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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 4 October 2023

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

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is rural affairs, land reform and islands. Any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. The usual appeal for brevity in questions and answers applies.

UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement (Impact on Agriculture)

1. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its most recent assessment is of any impact of the United Kingdom-Australia free trade agreement on Scotland's agricultural sector. (S6O-02584)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Research undertaken by the Andersons Centre to assess the long-term impact of the UK-Australia and other free trade agreements on the Scottish agricultural sector outlined that both the Australian and New Zealand deals will exert significant pressure on sectors, particularly beef and sheep, that are important to our rural economy. We have always been concerned about the precedent that the negotiation of those initial deals would set, yet further pressure could be placed on the agricultural sector if other deals are poorly negotiated by the UK Government—for example, with Canada, which exports more than a third of its beef produce.

Although it is too early to determine the full impact of the UK-Australia trade deal, all indications are that it will be negative for Scottish farming. Unless the UK Government listens to and takes seriously the concerns that I have raised repeatedly and which have been echoed by our farmers and crofters, the sector will continue to suffer from bad deals, with bad outcomes for Scotland foisted on us by Westminster.

Audrey Nicoll: Earlier this month, the price of Australian lamb reportedly sat at around less than half the price in Scotland, and Australian lamb exports to the UK reportedly almost trebled in

August to 1,028 tonnes. Now, the Australian red meat sector looks poised to make further inroads, having launched the Aussie Beef and Lamb brand. What would the cabinet secretary say to those farmers who, while working tirelessly to provide food of unparalleled quality, might be fearful about what the consequences of this Brexit-based Tory betrayal could mean for the future of their livelihoods?

Mairi Gougeon: That is why I argued strongly during the negotiation of that deal and urged the UK Government not to give away those enormous tariff-free quotas needlessly. As we have now seen, the UK Government has changed its mind. Former Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary of State George Eustice, who was in post during the negotiation of that deal and who gave farmers and crofters assurances that what they were looking for and their interests would be protected, criticised the deal after he left post, saying that the Australia trade deal is

“not actually a very good deal”

for the UK and that we

“gave away far too much for too little in return”.

The Scottish agri-food sector deserves so much better than that, especially when we consider the deals that the European Union has managed to negotiate with Australia and New Zealand. It has negotiated a far better deal for its members. It is not only frustrating but an absolute disgrace that the UK Government did not see fit to do the same.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The ability of Scottish farmers to trade competitively with the rest of the UK is vital to Scotland's agricultural sector. Will the cabinet secretary give clarity on the percentage of direct support that will be attributed to replacing common agricultural funding for farmers and crofters?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I do not think that that is related to the initial question on trade deals. Is there anything that you can add to what you have already said, cabinet secretary?

Mairi Gougeon: I completely agree with the first point in Rachael Hamilton's question. She is also referring to the future budget and what that might be. We have committed to maintaining direct payments in Scotland, but we do not have any clarity on the future budget from the UK Government, and it has refused, to date, to engage in any meaningful conversations on the matter.

Food and Drink Producers (Support)

2. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is

taking to encourage people to support their local food and drink producers. (S6O-02585)

Mairi Gougeon: We want everyone to have the opportunity to enjoy food and drink that is produced locally and for producers of all sizes to access the markets that are on their doorsteps. We will shortly be publishing “Local food for everyone”, which will set out our local food strategy and is about connecting people with food, connecting Scottish producers with buyers and harnessing the power of public sector procurement.

We have also provided more than £700,000 between 2020 and this financial year to the Scottish Grocers Federation for its go local programme, which is helping transform convenience stores with dedicated display space for Scottish produce.

Emma Harper: I attended the Stranraer oyster festival—the cabinet secretary did as well—where some fantastic Dumfriesshire and Galloway producers such as Stacy Hannah Chocolate, Moffat Distillery and Sulwath Brewers were selling their products. In addition, over the summer, many people supported our local food and drink producers at various agricultural shows. What further practical steps can the Scottish Government take to support the public to choose local, particularly with Food Standards Scotland pointing out that the Tory-made cost of living crisis is impacting on people’s ability to shop locally?

Mairi Gougeon: I welcome Emma Harper’s points about the Stranraer oyster festival. It was a fantastic event, and it is great to hear that about 25,000 people attended. I take this opportunity to extend my gratitude to Romano Petrucci as well as all the other volunteers who helped to make the event such a success.

In relation to Emma Harper’s question, we continue to support Scotland’s Town Partnership. This year, we provided it with a grant of £400,000 to develop the Scotland loves local programme as part of its overall work programme of activities, and as a means of putting localism at the heart of a stronger, greener and fairer Scotland. An additional £250,000 of funding was agreed earlier this year, which will enable significant development of the Scotland loves local gift card programme during this year, including further promotional activities, digitisation and further expansion and reach of the programme.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a couple of supplementaries, the first of which is from Brian Whittle.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary and I have rehearsed the topic of local public procurement many times and I know that she agrees with me that it is a significant way

in which we can support our food producers and our rural economy. Does she agree that bean counters using cheap imported food is a false economy and that we must ensure that as many councils as possible use local food procurement? If so, what is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that that approach is expanded?

Mairi Gougeon: I welcome the member’s question. It is not just us who agree on that; members across the chamber agree on the power of public procurement and how it can strengthen both our local economy and our economy more widely. Indeed, we heard that in our recent food and drink debate.

As we know, this is a complex area, and that is why we have a number of initiatives to help us get round some of the issues and to support our local producers as much as possible. One such initiative is the Food4Fife scheme, which I know the member will be aware of. Over this financial year, we have provided £490,000 of funding for the expansion of that scheme and for a wider pilot project in Glasgow to examine how we can strengthen local public procurement not just in schools but across the wider public sector.

We will continue to monitor that and will look to do all that we can in that respect, particularly through the good food nation plan, the draft of which will be coming forward shortly. I look forward to engaging with Brian Whittle and other members on how we can look to improve what we are doing already.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Rhoda Grant joins us remotely.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The issue is that most procurement, especially that for schools and other Government organisations, is done centrally. What steps will the cabinet secretary take to work with those who procure, including in relation to their wherewithal to procure, to ensure that local people have in their hands the ability to procure small amounts locally?

Mairi Gougeon: The member raises a really important point. We know that there is a complex legislative framework around procurement, and that is why, as I outlined in my previous response, we are undertaking a number of different initiatives and finding ways in which we can look to strengthen that.

One thing that we are taking forward is the Supplier Development Programme, which delivers free training and guidance on how to submit and win public procurement bids. Our legislation, through the sustainable procurement duty, requires public sector contracting authorities to consider and act on opportunities to facilitate the involvement of small and medium-sized

enterprises, third sector bodies and supported businesses through public procurement.

Again, as with my offer to Brian Whittle, I am more than happy to continue to engage with Rhoda Grant and other members on considering what other improvements we could make in this area, because we want to ensure that we have strong local supply chains that really benefit our producers as well as our local economies.

Fishing Industry (Support)

3. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what role it will play in supporting the fishing industry over the next 10 years. (S6O-02586)

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government already plays an active role in supporting and managing Scotland's vital fishing industry, and it will continue to do so in the future. Through our delivery of the actions in our 10-year fisheries management strategy, the funding that we provide and the operational functions that we deliver, we are focused on ensuring that both Scotland's fishing industry and our marine environment can thrive sustainably, and that our seafood sector can continue to support jobs and provide a high-protein source of food for our communities.

Liam Kerr: North-east fishing communities expressed cautious delight when, in response to warnings that highly protected marine areas would close 47 per cent of our waters to fishing and decimate the industry, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands halted their implementation. However, almost immediately, Government minister Lorna Slater and Ariane Burgess MSP said that the Scottish Government will still bring in HPMA's as they are a red line in the Bute house agreement.

Can this minister clear up the Scottish Government position? Have the hated HPMA's been ditched, or was the pre-recess announcement simply a cynical delaying tactic?

Gillian Martin: That is probably a question for the cabinet secretary, Màiri McAllan, but I hope to clear things up, if I can, with regard to the support that we are giving to fishing.

We want to ensure that communities across Scotland are central to any process in which we involve them. Since I took on responsibility for inshore fisheries, we have been consulting on inshore tracking and monitoring. That consultation is open until 7 November. That will allow people to look at what more data we can get on what species are out there and where they are in our seas. That is for vessels under 12m.

Given that Liam Kerr mentioned north-east fisheries, I can let him know that I am actually speaking to them in about an hour's time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a number of supplementaries. We will try to get through all of them, but the questions will need to be brief, as will the responses.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): A fisherman has described the recent experience of the industry as "the hardest three years". That same fisherman described how the industry was "sold a lie" over Brexit. How will the Government's long-term support plans seek to protect the Scottish fishing industry from the disaster politics of the Tories and Labour, neither of whom offer support to the Scottish fishing industry?

Gillian Martin: What Kate Forbes has outlined that she has heard from her local fisherman is something that I and my colleagues, such as Karen Adam, who represents Banffshire and Buchan Coast, have also heard.

We warned of the effects of Brexit on the Scottish fishing industry. Those have been exacerbated by the Tories' hard Brexit—a hard Brexit need not have been imposed on Scotland. Those effects include higher export costs, barriers to trade, loss of access to labour and broken promises about lost European Union funding being replaced in full.

