (Regulation and Administration) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be extended to 12 May 2023.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 19 May 2023.—[George Adam]

Motions agreed to.

Decision Time

17:18

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

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

The first question is, that amendment S6M-08685.2, in the name of Paul McLennan, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08685, in the name of Mark Griffin, on homelessness prevention and housing supply, 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.

17:19

Meeting suspended.

17:22

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote. The question is, that amendment S6M-08685.2, in the name of Paul McLennan, be agreed to. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Unfortunately, the voting app is telling me, "403 Forbidden", rather alarmingly, but I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Johnson. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am not sure whether my vote has been registered. My app is not refreshing.

The Presiding Officer: I confirm that your vote has been recorded, Mr Choudhury.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not get connected. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Dornan. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)

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

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysoyl (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-08685.2, in the name of Paul McLennan, is: For 62, Against 52, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-08685.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08685, in the name of Mark Griffin, on homelessness prevention and housing supply, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app failed. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. We will ensure that your vote is recorded, Ms Lennon.

Daniel Johnson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Johnson. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-08685.1, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 53, Against 61, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-08685, in the name of Mark Griffin, on homelessness prevention and housing supply, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Daniel Johnson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

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

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app did not appear to connect. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: I can confirm that your vote was recorded, Ms Mochan.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. It would appear that my app did not connect. If that was the case, I can say that I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: I can confirm that your vote was recorded, Mr Doris.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): On a point of order—

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): On a point of order—

The Presiding Officer: I can confirm that your votes were recorded, Mr Kidd and Mr Greer.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP) rose—

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con) rose—

The Presiding Officer: I can confirm that your vote was recorded, Ms Stewart, as was yours, Ms McCall.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 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)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)

Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)

Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-08685, in the name of Mark Griffin, on homelessness prevention and housing supply, as amended, is: For 63, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament acknowledges the recommendations of the Temporary Accommodation Task and Finish Group and agrees that the Scottish Government should respond positively to tackle the unacceptable numbers in temporary accommodation; recognises the expertise and partnership working between local and national government, third sector organisations and those with lived experience to tackle, prevent and end homelessness, building on existing strong homelessness and housing rights; welcomes the continued investment through local government core funding and the Scottish Government's £100 million Ending Homelessness Together transformation fund to continue with a rapid rehousing and housing first approach; acknowledges that Scotland leads the way in delivering affordable housing, with 118,124 affordable homes delivered since 2007, 83,291 of which were for social rent, including 21,313 council homes, and welcomes the Scottish Government's continued investment of £3.5 billion over the current parliamentary session for the delivery of more affordable homes towards its 2032 target.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-08686.2, in the name of Tom Arthur, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08686, in the name of Michael Marra, on Scotland's finances and the cost of living, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.
 The vote is closed.

Daniel Johnson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would like to vote no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. I will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 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)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-08686.2, in the name of Tom Arthur, is: For 62, Against 50, Abstentions 1.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-08686.1, in the name of Liz Smith, which seeks to amend motion S6M-08686, in the name of Michael Marra, on Scotland's finances and the cost of living, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-08686, in the name of Michael Marra, on Scotland's finances and the cost of living, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: We will move to a vote.

The vote is closed.

Daniel Johnson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would like to vote no.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 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)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-08686, in the name of Michael Marra, on Scotland's finances and the cost of living, as amended, is: For 62, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament considers sound financial management and the responsible use of taxpayers' money to be key priorities for any government, and that this is especially important at a time when households and businesses face increased bills and expenses due to the ongoing cost of living crisis; understands that the record of the Scottish Government over the last 16 years has been characterised by balanced budgets, unqualified accounts and, since 2018, the most progressive income tax system in the UK; considers that this is in stark contrast to the

decade of austerity that Scotland has faced from successive UK governments; recognises that the Scottish Government has worked constructively with Audit Scotland, the Scottish Fiscal Commission and the Scottish Parliament's Finance and Constitution Committee to improve the budgetary process and parliamentary scrutiny of Scotland's finances; calls on the Scottish Government to continue to prioritise openness, transparency and competence in the management of Scotland's finances, and further calls on the Scottish Government to address the concerns about the inconsistency in financial data sets that were set out by the Scottish Parliament Finance and Public Administration Committee in paragraph 43 of its report, *PreBudget Scrutiny 2023-24: Scotland's Public Finances in 2023-24 and the Impact of the Cost of Living and Public Service Reform*.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-08663, in the name of Sue Webber, on appointment of the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament nominates Nicola Killean to His Majesty The King for appointment as the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland under section 2 of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2003.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Celebrating Autism Acceptance

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S6M-08250, in the name of Stephanie Callaghan, on celebrating autism acceptance. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite any members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges both World Autism Acceptance Week, which runs from 27 March to 2 April 2023, and World Autism Month, which is celebrated throughout April, and their aim to raise awareness of autism, educate the public and make the world a friendly place for autistic people; notes that the National Autistic Society (NAS) theme for World Autism Acceptance Week 2023 is "colour", and welcomes the fundraising events, including an in-person colour walk and colour virtual challenge, to support services; understands that more than one in 100 people in Scotland are autistic, and believes that accepting, promoting and celebrating the skills, thoughts, ideas and talents of autistic people supports those individuals to reach their full potential, while bringing positive benefits for wider society; further understands that the report, *Closing the Accountability Gap*, published by NAS and Scottish Autism, found that there is still a significant gap in the provision and access of appropriate support for autistic people across services such as schools, employment and healthcare; commends NAS and Scottish Autism for what it considers their continuous campaigning to promote autistic people's rights and create a fairer and more accepting society, and in championing quality autism-specific services across Scotland, as well as their work to establish a Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodiversity Commissioner, and acknowledges the valuable work of local autism groups, such as HOPE for Autism and the Autism Resource Coordination Hub (ARCH) based in Lanarkshire, that work in partnership with autistic people.

17:36

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I am absolutely delighted to be leading this debate during autism acceptance month.

I thank colleagues for coming together to celebrate the rich talents, strengths and contribution of the fantastic autistic people in our lives. Most of all, I want to thank the National Autistic Society—members of which are up there at the back of the public gallery this evening—for continually advocating for autistic people's rights. For more than 25 years, NAS has provided specialised care and support to the autistic community, and I am sure that we can all agree that that is something that is well worth celebrating.

Every time that we talk about autism, we improve awareness and promote understanding, but that does not quite cut it. What autistic people really need is our acceptance—they need to be

accepted, valued and respected exactly as they are and without pressure to fit into other people's idea of normal. Together, we must create a society that works for autistic people, not against them.

The National Autistic Society tells us that more than one in every 100 people in Scotland has an autism diagnosis—and that is forgetting the people who are not yet diagnosed. However, if you have met one autistic person, you have met only one autistic person. It is time to banish the outdated stereotypes and incorrect assumptions that limit society's understanding of autism and also to put more focus on early diagnosis.

Records show that, across Scotland, waiting times for an autism diagnosis can be lengthy, with one person waiting more than four years. Clearly, that is not good enough. However, support need not wait for diagnosis; it can start wherever there is a need.

There is a particular issue around women and girls, with research showing that they often struggle in silence. Too often, females who query a possible autism diagnosis are dismissed, because they excel at mimicking others and masking the symptoms. It is suggested instead that they are just naturally shy or anxious, or that other mental health issues are to blame. However, as we know, women in our society are often fobbed off, so it probably does not come as a huge surprise that autism diagnostic tools are focused on the common traits that we see in men and boys, which means that female symptoms are easily missed—even by professionals.

Last year, the National Autistic Society launched a brilliant campaign called "Now I Know", which highlights the immense struggles and the liberating experiences of women who receive a late diagnosis. One such woman is Zara, whose diagnosis has allowed her to become comfortable with her true self. She has been told that, since she had her autism diagnosis, she has seemed more autistic. However, behind the masking, Zara has always been that way. The difference is that, today, she is proud of who she is, and she does not try to hide those autistic traits.