This Government will always champion Scotland's fishing industry and do all that we can to support it, and we will adapt and innovate to ensure a just transition to a sustainable and resilient fishing fleet. That includes annual negotiations in which we work to secure the best outcomes that we can for Scottish fishing businesses. However, as long as we are part of the United Kingdom, whether there is a Labour or a Tory Westminster Government, we in Scotland will not have a direct seat at the table—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. I call Colin Smyth.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The Scottish Government has a legal duty to support and incentivise fishing methods that have a lower environmental impact and are selective. What specific measures has the Government taken, and planned to take, to deliver what is a legal responsibility?

Gillian Martin: I refer Colin Smyth to part of my answer to Liam Kerr's question, on what we are doing with the inshore tracking and monitoring consultation. We are proposing to put monitoring cameras on vessels under 12m. That has already been piloted in the Hebrides, and it will be able to give us a picture of, and some more robust data

on, where the species are and where we can fish sustainably. I think that that will be a game changer with regard to what we see in the marine environment. We will know what is where, and when.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Maggie Chapman, who is joining us remotely.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Can the minister outline what the benefits would be from applying a future cap to current high-impact fishing activity in Scotland's inshore waters?

Gillian Martin: We are not proposing any cap. We are looking to use science and the available data from our fishing fleet to have a better idea of what species are where in Scotland's inshore waters. That will be the absolute bedrock of any decisions that we make in future. It is not a case of applying caps as such; it is a case of knowing what is where, where we need more sustainable fishing methods, and what species we will protect and allow to thrive more through the decisions that we make. It all has to be based on scientific data.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Have the hated HPMA's been ditched—yes or no?

Gillian Martin: I refer Douglas Lumsden to the statement that Màiri McAllan gave to the Parliament. Everything that he needs to know is in that statement.

Crops (Durability)

4. Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it plans to take to improve the durability of Scottish crops over the coming years. (S6O-02587)

I refer members to my entry in the register of interests regarding farming.

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government invests nearly £50 million a year in a portfolio of strategic research to ensure that Scotland maintains its position at the forefront of research into advances in sustainable crop production, natural resources and the environment. That includes research that is aimed at improving crop resilience. We have also made capital investments in new technology, including a new educational vertical farming facility at Scotland's Rural College, which will provide a fully controllable facility for researching crop growth.

The provision of high-quality advice for growers is supported by Government via the Farm Advisory Service and the SRUC crop-monitoring grant, to ensure that producers can make the best decisions for their current crops and future

planning. Further, we have promised up to £6 million for our fruit and vegetable producers to allow them to continue to work together to invest in ensuring the viability of fruit and vegetable production.

Alexander Burnett: Recent work by the James Hutton Institute has shown that advances in gene sequencing can help to protect staple Scottish crops such as potatoes, barley and raspberries from the changing climate. Will the minister accept that those technological advances are essential for Scotland's food security?

Gillian Martin: What I will accept is that, before we make any decisions on anything to do with gene sequencing or gene editing, we must listen to organisations such as the James Hutton Institute and many more, such as our partners in SEFARI—the Scottish Environment, Food and Agriculture Research Institutions. As I said in response to the fishing questions, this is all about data, research and listening to the advisers, of whom we have many in Scotland, to inform our policy decisions.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): The climate crisis and changing weather patterns will undoubtedly affect the durability of Scottish crops. Does the minister agree that there is an astonishing level of hypocrisy in the Tories' posing that previous question when the Government's plans seeking to mitigate climate change and its impact on society, including arable farming, are utterly undermined by the watering down of climate commitments?

Gillian Martin: Jackie Dunbar is right. Climate change is the biggest threat not just to farming but to human, plant and animal health. The Prime Minister's watering down of climate policy is an unforgivable betrayal of current and future generations in all those respects.

In Scotland, many of our farmers and crofters are already taking extremely positive action to produce food sustainably in ways that actively benefit both climate and nature, and we are supporting them through our agriculture reform programme. The vision for agriculture outlines a transformation in how we support farming and food production in Scotland so that we become

“a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture.”

That approach will allow agriculture to be more resilient to changes in the climate and will build on existing grants and advice.

However, Jackie Dunbar is right. We can do what we can to mitigate the effects of climate change, but the best way to deal with it is to halt it.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): The overuse of fertiliser on our cereal

crops can result in excess fertiliser run-off and the release of nitrous oxide, which is a greenhouse gas that is more than three times more potent for global warming than carbon dioxide. Understanding the soil microbe genome will lead to significant changes in our agricultural practice and improve crop yields while reducing dependency on synthetic nitrogen, which damages our environment. One solution is to get micro-organisms to fix more nitrogen for crop use, and we can do that now by using genetically engineered bacteria. When will the Scottish Government consider starting the process that would allow the world-renowned scientific institutions that we have in Scotland to carry out work to exploit the soil microbe genome to solve the problem?

Gillian Martin: I point Mr Carson to the strategic research programme, which is already looking into quite a lot of those areas. For example, the SRP is looking at disease resistance and pathogen biology, various tools and technology, the development of new populations and genotyping tools, and methods for trait dissection to support horticultural crop improvement. The programme is also looking at crop improvement for sustainable production in a changing environment, and it is exploring barley diversity for resilience and sustainability. Mr Carson asks when the Scottish Government will start that work, but our funded organisations are well under way in looking at all those issues.

Neglected Land

5. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is helping to provide capacity for community groups to buy any neglected land in their local communities. (S6O-02588)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government is committed to supporting community ownership across Scotland through our Scottish land fund and our asset transfer and community right-to-buy policies.

The community right to buy abandoned, neglected or detrimental land came into force in 2018. It gives community bodies the right to compulsorily purchase land that is wholly or mainly abandoned or neglected or that is causing harm to the environmental wellbeing of the community. Through the Scottish land fund, community groups can access grants of up to £1 million—or, in exceptional circumstances, potentially more than that—to help them to take ownership of land and buildings.

Rona Mackay: Does the cabinet secretary agree that capacity building in areas of multiple

deprivation is a key component of the land reform agenda?

Mairi Gougeon: The member raises an important point. I reiterate what I said in my initial response. Community ownership is a vital component of our land reform programme as it presents huge opportunities for communities in deprived areas to acquire land and buildings. We are well aware of the transformational impact that improving derelict and vacant land in deprived communities can have, and that there can be economic, social and environmental benefits for the people who live there. It is vital not only that such projects put communities at the heart of their activities but that communities are empowered to take on the ownership and management of such projects and spaces.

On the point about capacity building, we provide support to community groups in a variety of ways. Advice and guidance are available from Community Land Scotland, the community ownership support service and the Development Trusts Association Scotland. They work with community groups on a range of support and capacity-building activities, some of which are supported by grants from the Scottish Government.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Only two communities have applied for the right to buy neglected land since 2018, and both were unsuccessful. Proving that land has been neglected is very difficult. Communities are being blocked by overly bureaucratic processes, so what changes will the Scottish Government make to the right to buy in its upcoming land reform bill?

Mairi Gougeon: The member raises an important point. In fact, three such applications have been made. One of the transfers eventually took place through a negotiated sale, but the other two were not successful because improvement work was done on the land by the person who owned it.

A few weeks ago, when I gave evidence to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, we discussed that exact issue. I am more than happy to look at the potential barriers that are in the way, and at what we can do to resolve some of the challenges that communities can find themselves coming up against when they try to take ownership of vacant or derelict land.

Team Accommodation (Support for Rural Businesses)

6. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding support for businesses in the rural economy that provide team

accommodation for employees due to a lack of affordable rural housing. (S6O-02589)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands frequently has discussions with ministerial colleagues on a range of matters, including housing. My ministerial colleagues and I recognise the importance of housing to our rural economy, which is why our commitment to a rural delivery plan explicitly includes housing.

We have also committed to developing a rural and islands housing action plan, which will be published shortly. The plan will set out how we are supporting the delivery of housing in our rural and island communities, including through the £25 million demand-led rural affordable homes for key workers fund and proposals to give local authorities new powers to apply higher council tax rates for second homes.

Kenneth Gibson: The Auchrannie resort in Arran is employee owned, independent and locally run. Staffing is an issue because of the lack of affordable housing. About 110 staff live on site, and, without their own homes to rent or own, turnover is high. Does the minister accept that the exclusion from the figures of staff who are, in effect, homeless presents a false picture and that there is a real need for more affordable island housing? Will staff and team accommodation therefore be included in the figures in the future?

Paul McLennan: I welcome the action that businesses such as the Auchrannie resort are taking to meet the accommodation needs of their staff, but I accept the point that Mr Gibson, as a long-standing local MSP, makes about the permanency of that accommodation. Everyone wants not just somewhere to live but somewhere that they can make their home, which is a particular issue in rural and island communities.

I understand that work is being done in Arran to consider the island's housing needs and that a local lettings initiative has been introduced that gives additional priority for housing on the basis of being a worker or resident on Arran. Again, I am happy to meet Mr Gibson to talk about that matter.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have spoken with employers from across the Highlands and Islands who, having recruited the right people for their organisation, have been left struggling to secure accommodation for them. The SNP-Green Government has made big and bold statements on rural and island housing, but the simple fact is that the dedicated rural and island housing funds are not being fully utilised, despite extensions to the scheme. What has the Scottish Government learned from those failures, and what will it do differently in the future?