Autistic children and young people can also struggle to access their right to education. In 2018, the National Autistic Society, Scottish Autism and Children in Scotland released their joint report entitled "Not included, not engaged, not involved: A report on the experiences of autistic children missing school". The report highlights the sensory challenges that schools bring—bright lights, loud noises, chaos and uncertainty—and states that they can create the perfect storm for sensory overload in autistic pupils.

I will give members an example that illustrates that. During his primary 7 year, my autistic son

delivered a presentation to his class in which he asked his classmates to sit in silence for one whole minute, and then he asked about the sounds that they heard. They had noticed birds tweeting, tummies rumbling, clocks ticking and all the sounds that we do not notice but which some autistic people are constantly aware of. He pointed out to his classmates how those noises can make it hard to listen, to do maths and to write essays, and how exhausting it can be to concentrate and focus on the things that he needs to focus on. His classmates really understood. I encourage everyone here to try out that minute's silence, become aware of all of those noises, and then imagine them constantly ringing in their ears every day as they try to focus and concentrate.

The "Not included, not engaged, not involved" report also tells us that one in three parents says that their autistic child has been unlawfully excluded from a school and that young people can find themselves spending vital education time away from classroom activities. Sometimes, teachers lack key training or resources that are needed to support autistic pupils in the classroom.

Although autistic behaviours are often still misunderstood as bad behaviour, understanding is improving. However, it is still too common for parents to feel blamed. Too many hear, "Your child is disruptive. Are there issues at home?" That said, I recently had an encouraging chat with a friend about her child's positive experience of the education system. She said, "My son's school put in place flexi schooling and allowed him full autonomy over his learning. Teachers let him choose how to mix remote and in-person learning, and he achieved an A in advanced higher English and then went on to study an HND at college. Now, he is completing a degree at Strathclyde uni. They created an environment where my son could thrive."

We need to see much more of that, and it is up to all of us to ensure that that type of positive strategy becomes the new normal.

Recently, I visited a couple of local groups: the autism resource co-ordination hub—ARCH—in Hamilton and Hope for Autism in Airdrie. I learned from them about the programmes that they are running to support autistic communities. ARCH has co-designed its model and services with autistic people and families, and Hope for Autism has an autism team developing and delivering training for families and professionals. It is vital that we invest in and learn from such organisations so that we can build available post-diagnostic support that really allows autistic people to excel.

However, we have come a long way, and the Scottish Government's forthcoming learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill, which will

establish a learning disability, autism and neurodiversity commissioner, will be a world first. It will be a landmark legislative move to benefit autistic people. I am delighted that the First Minister is committed to introducing the bill by the end of this parliamentary session, and I encourage the minister to pledge her commitment today, too, and to ensure that autistic voices remain central and at the core of policy making in our Scottish Parliament.

I thank all the autistic people who light up our lives. I will finish with the words of the autistic author Paul Isaacs:

“Do not fear people with Autism, embrace them, Do not spite people with Autism unite them, Do not deny people with Autism accept them for then their abilities will shine.”

17:44

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I thank Stephanie Callaghan for lodging the motion and congratulate her on her extremely powerful speech.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate concerning the indispensable work that has been done for individuals in Scotland living with autism. I am also happy to see the Parliament acknowledge world autism acceptance week and world autism month, which have been celebrated to raise public awareness of autism and aid in creating a more welcoming world for autistic individuals.

Over the course of my career as an MSP, I have been able to work closely with a wide array of colleagues and organisations to help make Scotland more accommodating to the needs of autistic people. Personally, I have been contacted by many parents and family members of people with autism in Glasgow, who have asked that more be done to support their loved ones' needs.