Paul McLennan: I referred to the rural and islands housing action plan, which is coming out. I also undertook a summer tour, during which I met a number of stakeholders, including the National Farmers Union Scotland, the Scottish Crofting Federation, the Scottish Islands Federation, Scottish Land & Estates and the Crown Estate. That informed what the rural and islands housing action plan will include. However, I am happy to meet Mr Halcro Johnston to talk about the matter.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. Questions 7 and 8 were withdrawn, so that concludes portfolio questions on rural affairs, land reform and islands.

There will be a brief pause to allow the front benches to change before we move to the next portfolio.

NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is national health service recovery, health and social care. As ever, any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question. Brevity in questions and responses would be appreciated. Maggie Chapman joins us remotely to ask question 1.

Healthcare (Support for Trans People)

1. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what support is provided to trans people and their companions when accessing healthcare, including gender reassignment surgery. (S6O-02592)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister, Jenni Minto.

Minister, is your microphone on? Please can we switch on the minister's microphone? There we go.

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I apologise.

Since December 2022, we have invested more than £2.8 million to support improvement in access to, and delivery of, NHS gender identity healthcare in Scotland. More than £2 million has been allocated directly to health boards that provide gender identity clinics to expand staffing, reduce waiting times and put in place increased support for people on waiting lists.

As with any healthcare, the "Charter of Patient Rights and Responsibilities" sets out that patients have the right to be treated with respect and fairly and equally, whatever their health needs. The charter also states that another person can

accompany them to an appointment to provide support.

Maggie Chapman: I thank the minister for that response. Constituents have contacted me about their difficulties in accessing services, in terms of geography and insufficient support where there is a clinical recommendation that patients are accompanied for treatment.

Can the minister outline how the “NHS gender identity services: strategic action framework 2022-2024” will ensure that all health boards—not just those that have GICs—take a more proactive role to ensure the wellbeing of trans people living in their areas? Can she confirm that, where clinically recommended, health boards should provide travel reimbursements for companions?

Jenni Minto: I thank Ms Chapman for the question. As the member will understand, I am unable to comment on individual decisions made by a health board. However, financial support for travel is available for patients and authorised companions, according to eligibility criteria and medical requirements. Health boards are responsible for reimbursing patients’ travel expenses in line with Scottish Government guidance. That is expected to consider individual circumstances and ensure that patient care is at the centre of all decisions.

Our framework outlines a range of national work that is already having a positive impact on service provision across NHS Scotland. Perhaps the most relevant to Ms Chapman’s question includes the on-going development of Healthcare Improvement Scotland’s standard for gender identity healthcare, which is applicable to all health boards.

Independent Living Fund

2. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps are being taken to re-open the independent living fund. (S6O-02593)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): Our approach to re-opening the independent living fund will be centred around co-design with disabled people and their representative organisations as well as with other stakeholder groups. We have already started the process of setting up a working group with Independent Living Fund Scotland that will co-design the re-opened fund, including developing eligibility criteria that will ensure that funding is targeted at those who will benefit the most.

Bill Kidd: I understand that the Glasgow Disability Alliance has welcomed the announcement that the Scottish Government will re-open the independent living fund, saying that it

plays a vital role in Scottish social care in supporting disabled people to live the lives that they want to live. Can the cabinet secretary say any more about how the fund can support disabled people, including those living in my constituency, to live independently and participate in the community?

Maree Todd: The announcement of the fund’s re-opening has been universally welcomed and I really welcome the question, which allows me to put on the record that ILF Scotland currently supports nearly 1,900 disabled people. Recipients can use their award to employ personal assistants or regulated support workers to meet their individual care requirements, which supports them to live in their own homes and play a part in the community through work, learning, training or hobbies.

The fund makes it easier for them to look after their physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing and to maintain relationships with family, friends and wider networks. Recipients are supported to have the choice and control to live their lives as they choose. By re-opening the fund, we will expand those benefits to more disabled people, starting with up to 1,000 new recipients in 2024-25.

Community Pharmacies

3. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps it is taking to support community pharmacies. (S6O-02594)

The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto): This year, we have increased community pharmacy funding by 6 per cent and have increased the guaranteed minimum income by 15.95 per cent, taking the total minimum funding package to £299 million.

We have also invested in a programme to support community pharmacists across Scotland to become independent prescribers. As of December 2022, a total of 1,852 pharmacists were qualified prescribers or currently undertaking an independent prescribing qualification, 474 of whom were working in a community pharmacy.

We also continue to invest in technology to support community pharmacy teams in delivering their services. We are currently investing in a digital prescribing and dispensing programme that will replace the current paper prescriptions and associated electronic prescription messages with a digital, paperless approach by the end of this parliamentary session.

Jackie Dunbar: I met Marie Curie and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society when they were in Parliament a few weeks ago. They discussed the daffodil standards with me and felt that having those standards could help not only community

pharmacies but patients and their families. Does the Scottish Government welcome the daffodil standards and will it commit to helping community pharmacies to meet those asks?

Jenni Minto: We welcome the development of the daffodil standards by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and Marie Curie UK. Those standards were adapted for community pharmacy teams and are based on the work completed by the Royal College of General Practitioners. They align with the eight standards used in general practice but reflect the way that pharmacies work. We encourage community pharmacists to sign up to the daffodil standards to help pharmacy teams to build on their existing palliative care provision and improve the quality of care provided to both patients and their carers. In order to increase sign-up, I am happy to raise the issue at my next meeting with Community Pharmacy Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a couple of supplementaries.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Earlier this year, Community Pharmacy Scotland warned that the Scottish National Party Government's funding arrangements for 2023-24 will not support the pace of service development and that the year ahead will be one of recuperation and consolidation. Given the important role of the pharmacy first scheme in reducing pressures on the national health service, how will the Scottish Government support community pharmacies to provide clinical services when they continue to face significant financial and workload pressures of their own?

Jenni Minto: As I outlined in my first answer, we have been working very closely with Community Pharmacy Scotland to ensure that we are providing it with the correct funding package to enable it to continue the incredibly important work that it does in supporting our NHS in our communities.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Can the minister provide an update on the progress of the joint programme with NHS Education for Scotland and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, which is aimed at encouraging more students to consider careers in pharmacy? Specifically, given the challenges that rural pharmacies face, what cross-portfolio discussions has the minister had within Government to ensure that the appropriate choices are in place for young people in education in rural regions, such as my own, so that they can embark on a path towards pharmacy from school age?

Jenni Minto: I thank Carol Mochan for that question and I recognise the issues that she raises, given that I, too, represent a rural

constituency. Working with schools and, as she highlighted, working with NES, we are encouraging participants from parts of Scotland where there are gaps in the pharmacy workforce. It is important to work with local schools to encourage people into pharmacy. I visited a pharmacy in Ellon in the summer, and we talked about the issue there.

The chief pharmaceutical officer has established a national pharmacy workforce forum to provide strategic influence and national co-ordinated actions to support short, medium and long-term evidence-based pharmacy workforce planning.

Stoma Care Nurses

4. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether there are enough stoma care nurses to care for the around 20,000 stoma patients in Scotland. (S6O-02595)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): We recognise the valued contribution that clinical nurse specialists make to individual patients, their families and the wider delivery of specialist services. Their role is vital to supporting patients and families who require specialist care. To support that, the Scottish Government has invested more than £2.4 million annually in the specialist nursing and care fund.

However, although the Scottish Government has overall responsibility for health and social care policy in Scotland, the statutory responsibility for delivery and commissioning of services lies at a local level—with local authorities, national health service boards and integrated health and social care partnerships. Operational decisions, including whether there is a need for stoma specialist nurses, are therefore matters for those bodies to make and should take into account the numbers of patients in their local areas.

Edward Mountain: I thank the minister for that answer, although I am not sure that I heard an answer on the specifics.

I think that we need workforce planning for the future to be done across Scotland and not to allow the stoma nurses' provision to be under the threat of retivals, which I fear it is at the moment.

Will the Government also commit to instigating an annual review for all stoma patients?

Jenni Minto: I am happy to look at that and discuss it with my officials. Perhaps Mr Mountain and I can meet again to talk about it further.

Epidermolysis Bullosa

5. Bob Doris: To ask the Scottish Government what work is on-going to support the development

of new treatments for those living with epidermolysis bullosa, which is commonly known as EB. (S6O-02596)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Scottish Government wants people in Scotland with rare diseases such as EB to be able to access the best possible care and support. We support research through the chief scientist office by providing funding opportunities for research on a wide range of conditions, which could include EB treatments, with open competitive grant schemes and Scottish access to National Institute for Health and Care Research programmes.

Through NHS research Scotland, the CSO also invests in infrastructure to support health boards to host and participate in clinical trials, including support for studies on rare diseases and skin conditions.

Bob Doris: I thank the minister for that answer and for her attendance at the DEBRA event that I hosted recently in the Scottish Parliament. As the minister knows, at the event we heard that advances in EB treatment over the years have been painfully slow, but that there is currently a real opportunity to repurpose up to 10 drugs that are used to treat other conditions.