In my capacity as an MSP, I have sponsored numerous parliamentary motions on subjects relating to autism, including motions on the Glasgow founder of educational Dekko Comics winning a national award and Glasgow mums launching a playgroup for kids with autism. Additionally, I have had the honour of attending events that have been held by groups at the Parliament, such as the event to celebrate 25 years of the National Autistic Society Scotland and an event to mark Scottish Autism's 50-year anniversary. Furthermore, before the Covid-19 pandemic, in collaboration with the National Autistic Society, I called on the Scottish Government to introduce a three-month national health service waiting time target for autistic patients. NAS has found that 27 per cent of patients were misdiagnosed and that 42 per cent indicated that the process had been stressful. The

move was designed to expedite the autism diagnosis process and align it with measures that already existed in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Aside from various roles in which I have served, being a member of the cross-party group on autism has been particularly rewarding. During the pandemic, I was delighted to see the launch of its report, “The accountability gap”, which reviewed the Scottish Government's strategy for autism.

After eight years of the Government's strategy being implemented, it has become evident—through the statements of most of the hundreds of individuals who participated in our review—that, although progress has been made, obstacles remain, particularly in relation to employment and diagnosis support.

Among the recommendations of our report, I supported the creation of a new commissioner to safeguard the rights of autistic people in Scotland, which would facilitate bridging the gap between advocacy and policy making. I believe that that will help to address on-going obstacles for autistic people, as 72 per cent felt that they lacked sufficient support, 78 per cent stated that they had difficulty in securing local support, and 69 per cent believed that greater support would help with feelings of isolation.

That leads me to highlight the potential of the forthcoming learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill. The bill, which will establish a learning disability, autism and neurodiversity commissioner, will open to public consultation in the latter half of this year. I welcome increased engagement between the Scottish Parliament and organisations that perform invaluable work on behalf of autistic individuals. More specifically, I encourage more robust dialogue with the groups that I have been privileged to work with, such as Scottish Autism.

Like Stephanie Callaghan, I know that everyone in the chamber will join me in working tirelessly to address the continuing challenges that are endured by people with autism.

17:48

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Stephanie Callaghan for bringing this important debate to the chamber. On behalf of Scottish Labour, I, too, welcome world autism acceptance week and all the work in Scotland that is linked to world autism month, which is happening throughout April.

We know that autistic and other neurodivergent people often find themselves excluded from life opportunities and unable to access the support to which they are entitled. Until 2022, the focus of this time of year was world autism awareness. The

move to focus on acceptance occurred as a result of the belief that, although, thanks to the campaigning of many people, there was an increased awareness, that was not accompanied by the better understanding of autism that Stephanie Callaghan talked about, or the systemic change that promotes inclusion and acceptance in the long term—those elements are an important part of the work that needs to be done. That is a fair point, and it is worth repeating that we need to think about what changes we can make in society to promote inclusion and that long-term acceptance.

In my life before coming to this place—there was life before this place—I was lucky to meet and work with many people with autism. In that role, I saw at first hand some of the barriers that people and their families face, but I stress that I also saw solutions and the potential avenues that are available to support people with autism and their families.

I thank the National Autistic Society for its very helpful briefing. We know that many autistic people and families face barriers to acceptance and supports in a wide range of everyday settings. People have spoken about school settings that do not have adequate facilities to support autistic learners. In social care, supports are often not forthcoming until a person is in crisis, which is totally the wrong thing for people with autism. It would be remiss of me not to say that the crisis in social care is hugely affecting the support that is available for people with autism and, if we address that crisis, that will help. Providing such support is a professional role, and we should see it as that.

As I have heard many times from families, advocacy services are really important so that people do not reach the crisis point that causes so many problems. As we heard, accommodation affects people with autism, and many people are trapped in the wrong settings, which does not help them. With regard to healthcare, we have heard from members that people have challenges in getting their diagnosis and, perhaps because of that, the help and understanding that they need within health services.

It is really important to me that there are meaningful opportunities in the job market and in other areas, so we must equip employers to support people. In addition, we must understand what happens as people get older, so we need research to look at that.

As people know, for me, a fairer society is one that prioritises health and, in the chamber, we often talk about that. Physical, mental, social and economic health are all crucial aspects that we want for ourselves, so we want them for other people as well.

I am aware of time, but another interesting point is that we estimate that about 56,000 people in Scotland are living with autism, but an additional number of people need support. There are around 700,000 people for whom autism and/or a learning disability is part of their daily life, and those complexities would be helped if we had better understanding.