How can the Scottish Government work in partnership with other United Kingdom healthcare systems to identify the required funds, which are estimated at £10 million, to allow clinical trials to proceed and, I hope, provide improved treatments for that dreadfully painful condition?

Jenni Minto: I thank Bob Doris for hosting the DEBRA event in Parliament a few weeks ago. I heard the very personal experiences of what it is like to live with EB, as well as hearing from the clinicians about the potential of drug repurposing research to identify treatments that might improve the quality of life for people with EB. It was a very powerful event.

We recognise the potential of drug repurposing research to find new, safe and effective treatments for health conditions. We participate in NHS England's medicines repurposing programme, which seeks to identify and progress opportunities to use existing medicines in new ways, and the chief scientist office works in partnership with other health research funders, including the National Institute for Health and Care Research and medical research charities, to support research. The CSO's partnership with NIHR opens NIHR's large programmes to researchers in Scotland, thereby providing funding opportunities for large studies and trials of treatments across the range of health conditions. Applications are subject to independent expert peer review, and

funding recommendations are made by independent expert committee.

Scottish General Practitioners Committee (Engagement)

6. Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last engaged with the Scottish general practitioners committee and what was discussed. (S6O-02597)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): Scottish Government officials regularly meet the Scottish general practitioners committee of the British Medical Association, and they last held a bilateral meeting on 14 September, at which contractual and funding issues were discussed as part of our joint endeavour to ensure the sustainability of general practice.

I understand that, today, officials are holding an all-day discussion with the committee to discuss the future development of the GP contract.

Stephanie Callaghan: My constituents have raised concerns that they are not receiving up-to-date information about the changes that are happening at their local GP surgeries. It is my understanding that the Scottish general practitioners committee previously identified that as an issue and called on the Scottish Government to educate the public on changes in GP practices.

Are there any steps that the Scottish Government can take to support GPs to amplify the "Right care, right place" message and provide their patients with impactful communications that explain what to expect from their GP primary care team, how to access the right health professionals directly and any changes in the day-to-day operations of practices?

Michael Matheson: The member raises an important point and correctly referred to the "Right care, right place" campaign. That programme, which has been running since 2021, is about providing the general public with targeted information to ensure that they consider what the right route is for them to access healthcare services. The next phase of that campaign is due to run throughout this autumn and winter to help to ensure that the public have a broad range of information available to them. I assure the member that we intend to continue to have a phased programme of investment over the course of the next 18 months to support education to ensure that patients access the right service in the right place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will allow a couple of supplementaries, the first of which

comes from Sandesh Gulhane, who joins us remotely.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): The Scottish Government failed to deliver the original GP contract that was negotiated in 2018. It created a second memorandum of understanding in 2021, in which it made further promises on primary care and pharmacy. The Scottish Government is failing deprived communities, rural communities and island communities. Does the cabinet secretary consider that the Scottish Government is on track to deliver on its contractual promises, including on community link workers and community pharmacy for rural and island areas, as promised in the second memorandum of understanding?

I declare my interest as a practising national health service GP.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We encourage members to have their cameras on at all times, wherever possible.

Michael Matheson: In short, yes, I do—and we will continue to make progress with phase 2 of the contract.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I have been contacted by numerous GPs in Glasgow who face the prospect of losing, from next April, the vital community link workers who are based in their practices. Last week, official figures confirmed that people in Glasgow have the lowest life expectancy in Scotland. Despite that fact, the number of link worker posts in what are some of the most deprived communities is to be reduced from 70 to 42. Does the cabinet secretary accept that any cut is at odds with the programme for government commitment to ensuring that link worker services can respond to local needs? What is being done to save those jobs in the poorest communities in Glasgow?

Michael Matheson: I recognise the value of the important role that community link workers play in our GP practices. As I have repeatedly said, I want the existing number of community link workers to be maintained. For a number of weeks, my officials have been engaging with the integration joint board in Glasgow in order to address concerns about the way in which the primary care improvement fund is operating.

The funding from the Scottish Government has not changed; rather, there has been a change of approach by the IJB, and we are engaging with it in an effort to address the issue. I hope that we can continue to make progress with the IJB on the matter. It is my intention that the Scottish Government's investment in the programme continue into the future, and I want the IJB to be open to ensuring that it looks at every possible

avenue for continuing to invest in community link workers in GP practices in Glasgow.

Health Services (Highlands and Islands)

7. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether the provision of health services across the Highlands and Islands region meets the needs of local communities. (S6O-02598)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): Everyone should receive the best possible care and treatment from our health and care services. Service delivery is the responsibility of individual health boards, but we set out the wider policy within which national health service boards are expected to deliver high-quality care that is safe, effective and person centred, in order to meet the needs of local communities.

I recognise that rural and island NHS boards experience particular challenges, which is why work is on-going to ensure that services are delivered in a flexible way that responds to local population needs and geographic challenges. An example of that is the national centre for remote and rural health and care, which will be launched later this month.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The transfer of vaccination from general practitioners to NHS Highland has been fraught with difficulty. NHS vaccinators are travelling upwards of 100 miles to carry out vaccinations that local GPs are perfectly capable of doing. As winter approaches and new vaccination schemes are rolling out, what steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that the efficacy of vaccinations in Scotland's remote, rural and island communities is significantly improved?

Michael Matheson: I recognise that there are some specific challenges with vaccination programmes in rural areas. However, the member will be aware that the change was instigated in NHS Highland as a result of the British Medical Association's negotiations on the GP contract. The organisation wanted vaccinations to be removed from GP practices and to be done by the NHS. That was the approach that has been taken and which was agreed to.

Clearly, there have been some challenges around that. I know that we are continuing to engage with NHS Highland to try to address those issues and to make sure that a proper vaccination programme is delivered as locally as possible to constituents across the Highlands.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am interested in the cabinet secretary's answer. The 2018 contract review, which was carried out by the BMA, was not supported by GPs

across the Highlands, who want to carry out vaccinations themselves. On that basis, will the cabinet secretary renegotiate that agreement in order to allow rural areas to get the vaccination cover that we deserve and that we are not getting?

Michael Matheson: I recognise the on-going concerns. However, the member will appreciate that the GP contract applies across all GP practices in Scotland. That formed the basis of the approach. I recognise the concerns that the member is raising about the matter and I am not dismissing them. However, the GP contract applies across all GP practices in Scotland. It is difficult to provide carve-outs for specific areas because of the difficulties that that creates. Notwithstanding that, we are continuing to engage with NHS Highland and it is continuing to engage in looking at how it can address some of the local concerns.

National Health Service Recovery Plan

8. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to publish winter updates to its NHS recovery plan and winter resilience overview. (S6O-02599)

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): Our NHS recovery plan for 2021-26 was published in August 2021 and sets out our key ambitions and actions to be delivered over the next five years, in order to address the backlog in care and deliver the recovery and renewal of NHS services. We are investing £1 billion over the lifespan of the plan in order to support increased NHS capacity, deliver reform and ensure that everyone has the treatment that they need at the right time, in the right place and as quickly as possible.

In addition, a separate winter plan, which has been developed jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, will be published later this month. The plan sets out the actions that are being taken across the whole health and social care system to alleviate the inevitable and considerable pressures across NHS Scotland this winter.

This year, preparedness work for the coming winter began earlier than ever before, and builds on lessons learned from previous winters on what we know works to ensure that people are able to access the best and most appropriate healthcare for their needs. We have been working with all parts of the system to ensure the actions that are set out in the winter plan are being undertaken consistently and as a matter of priority in order to help to build capacity and cope with increased demand over the winter months.

Craig Hoy: Similar to the previous health secretary, it is quite clear that this cabinet

secretary is simply not doing enough to prepare health boards for the winter. During a recent visit to Borders general hospital, dedicated staff told me that they were already at capacity and were facing a crisis this winter across the hospital. On the day that I visited, 80 out of 310 beds were blocked as a result of delayed discharges, and there was simply no further capacity to flex. Despite what the cabinet secretary says, is it not time that the distracted and divided Scottish National Party Government focused on delivering a real and meaningful NHS recovery plan and a real strategy to deliver resilience this winter?

Michael Matheson: I am a bit surprised by Mr Hoy's question, because—given that we have not published it yet—he seems to have jumped to a conclusion on whether the winter plan contains the right actions.

Mr Hoy probably does not recognise that our NHS is now under pressure throughout the year, rather than just during the winter. In the winter, the pressure becomes much more acute, which is why we are taking forward a range of measures including additional investment and redesign of services.

I assure Mr Hoy that we will continue to invest in our NHS—in particular, in the staff who do a first-class job across our NHS, in the way that Mr Hoy made reference to. We are doing that by giving them the best pay in the UK and, importantly, by making sure that we avoid industrial action in our NHS and allowing services to be delivered to patients on a consistent basis, unlike his colleagues south of the border.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): It is welcome that the Covid vaccination and winter flu vaccination programmes were started earlier this year, particularly in light of there being a new Covid variant. I am sure that we all encourage everyone who wishes to get the flu or Covid vaccine to take up that offer. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on the progress that has been made on the programme to date?

Michael Matheson: We have made excellent progress on our flu and Covid vaccination programme, with more than 34,000 flu and 176,000 Covid vaccinations having been delivered in the first three weeks of the programme, up to 24 September. Further public figures detailing vaccine uptake by Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation eligibility groups will be made available in the coming weeks via Public Health Scotland's dashboard. All invites for people aged 12 and over who are eligible have now been sent out, and invites for under-12s will follow shortly.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): The cabinet secretary mentioned building capacity and how it is key to tackling our backlogs, but the national

treatment centres are the backbone of that solution. I am concerned that many are behind schedule, and the one that was BMI Carrick Glen hospital will not be open for the foreseeable future. How will we tackle our backlogs when there is such a backlog in producing the capacity?

Michael Matheson: Tackling the backlogs is done through a combination of providing additional capacity and making better use of existing capacity. As the member will know, by the end of this year, five of the new national treatment centres will be open. The member will also be aware that her colleagues in Westminster have cut our capital budget, which has resulted in less capital spending being available to us.

Alongside that, because of the disastrous mini-budget last year and the inflation that it caused, construction costs have gone through the roof. That means that capital budgets now have much less value—as an Audit Scotland report highlighted last week—as a consequence of the UK Government's decisions on those matters. Those matters have an impact on how much capital investment we can make, so I hope that the member will encourage her colleagues down in Manchester to make sure that they make the capital investments that are needed to allow us to roll out more national treatment centres across the country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on NHS recovery, health and social care. There will be a brief pause to allow front benches to change before we move to the next item of business.

Two-child Benefit Cap

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-10716, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on reversal of the United Kingdom Government's two-child benefit cap.

I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible. I note that some members who are due to speak in the debate are not present. We have not had any explanation for that, but I expect one and an apology in due course.

14:54

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am pleased to open the debate and to call unequivocally on the UK Government to end the harmful and discriminatory two-child limit and the abhorrent rape clause.

In 2017, the UK Government introduced the two-child limit, which removed a household's financial support for a third or subsequent child born after 6 April 2017, unless the mother of the child gains exemption through "special circumstances"—that is, if the child is part of a multiple birth or born as a result of rape. This summer, I was absolutely astonished to hear Keir Starmer confirm that a Labour Government would maintain the Conservatives' two-child limit and say that there is no reason that the rape clause cannot "operate more fairly." We also heard Anas Sarwar's thoughts on the Scottish Government's focus on creating a strong social security system when he suggested:

"We have been very much a social policy parliament rather than an economic policy parliament."

I think that Roz Foyer spoke for many of us when she described that as

"a dismaying lack of vision from any incoming Labour Government."

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Can the cabinet secretary explain to the chamber why, in April 2019, she said to *The Times*:

"It's not our policy to alleviate the two-child cap"?

Indeed, she has not advocated the Government's mitigating the two-child cap in taking the action that she has called us on.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: There is the irony—I have to mitigate not only what the Tories are doing, but the Labour Party, too. What a sad indictment of where Scottish Labour is now. I will come on to the mitigation method in due course.

It seems that, bereft of any social justice policies, the Labour Party has simply given up on

tackling poverty. The Scottish Government has been consistent in its opposition to the two-child limit since its inception in 2017, and it has repeatedly called on the UK Government to abolish it.

The policy purposely targets vulnerable children, and the Department for Work and Pensions's own analysis estimates that it is currently impacting around 1.5 million children in the UK. The House of Commons library tells us that it has affected 80,000 children in Scotland during the past 12 months alone and states that it has cost Scottish families in the region of £341 million in benefits since its inception. Child Poverty Action Group analysis found that removing the two-child limit would pull 250,000 children across the UK out of poverty and a further 850,000 children would be in less deep poverty.

It is clear that the policy severely impacts children, and it is punishing children because their parents are on low incomes. It cannot be right to limit the financial support that is available to children, simply because they have two or more siblings.

There are calls from other parties for the Scottish Government to mitigate the two-child limit. However, we do not have the powers to remove the policy at source. While universal credit and child tax credits remain reserved to Westminster, this is the situation that we are in. Even if financial mitigation were possible, the two-child limit and associated rape clause would still be applied by the UK Government.

However, the Scottish Government should not have to spend its fixed budget on rectifying the UK Government's failures. We are already spending £130 million per year to directly mitigate some of the UK Government's benefit cuts such as the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. Over the past six years, we have invested £733 million in directly mitigating UK Government policies, money that could have been spent on services such as health, education and transport, on further ambitious anti-poverty measures or on paying for 2,000 band 5 nurses each year. That is the price of staying in the union.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The cabinet secretary's policy calls on the UK Government to find £300 million. Where does she suggest that UK ministers find that money?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I assure Miles Briggs that I am coming to that. I have a suggested solution, and I am sure that we will hear many more during today's debate.

That money does not include our investment in the game-changing Scottish child payment, which we introduced to support families affected by the utter inadequacy of universal credit. By the end of

the financial year, we will have spent more than £700 million on the payment. In fact, Professor Danny Dorling, from the University of Oxford, recently commended the Scottish child payment for having delivered

"the biggest fall in child poverty anywhere in Europe for at least 40 years."

We made it clear in our programme for government that we are committed to reducing child poverty. It is therefore galling that the impact of our investment is lessened, because of the policies of the UK Government. We estimate that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty this year because of the Scottish Government's policies, with poverty levels 9 percentage points lower than they would have been without Scottish Government benefits. The latest poverty statistics, which we published in March, show that Scottish child poverty rates continue to be around 6 percentage points lower than the UK average, with the actions of this Government expected to increase that gap still further. This is, of course, challenge poverty week. How much easier would it be to effectively challenge poverty in Scotland, if it were not for the punitive policy measures imposed by the UK Government such as the two-child limit?

It is clear that this Government has very different priorities from the current UK Government—and, it would seem, from any future UK Government. Our priority is supporting children and families out of poverty. Surely everyone in this chamber can agree that the UK Government's approach to child poverty is severely lacking and that that is perfectly captured in its failure to remove the two-child limit.

Our efforts are further threatened by the fact that the Labour Party now seems to have signed up to that long list of Tory policies. Last year, at the Scottish Labour Party conference, Anas Sarwar said:

"our children's generation ... won't praise us for halving child poverty. They will ask what we did to eradicate it."

Well, I know what this Scottish Government has done. Since 2018, we have spent about £1.4 billion on mitigation and the Scottish child payment alone. What exactly can the Labour Party say that it has done, when it cannot even commit to scrapping the two-child cap?

Let us be very clear: keeping the two-child limit and rape clause is a choice—Labour's choice, and a Scottish Conservative choice, too. Labour's spending pledges are a political choice. It claims that the financial mess left by the Tories might impede it from doing the right thing. Let me help both parties, but particularly the Labour Party, out on that. How about not spending an extraordinary estimated £205 billion on Trident renewal? How

about Labour putting bairns first, not bombs? That is exactly the type of political choice that would help us eradicate child poverty, if Labour had the confidence and the courage to do it.

Amid the chaos of Keir Starmer's U-turn, the sheer breathtaking hypocrisy of the Scottish Labour Party has now kicked into action. First, we had the ridiculous claims from the Scottish Labour leader that scrapping the policy would "spook the markets". Then Jackie Baillie swooped to the rescue, taking to the airwaves to call on this Scottish Government to do exactly what her own party had just said it would not do and to scrap the cap. You could not make it up—a call from Scottish Labour to mitigate what UK Labour has been proposing.

In further evidence of that chaotic and hypocritical position, we have the Labour Party's amendment today. I have to say that I was a bit dumbfounded when I read it last night. It asks us to

"welcome ... the proposal for a New Deal for Working People".

For the record, I do welcome it—the problem is that Keir Starmer does not. After an avalanche of U-turns this summer, the Labour leader ripped up the plans. The promises to raise statutory sick pay and extend it to the self-employed have gone; the complete ban on zero-hours contracts has gone, too; and as for the promise to raise the minimum wage, quite frankly it looks a bit dubious when the Labour leader has diluted it from £15 an hour to—well, we will see what happens next week or next month.

Later this week—*[Interruption.]* Oh dear, Mr O'Kane—no wonder you are worried. I would be worried too, Mr O'Kane, if I were you.

Later this week, Labour members will be attending their party conference, and a vote will take place on those hollowed-out policy plans. So what exactly is Anas Sarwar's position? Is he planning to back his party's amendment today, and then head to Liverpool to approve a complete U-turn on the plans?

We on these benches and in this Scottish Government remain committed to strengthening workers' rights. It is very clear that more needs to be done—*[Interruption.]* I appreciate that Scottish Labour members are finding this uncomfortable, but perhaps they should listen and learn from a Government that is taking action to tackle child poverty.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I am interested to know what discussions you have had with the First Minister about the U-turns around school meals. Could you discuss with us how

often you have discussed that with the First Minister?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask members to speak through the chair. I call the cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Indeed, if there had been a U-turn I would have discussed it, but there has been none and therefore no need to have that conversation.