In my concluding remarks, I will talk about the learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill and the creation of a commissioner. I was lucky enough to visit a group in Catrine in Ayrshire, in my region, where there is a very compassionate group of staff. They spoke to me about how worth while that work would be and how important it is to get in there. I ask the minister to give us some idea of a timeframe for that work, as that would be very helpful for people who are living with autism.

17:53

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I thank and congratulate Stephanie Callaghan for securing this debate and I wish everyone a happy autism awareness month. When I saw that I had the opportunity to talk about autism, I was particularly enthused and then quite overwhelmed because, as an autistic woman who has autistic children, I have much to say on the subject, and it is really hard to condense it all into four minutes.

I have been very open about my journey into politics, which happened in part because of my lived experience as a parent of autistic children—the barriers, gatekeeping and negative judgmental attitudes drove my passion for justice in this area. When I was first elected as a councillor in 2017, I was inundated with constituents' issues regarding their autistic children's care in health, education, and transitions to workplaces and higher education. Six years on, in my new role, I still deal with many of the same challenges, and I am in no doubt that there is often a postcode lottery for families when it comes to what support they get, but it also depends on the attitudes and training of the individuals that they come across on their journey.

I do not want to be completely doom and gloom on the subject, but we have not got things right for Scotland's autistic community. I accept that there are many hard-working charities, organisations, schools, individuals and healthcare support workers, and I am extremely grateful for them but, overall, our society and institutions are in dire need of radical change and of a cohesive movement that will seek a meaningful societal shift in acceptance.

Like many others living with, or affected by, autism, I was really pleased to see the manifesto

commitment to bring a learning disabilities, neurodiversity and autism bill to Parliament and to create a commissioner to oversee work in the area. I place on record my gratitude for the new First Minister's assurance that the bill will be introduced by the end of this session of Parliament.

I am grateful to the National Autistic Society for all the work that it has done. The society has collaborated with me many times and it is fantastic to see all the work that it does in Scotland. I am also grateful to the society for the briefing and statistics that it provided for this debate.

In meeting key people over the years, I have heard a few times that diagnosis is not necessary. It is therefore hard to believe that we can have reliable or accurate statistics if we dissuade people from diagnosis and if there is reluctance or gatekeeping throughout our services. Oftentimes, unless a person displays obviously autistic traits, or is an inconvenience to certain institutions, they will not be diagnosed. High-masking autistic women are too often completely unnoticed, due to societal pressures to perform in a socially acceptable way, and are therefore often dismissed when they seek help.

I could speak for hours about the vulnerabilities of autistic women. The fact that they are three times more likely to be sexually assaulted than non-autistic women could lead to a whole debate in itself, as could the comorbidities that often come with autism and neurodiversity. Those include, but are not limited to, eating disorders, obesity, anxiety, depression, connective tissue disorders, gastrointestinal conditions, heart conditions and many more. The life expectancy of someone with autism is, on average, 16 years less than that of their non-autistic peers—a figure that should sober us all.

I met with Marion McLaughlin, the CEO of Autism Understanding Scotland, an autistic-led charity based in Aberdeen that supports autistic people, their families, and professionals across the north-east and Shetland. The charity does an incredible job and I hope that we can ensure that organisations such as that, and the National Autistic Society, are taken along on the journey to make Scotland a more accepting place. It is vital that we support those services.

I have hope for the future of Scotland's autistic community, but that hope comes with many conditions. I voice my gratitude to those who make the difference and for the opportunity to speak openly on this subject.

17:58

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I begin by thanking and paying tribute to Stephanie

Callaghan for securing the debate and Karen Adam for her really valuable contribution. I also pay tribute to the National Autistic Society and Scottish Autism for the work that they do, especially in advocating for individuals across Scotland. I have had meetings with both organisations during my time as an MSP, and I thank them for their work.

The motion for the debate includes a very important sentence, which is that we should "make the world a friendly place for autistic people".