It is clear, more than ever, that the only route to a fairer and more equal future—*[Interruption.]* Here we go. Yes, I am going to give Mr O'Kane another example of how he can take this forward. The only route to a fairer and more equal future is independence. We simply cannot afford to be shackled to a Westminster system that is driving more children into poverty, one of the highest levels of income inequality in Europe and the highest poverty rates in north-west Europe.

The two-child limit is just one policy impacting on the financial support available to struggling families. There are many more that we could hold a debate on in this Parliament, which is exactly why I have written to the UK Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, calling on the UK Government to establish an essentials guarantee to ensure that people receive sufficient support to help them with everyday items such as food, transport and energy.

An early step towards that would be scrapping the two-child limit and linking the level of social security support with the needs of families. That is why this Government is calling on colleagues from across the chamber to support our calls for the UK Government to take the right first step and scrap the two-child limit with immediate effect, ensuring that our most vulnerable families receive the support that they are entitled to.

I move,

That the Parliament calls on the UK Government to scrap the punitive two-child limit, which limits the amount of Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit a family can receive and undermines action to reduce child poverty in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can advise the chamber that there is a bit of time in hand, so there should be time to recompense members who take interventions. That is all the more reason for interventions not to be shouted from a sedentary position.

I call Miles Briggs to speak to and move amendment S6M-10716.2.

15:06

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I am always pleased to be able to debate welfare in the Parliament, and I welcome the fact that the

Government has brought forward the debate. However, perhaps what we have seen is more to do with tomorrow's by-election than the Government wanting to have a proper debate on the issue.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: No. Can I make some progress? I will be happy to take the member's intervention later.

It is hard to think of any UK Government in recent history, except perhaps the Governments of the first and second world wars, that has faced such huge economic challenges. The UK Government has faced the fallout and consequences of the global financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and the global energy and cost of living crisis, and that is the backdrop for difficult spending decisions that it has had to take over the past decade and those that we will have to take in the years ahead.

Ministers here have often outlined to Opposition parties the very same calculations that they have to take when deciding how to spend vital public services. The UK Government has a duty to manage the public finances carefully for future generations, and that has meant difficult decisions by UK ministers to control levels of public spending, including the welfare budget.

Kate Forbes: The member has talked a lot about duty, and I thought that I would make my question more topical. His Prime Minister has today talked about the importance of family. Why do the Tories think that a third child is of less value and less entitled to support than a first child?

Miles Briggs: That is not the case. As the member clearly knows, the policy is about fairness for working families as well—all families having to take difficult decisions. There is a political consensus on helping parents into work, which should be a Government priority. That requires a balanced system that provides strong work incentives and supports those who need it but that ensures fairness in our taxation system for all working families in this country.

The cabinet secretary did not mention this today, but it is a fact that the UK Government has provided more than £94 billion in direct support to help families during the cost of living crisis. The overall approach by the UK Government is evidenced by the fact that, between 2016 and 2022, the number of people in couples with children in employment has increased by 372,000 across the UK, which is a 2.7 per cent increase in the employment rate for that group.

It is right that the Government recognises that some claimants are not able to make the same

choices about the number of children in their family, which is why reforms have been progressed by UK ministers. They have listened and have brought forward exceptions to protect certain groups, and many of us argued and worked constructively with ministers to make that case and ensure that those changes were made. Child benefit can be paid to all children, and the additional amount in child tax credit or universal credit can be paid for any qualifying disabled child or young person.

It is important to note that the cabinet secretary did not want to highlight the fact that, through working tax credit and universal credit, additional help for eligible childcare costs is available regardless of the total number of children in a household. The reduction in the universal credit taper rate and the £500 increase to work allowance, in addition to the normal benefit uprating and alongside the landmark kickstart and restart schemes, demonstrates a focus on supporting families to move into progressive work.

A critical issue that many families continue to face is that of the availability and accessibility of affordable childcare, which is a significant challenge and is clearly impacting on many parents' decision to take up paid work and the ability of many to increase their working hours. I know from constituents who have contacted me about the issue that people are finding it more and more difficult to access childcare, with families having less flexibility to take up work and training opportunities.

The failure of SNP and Green ministers to deliver on the Scottish Government's own policy of 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare for three and four-year-olds is not helping to provide that opportunity for people to access the childcare that they need to take up employment or training.

Today, the National Day Nurseries Association warned that

"Childcare businesses in around a third of local authority areas begin the new academic year without knowing how much they are being paid for funded places."

This afternoon, we could have debated that crisis facing our nursery sector and the fact that just three of Scotland's 32 local authorities are increasing early learning and childcare entitlement.

As I have said, there is a political consensus that the most suitable way to lift children out of poverty is to support their parents into progressive work, wherever possible. Children living in workless households are approximately five times more likely to be in poverty than those living in households where all adults are working. We

should work on the consensus that exists to find solutions.

Carol Mochan: Can the member tell me whether he and his colleagues accept that the Westminster Conservative Government's approach to benefits means that many families find it difficult to make sense of and take part in the DWP's processes that are there for them to access benefits and move on to work?

Miles Briggs: I am always in favour of the DWP and Social Security Scotland having discussions about how we simplify access to benefits. That is something that both departments need to address. As the cabinet secretary has said, the issue of uptake is also important.

The UK Government has continued to take action to help families with the cost of living. For example, the national living wage is set to increase to at least £11 an hour from next April. That increase will benefit 2 million of the lowest-paid workers in our country.

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: I would like to make some progress; I have only a few minutes left. I will see if I have time to let the member in later on.

Recent SNP-Green cuts to, for example, employability schemes are continuing to make things problematic for many families who are seeking that support.

The UK Government has consistently said that the best way to support people's living standards is through good work, better skills and higher wages, and getting people into sustainable employment needs to be a key priority for both Governments working together.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have very much enjoyed the member's speech on childcare and employability, but I wonder whether we could get back to the point of the motion. Can he tell the chamber whether he thinks that, in our society, a woman having to admit a rape is a fair thing or not?

Miles Briggs: As I have said, these are difficult decisions, and Governments have had to take them. The cabinet secretary has also got to think about that. However, the failure of this Government is what this Parliament is responsible for. As we have already heard, this Government has failed in relation to the roll-out of free school meals, the ability of local authorities to adequately fund childcare provision and the scandal of the record number of children living in temporary accommodation in Scotland today. That is this Government's record, and the cabinet secretary

needs to start debating it more often, rather than simply accusing others.

SNP and Green ministers demand to know from Opposition parties where money for additional spending commitments will come from. Today, the cabinet secretary seems to think that the defence budget is the one that she would target. However, where is the £300 million coming from? The cabinet secretary just saying that it would come from scrapping Trident is student politics; it is not how we deliver for the people of this country.

The Scottish Government has received the largest budget settlement in the history of devolution. It has the powers to create new benefits—

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

Miles Briggs: No. I am coming to a conclusion.

The Scottish Government has the ability to top up reserved benefits if it wishes, and we, as a Parliament, have the opportunity to decide where we want to change welfare policies. Powers over welfare, and over taxation to pay for those decisions, were demanded and transferred precisely so that our Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government could make different choices if the Scottish Government of the day so wanted.

That is why recent polling conducted by YouGov, which was published in July, found that 60 per cent of respondents agreed that the two-child limit on the number of children for whom parents can claim should be kept. In fact, 53 per cent of respondents in Scotland agreed as well.

As I said at the start of my speech, Governments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and London face difficult spending decisions. As future decisions are taken, we should all work to make sure that our welfare system is fair both to those who need the support and to taxpayers, and, ultimately, that it is sustainable.

I move amendment S6M-10716.2, to leave out from "calls" to end and insert:

"notes that the UK Government has a duty to manage public finances carefully for future generations; considers that the UK Government has sought to curb increasing welfare spending by reducing benefits to those on higher incomes acknowledges exemptions to the two-child policy in respect of Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit, such as for families with children with disabilities; welcomes the UK Government's £94 billion in support to help families navigate the global cost of living crisis, and commits to focusing on debating issues that are within devolved responsibilities, such as the roll-out of benefits through Social Security Scotland, the closing of the poverty-related attainment gap, the roll-out of free school meals, the inability of local authorities to adequately fund childcare provisions and the disturbing number of children in temporary accommodation."

15:15

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): We meet this afternoon in the middle of challenge poverty week, and, as I have said before in the chamber, there are few issues as important as tackling poverty. It should be the focus of far more of our time in this place, particularly in terms of how we use the powers of this Parliament to take action.

The Government has chosen to bring a very limited debate today on a very pernicious part of the universal credit system, which it is entitled to do. However, given that it is challenge poverty week, and given the scope of that week, the Government could have used its time to have a much wider debate about all the roots and facets of poverty and about how we use our collective energies far more in tackling it. The Government has chosen not to do that, so perhaps it is more interested in the political context in which we meet today than in—

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul O’Kane: I will in a moment.

Perhaps we are meeting in that context rather than for the wide-ranging, constructive debate that we could be having about challenging poverty in communities across Scotland and the Government’s own record in that regard.

Kate Forbes: The member rightly talks about poverty being quite a wide issue. Peter Kelly, of the Poverty Alliance, has described the benefit cap as

“the worst of the”

Tories’

“welfare ‘reforms’”.

How does it feel for Labour to be supporting the worst of the Tories’ welfare reforms?