We have not done enough to do that. Our public services, which we have the opportunity to shape and improve, should look at how they can do more to improve outcomes, especially for people who have not been able to achieve a diagnosis. Stephanie Callaghan was right to say that, in this day and age, it is completely unacceptable that it can take four years to reach a diagnosis. I hope that the Scottish Government will use the debate to look at the potential to reform diagnosis across our services.

For some time, I have been campaigning with parents in my Lothian region on the fight that they have had to face, after having achieved a diagnosis for autism, to have their child referred for an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessment, which is not routinely offered. That has to change.

I have supported a family with two boys who were diagnosed with autism by NHS Lothian some years ago. They had to watch their boys struggle to function at school and in society for up to six years before going private to seek an ADHD assessment. Both boys were diagnosed with ADHD and given the necessary support and medication. That has transformed their lives, as well as their family's life. Given that 50 to 70 per cent of people with autism have co-morbidities that can include ADHD, it would make sense for those who meet the diagnosis criteria for autism to be routinely referred for an ADHD assessment.

I understand that NHS Lothian is developing a neurodevelopmental pathway. I welcome that and have been calling for it. I have written to previous mental health ministers and social care ministers about the issue, because we need a Scotland-wide solution. I hope that the minister will agree to meet me and other campaigners to discuss the issue, because there is an opportunity to fix it for families. I understand that ministers will have concerns about new and additional referrals to specialists, but I want to make sure that we address the issue, because proper diagnosis is needed for young people with ADHD and/or autism. That is so important to a young person's development, and we as a country are not getting

it right. I hope that the minister will comment on that in her closing speech.

In addition, two key bills are going through the Parliament: the learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill and the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill, both of which will, I hope, present an opportunity for cross-party working.

I have many concerns about how professionals respond to children with autism and their behaviours. That needs to be ironed out in the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill when it comes to recording incidents, training for individuals and how we have built a system that often escalates how children are responded to. Across the Parliament, we need to look at de-escalation and at the training that we provide to individuals.

The debate has been useful. There is lots of work to do. Many members, from all parties, want to see real and positive change. I hope that, in future years, when we have other debates on the subject, we can genuinely say that we have worked to make Scotland a friendly place for autistic people.

18:02

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank Stephanie Callaghan and all the members who have spoken in the debate for their valuable contributions. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the points that have been made and to highlight the role of the Scottish Government in improving the lives of autistic people, including through our approach to promoting wider acceptance of autism and neurodivergent people.

Reducing the stigma that autistic people face and promoting better understanding are key features of our “Learning/Intellectual Disability and Autism Towards Transformation” plan. The plan sets out the actions that are needed to shape support services and attitudes in order to ensure that the human rights of autistic people and people with learning disabilities are respected and protected.

This year, the Scottish Government marked world autism acceptance week by launching a new e-book on the Different Minds website. It was written and created in partnership with autistic adults and gives an insight into the differences between autistic and non-autistic communication styles. It highlights the positive message that we all communicate differently and that that is okay.

During the week beginning 27 March, members will have seen some of the posts on social media, which were shared further through stakeholder networks and the partnerships that we have

developed with services and companies across Scotland. Our Different Minds campaign increased awareness of autism through TV advertisements, which were shown repeatedly in 2020 and again in 2022. That puts autism at the forefront of people’s minds, builds understanding and breaks down misconceptions, stereotypes and stigma.

The Different Minds campaign continues to highlight the differences via the website, which was designed with autistic people, shares their stories and experiences in their own words and busts myths that surround autism in real and impactful ways.

I would like to outline some of the work that the Government has brought forward in the past few years. Over the past two years, the fund that supported the Different Minds campaign has been given additional investment of £800,000, which has enabled organisations to work with employers to provide the right adjustments and support to allow autistic employees to bring their skills to the workplace.

To date, we have invested £2 million in piloting post-diagnostic support for autistic adults and young people through a number of third sector charities. Our focus on post-diagnostic support has helped hundreds of newly diagnosed autistic people to find self-understanding through a range of tailored supports.