Paul O’Kane: I am coming on to speak about why universal credit does not work and why it needs to be fundamentally reformed. We need to see wide-ranging change, because it is not helping people; it is failing people. The member is right in her assertion that those policies are failing people, because the life chances of all our people are crucial to how we thrive as a society and as a world. It is clear that we need a change of approach at UK and Scottish levels to lift more people out of poverty.

Scottish Labour campaigned against the introduction of the two-child limit, and we continue to oppose it, along with the cruel direction of 13 years of this Tory Government. The Tory Government has demonstrated its unfitness to govern through the financial chaos that it unleashed on the country last year, driving more and more people into poverty. Given the further

chaos, including the adulation of Liz Truss and her acolytes this week in Manchester, it is clear that the Tory Government has learned nothing and takes no responsibility for its actions.

The next Labour Government will fundamentally reform universal credit, ensuring that it provides a proper safety net for those who need it.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I am interested in the Labour amendment, which talks about the

“New Deal for Working People”,

There are a lot of reasonable things that I absolutely agree with in relation to that. However, Mr O’Kane talks about a review of universal credit, and, in the chamber previously, Mr O’Kane and Mr Marra have said that the two-child limit has to stay until that review is complete. Can I have clarity today on whether Labour’s position is that it will abolish the two-child limit immediately, or will we have to kick the matter into the long grass and wait for a universal credit review? That is the clarity that I need this afternoon.

Paul O’Kane: I thank Mr Doris for his supportive comments on the new deal for working people. I hope that he might convince members on the front bench to back our amendment and those proposals. I do not recall using that language; I will need to check the *Official Report*. I am not sure that that is what Mr Marra and I said. We have said that we are committed to a fundamental reform of universal credit—of all parts of the system—to ensure that it works for people and to remove those punitive methods from it. A Tory Government—

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

Paul O’Kane: If the cabinet secretary will allow me to make some progress, I will give way to her in a moment.

As I have said, the next Labour Government is fundamentally committed to reforming universal credit, because the current system is not working and we need wide-ranging reform. It is not just about changing some social security policies; it is about changing the whole system. Fundamental change is what Labour does when it is in power. I will give way to the cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am grateful to the member for the chance to give him another opportunity to answer Mr Doris’s question, because he did not. We do not need a review to know whether the two-child cap is a bad thing—I think that we all agree that it is a bad thing. Will the UK Labour Party implement a policy that scraps it? The member does not need to wait for a review, nor does his party, to know that it is a bad thing.

Paul O’Kane: I have said that the policy is a pernicious policy. I am committed to—and the Labour Party is committed to—examining every part of the universal credit system to make sure that it works. If the cabinet secretary wants to roll her eyes and not listen to the fact that we need to reform universal credit fundamentally—which will take time—that is up to her.

I am proud that the previous UK Labour Government lifted 2 million children and pensioners out of poverty. That includes 200,000 children in Scotland alone. How did we do that? We did that through a new social contract that included the national minimum wage, child benefit and tax credits. It is clear that we need that level of change now to tackle poverty across Scotland and the UK, because things have got so much worse since then.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s annual state of the nation report highlighted just two days ago that the number of Scots still living in poverty is more than 1 million, that the level of deep poverty is on the rise—it is just shy of half a million people—and that 24 per cent of children are living in poverty after housing costs.

Under the Tories and the SNP, inequality and poverty have soared. There are 40,000 more children in poverty in Scotland compared with a decade ago, and we are not seeing action on the scale that is required. Our amendment outlines the new deal for working people and the importance of ensuring that it is there to lift people out of poverty.

An estimated two thirds of children in poverty live in working households; 60 per cent of families impacted by the two-child cap are in work; 10 per cent of all employees in Scotland are stuck on low pay; and 72 per cent of that group are women. That is why the new deal for working people would be transformative, and it was endorsed by the Trades Union Congress.

We heard derision from the cabinet secretary regarding a document and a policy that are backed by the TUC. What will the new deal do? It will ban zero-hours contracts, outlaw fire-and-rehire practices and raise the minimum wage to a living wage in order to tackle insecure work and ensure that work pays as a key route to ending poverty. Indeed, the TUC called it

“the biggest upgrade of workers’ rights in a generation.”

I hope that the Government will be able to support a document and a policy that are supported by the TUC and back our amendment.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We will back Scottish Labour’s amendment tonight. Would Keir Starmer back it, though? That is where Paul O’Kane has a difficulty. The difficulty is not with the SNP; it is with his UK Labour leadership.

Paul O’Kane: I am not entirely sure what the cabinet secretary is driving at. Angela Rayner and Keir Starmer, in conjunction with the TUC, have endorsed the document. He will back to the letter the policy that the document outlines, which we will deliver when in government. I have no idea what the cabinet secretary is driving at in her contribution today.

Let us be clear that this is a transformative opportunity to raise people out of poverty wages and into secure work. We know that the SNP has not got the best track record when it comes to things such as paying the living wage in Government contracts or using zero-hours contracts to recruit campaigners. Just a few weeks ago, the SNP abandoned the parental transition fund of up to £15 million a year to tackle the financial barriers that are faced by parents who want to enter the labour market.

In the debate today, we will, no doubt, hear again calls along the lines of, “If only we had more powers, things would be better,” and, “If only independence was here, things would be better.” Perhaps the SNP should first explain why it is not using the powers that it has. It is not just me saying that. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighted this week that the SNP Government simply complaining about the powers that it does not have is

“to deny its direct responsibilities for things like employability, economic development, skills, and so on.”

If the SNP does not want to listen to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, maybe it should listen to its own Poverty and Inequality Commission. In May 2023, in relation to the child poverty delivery plan, it said that it is

“concerned that there does not seem to be the necessary clarity or sense of urgency about delivery of these actions.”

It is time for fundamental reform of universal credit. It is time for a new deal for working people, to drive up wages and standards and to lift people out of poverty. It is time to move on from two failing Governments and deliver real change for people across Scotland and the United Kingdom.

I move amendment S6M-10716.1, to insert at end:

“; notes that an estimated two thirds of children in poverty live in working households, 10 per cent of all employees in Scotland are stuck in low pay, and that 72 per cent of that group are women, and welcomes, therefore, the proposal for a New Deal for Working People, which has been endorsed by the TUC and includes plans to ban zero-hours contracts, outlaw fire and rehire practices, and raise the minimum wage in order to tackle insecure work and to make sure that work pays as a key route to ending poverty.”

15:24

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Before I start, I express my sincere apologies for my late arrival; I was unavoidably detained.

The author Anthony Horowitz once wrote:

“Childhood, after all, is the first precious coin that poverty steals from a child.”

In Scotland today, that statement is only too accurate. At its heart, today’s debate is about poverty and, more specifically, child poverty.

More than 1 million people, and one in four children, live in poverty in Scotland today. That is around 250,000 children. In 2023, in one of the wealthiest nations on earth, that figure is unacceptable—it is outrageous. It is all the more shameful when we note that 68 per cent of children who are living in poverty are from working households, and 29 per cent of children live with a disabled family member.

It has been five years since the Child Poverty Act 2010 set a target of fewer than 18 per cent of children living in relative poverty by 2024. However, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reminds us that that reduction target is

“unlikely to be met without significant additional Scottish Government action”.

We are on the eve of that deadline, and we are nowhere.

Numerous studies have found that children who grow up in poverty experience many disadvantages. It can have a negative impact on their health and significant social consequences, and the effects are felt both during childhood and into adulthood. I saw that impact with my own eyes during the decade that I spent working with disadvantaged young people, and I see it today in my constituency.

Poverty is affecting children’s health and education, and even their cognitive development. It is an adverse childhood experience. Every child in Scotland should have the right to safety, warmth, a roof over their head and food in their belly. It is the duty of those in this chamber, and this Government, to do absolutely everything in their power to alleviate this crisis—it is a crisis—and to move forward to a Scotland that is free of child poverty as soon as is humanly possible.

I make it clear from the outset that Liberal Democrats oppose the two-child benefit cap. We have always opposed the two-child benefit cap. We opposed it when it was introduced by the Conservative Government in 2017, and we absolutely oppose it now. It is unfair and unjust, and it is an illiberal policy. The Child Poverty Action Group has called it

“one of the biggest drivers of rising child poverty”.

CPAG says:

“Removing the”

policy across the UK

“would pull 250,000 children out of poverty overnight”,

and take

“850,000 children”

out of

“deep poverty.”

Deep poverty—we are talking about 21st-century Britain here.

However, we must also hold the SNP-Green Government to account for its own failures on social security in Scotland.

Bob Doris: Does Mr Cole-Hamilton agree that axing the two-child cap and the rape clause does not have to wait for a review of universal credit and that it should happen as speedily as possible?

I have checked the *Official Report*, and Mr O’Kane’s position is indeed that there should be a review of universal credit first; that is certainly my interpretation of what he said. What is the Liberal Democrats’ view?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I would support the abolition of the rape clause today. It is a moral imperative that we rid ourselves of that abhorrent policy, so I absolutely agree with the sentiment that Bob Doris expresses.