We fund the national autism implementation team to work with health and social care partnerships and NHS boards to focus on improving and developing diagnostic services—a common theme in all the contributions to tonight’s debate. The NAIT has also worked in partnership with four HSCPs to trial support and diagnosis pathways for adults with autism and ADHD. That partnership is supported by £650,000 of funding. The report was published in March 2023, and we accepted all the recommendations to take this work forward.

That work complements our approach to neurodevelopmental pathways for children and young people. In 2021-22, we provided NHS boards with funding of £3.06 million to build capacity to support the implementation of the neurodevelopmental specification.

In 2022-23, we allocated funding of £32 million via the mental health outcomes framework to improve the quality and delivery of mental health and psychological services for all. The priorities include improvements in child and adolescent mental health services, psychological therapies, eating disorder services and neurodevelopmental services.

We published the supported employment review in September 2022, and we are considering the recommendations to support people with

disabilities or other disadvantaged groups to secure and maintain paid employment.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I didnae really want to interrupt the minister's speech, but I am thinking about a place in Dumfries that is good at supporting people with autism into employment. The Usual Place does a great job in supporting people into work and long-term employment. Does the minister agree that that is a good example of something that we should support? She might want to come and visit Dumfries some time down the line.

Maree Todd: As the member knows, I am always delighted to get down to Dumfries. There is a lot around the country to celebrate but, as we have heard, there is also still a lot of work to do. That is why, in our 2021 programme for government, the Scottish Government committed to introducing a learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill. The bill will ensure that the rights of autistic people, people with learning disabilities and other neurodivergent people are respected and protected.

Initial scoping work for the bill was published in February, and we have now formed three panels, which include the voices of practitioners, stakeholders and those with lived experience, to further develop the bill. More than 260 people applied to our lived experience panel, and 27 individuals are now bringing experience, energy and passion to the development of the consultation on the bill.

I am afraid that I cannot give Carol Mochan assurances on the timing of the bill, because so much of that lies outwith my control as minister. However, I assure her that the Government is still committed to it and still working on it, and we will keep the community well informed as we continue with the work.

We welcome the report "Closing the Accountability Gap", which was published by the National Autistic Society and Scottish Autism in conjunction with 2,000 autistic people and their families and carers. The report shares the view that a commissioner is required to champion the learning disability, autism and neurodiversity bill. We are, however, aware that that view is not shared by everyone at this stage, which is why we need to consult on the options, including the option of appointing a commissioner or commission.

I want to respond to some of the points that were made during the debate. Stephanie Callaghan and Karen Adam were absolutely right to raise the issue of masking and the additional challenges that autistic women and girls face. We work with the Scottish Women's Autism Network to support its work in that area.

I would be more than happy to meet Miles Briggs and campaigners to hear what they need the Government to do and what changes they think are required. I cannot guarantee that I will be able to commit to a timeline for action, but I am certainly more than happy to meet and listen.

There is a challenge with employment. We know that employment rates among autistic people are really low, and we need to tackle those inequalities, not just to improve the quality of life that autistic people experience but to help Scotland's economic performance. The employment rate for autistic adults in Scotland is about 16 per cent. In comparison, the national employment rate is 73 per cent, so it is a no-brainer that we need to tackle that disparity, and we are tackling it through our fair work first policy and by implementing the recommendations of our review of supported employment and individual placement and support.

I realise that I have run out of time, as I often do—I apologise, Presiding Officer. To sum up, I thank Stephanie Callaghan again for highlighting these important issues. Autism acceptance week sets out to raise the profile of autism, and it has succeeded in bringing us all together today. I am committed to working in partnership with the Parliament and with our stakeholders to make Scotland an accepting and inclusive place, where we welcome and celebrate difference and realise potential. It is crucial that we are informed by neurodivergent people, including autistic people, about their needs so that they can have real choice and freedom in how they live their lives. As I settle into my new role, I look forward to meeting autistic people and other neurodivergent people in the coming weeks and months and to listening to their experiences and ideas.

Meeting closed at 18:11.

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