Right now, those who apply for the adult disability payment in Scotland are, in many cases, facing longer waits than they did under the DWP system. When someone who lives in Scotland and is in receipt of the personal independence payment reports a change in circumstances, they are currently forced to wait three months to be moved over, and only then does Social Security Scotland start work on that change. If, during that time, as is often the case, the person’s condition worsens and they are entitled to a higher rate, they are missing out for that period.

Something that should happen at the touch of a button is taking months and denying disabled people the support that they need when they need it most. That lays bare the incompetence of the Scottish Government in removing the dedicated social security minister to properly oversee that transition at its most critical juncture.

This Government promised fairness, respect and dignity, and we all voted for that in the new social security arrangement. Instead, people are being left to face uncertainty for months while a decision is being made, and sometimes they wait in poverty.

We have fought for more powers for this Parliament, but it is taking far too long for the Scottish Government to get itself ready, leaving people with the DWP for more than a decade. That is not good enough for families, including some of the most vulnerable families, across Scotland.

This week, it was revealed that the Government has quietly scrapped a key plank of its anti-poverty strategy. Only last year, ministers pledged to create a new parental transition fund to tackle the financial barriers that are faced by parents trying to get into work. Shirley-Anne Somerville has now said that it

“would not be possible to deliver”

and that it has

“run its course as a concept”—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee, 14 September 2023; c 13-14.*]

That scheme was welcomed.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member give way?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I will.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am grateful to the member for the opportunity to point out that the reason why the scheme cannot work is because of our current powers. If we put something like that in place, reserved benefits would be impacted and people would not find themselves any better off. The practicalities of devolved and reserved powers have required us to look again at different approaches. We need to discuss the issue, but let us please discuss the genuine reasons why we have had to move on, which are to do with the implications for reserved benefits.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The cabinet secretary will recognise the deep disappointment that the move has created. The scheme was welcomed and recommended by charities and those with lived experience of poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in full knowledge of the facts, has called that U-turn “deeply concerning”.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): On that point, it was parents who expressed the desire and need for the fund. It seems beyond belief that the Scottish Government would commit to something that it subsequently turns out not to have the power to deal with. That seems to be the Scottish Government promising something before it understands what it is being asked.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Given the length of time that we have had to understand the ecosystem of the benefits over which we have control in this country, it is astonishing that the Scottish Government would give parents false hope in that way. It is clear that the Government talks a good

game on supporting those who are least well-off but, when push comes to shove, it falls well below par and often fails to deliver. Scottish Liberal Democrats want to get the Scottish social security system working faster and with the dignity that was promised. I repeat that all of us in the Parliament voted for that dignity.

We want to make childcare much more flexible and accessible to families in work, as well as to those who want to return to the labour market but are a considerable distance from it and cannot access opportunities such as evening training for want of basic childcare. We want to introduce a nursery premium for children in deprived areas and a national legal entitlement to youth work for every child in Scotland.

Liberal Democrats believe in a Scotland that supports the most vulnerable people in our society. We want every child to be able to learn, grow and play, secure in the knowledge that there will always be food on the table and a warm and safe space to call their home. That should be the case for every child in this country, and all of us in the Parliament must endeavour to make it so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the open debate. Members will be pleased to hear that we still have some time in hand, despite the impressive number of interventions that we have already witnessed this afternoon.

15:36

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Let us look at the impact that the two-child benefit cap had in Scotland in 2022-23. In that year, 80,936 children lived in households where benefits were reduced because of the two-child benefit cap. The cap was directly applied to 32,616 children, and it deprived households of £95.7 million in social security. The cap put 20,000 children in poverty after housing costs. Those are not Scottish Government figures; they come directly from the House of Commons library. However, they are not just figures; they are children and families—people—who were impoverished by the two-child cap.

After 13 years of brutal Tory austerity, a hard Brexit that Scotland never voted for and the horrors of the economically illiterate Truss budget, people and communities are facing real hardship. Now we know that the Labour Party is interested only in entrenching cruel Tory policies and not in abolishing them, and it is very clear at this point that Labour policy is no different from that of the Tories.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am sorry that Mr Stewart seems to have missed the other speeches in the debate. Labour is

committed to a fundamental review of universal credit. That could not be more starkly different from the position of the Tories, which is to maintain the benefit caps and the current position. We are committed to a fundamental review to change the way that the system delivers for the poorest people in this country.

Kevin Stewart: That is not what Keir Starmer has said about the two-child cap. He has said that Labour will look at what the finances are like after the Tories leave power—that is, if Labour manages to take power. We want an immediate end to the barbaric policy, and I do not think that it is beyond the wit of the Labour Party to say, in the here and now, that it wants rid of the policy now. Labour members say that the policy is unfair, so let us get rid of it now.

Let us be clear: such policies are the price of Westminster control. The SNP Scottish Government is absolutely clear that we oppose the policy in every form, and we will continue to demand its abolition. I hope that all like-minded members from across the chamber will back the Scottish Government's motion.

I also hope that members will take cognisance of the experts on the issue. Earlier, Ms Forbes quoted Peter Kelly of the Poverty Alliance. Let me add to the quote that she read out. He also said that the

"Two child limit and the benefit cap represent the worst of the welfare 'reforms' of the last 13 years. Any politician that claims to care about poverty, about increasing food bank use, about the well-being of kids needs to commit to scrap this terrible policy".

Action for Children has said:

"Any government serious about tackling child poverty will eventually have to confront the cruel reality of the #TwoChildLimit—a policy designed to actively stop poor children receiving assistance to meet their minimum needs".

The Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland made it clear that the two-child limit, which is

"one of the most brutal ... policies of our times"

affects more than 80,000 children in Scotland alone, pushing up to 15,000 of them into poverty. Across the UK, one in 10 children are affected. The group said:

"All political leaders must commit to scrapping it".

What have the politicians said? Anas Sarwar previously said of the Tories:

"This is the party that introduced the rape clause, which is a horrific piece of legislation, within their welfare reforms."

Where is that strength of feeling now? Why do we have to wait for some review? How long will that review take? Why will Anas Sarwar and Scottish

Labour not commit to the policy's abolition right now?

The Scottish Government has taken action on tackling poverty. An estimated 90,000 children have been lifted out of poverty because of SNP policies. Last year, more than £3 billion was invested in a range of programmes that are targeted at low-income households, with £1.25 billion directly benefiting children through interventions such as the historic child payment.

Martin Whitfield: Will Kevin Stewart give way?

Kevin Stewart: I am afraid that I have no time, Mr Whitfield.

By prioritising tackling poverty, the Scottish Government is addressing not only the cost of living crisis but, of course, the cost of the union crisis. Imagine what could have been achieved if Scotland had not had to pay for and mitigate Westminster mistakes. Chris Birt of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently told the Social Justice and Social Security Committee:

"Our social security system in the UK is currently fundamentally inadequate: people are hungry in this country because of it. The UK Government bears enormous responsibility for that. The Scottish Parliament has stepped into some of that space with things such as the Scottish child payment, and that is a good thing."—*[Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee, 21 September 2023; c 24.]*

We know that a Labour Government will be no different from a Tory one on this issue, as has been proven today. Starmer has told us so, and Anas Sarwar has no option but to agree. Well, I do not. It is time for us to put a halt to the cost of the union policies that impact so harshly on our children. It is time for us to control all social security powers here. It is time for independence.

15:39

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I start by noting the amendment to the motion in the name of my colleague Miles Briggs. It calls on the Scottish Parliament to focus on devolved issues, such as the roll-out of benefits through Social Security Scotland and other policies that will ultimately benefit Scottish children. That is what I will focus my comments on, which will come as no surprise.

The people of Scotland are looking to the Parliament to use its time to debate issues that affect them right now, such as delivering on the Promise, raising attainment in our schools, following through on delivering free school meals for primary pupils, funding free breakfasts and fixing the failing provision of 1,140 hours of free childcare. How about providing local authorities with the funding that was promised for digital devices? Only one in 10 schoolchildren has

received their free device, and 90 per cent of Scottish children do not have the laptop or tablet that was pledged to them pre-election. Some more cynical than I am might think that that was blatant politicking.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

Roz McCall: I am not taking any interventions. I am going to get my points across.

Based on a conversation that I overheard earlier, statistically—just to advise—the national average of children per household in the UK is 1.7, which equates to two children. I will just leave that there.

The SNP and the Greens, as the parties in government in Scotland, can use the extensive devolved powers to make changes that they believe are pertinent to Scotland. In other words, they can make choices. The Government has chosen to spend over £733 million in part to top up the Scottish child payment, on top of the UK Government's additional support and exemptions for the most vulnerable in society. Do not look now, but that could be devolution at work.

We all know that government is about making choices that we think will make positive differences to people's lives. Not many of those choices are easy; they are mostly difficult choices that highlight a direction of travel. It is easy to promise everything but, when it comes to delivery, we find that it is not possible or the budget will not allow it. We should be grown up about that fact and stand by our decisions about how we choose to spend taxpayers' money.

I note the cabinet secretary's comments on the focus on children and choices, and I will continue on that theme.

The SNP Government could have provided our children with the best and most rewarding route out of poverty, which is a first-class education system. However, we know that it has all but abandoned its promise to eliminate the poverty-related attainment gap. The former First Minister said that we should judge her on education. The previous Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, Shirley-Anne Somerville, ditched that commitment. In January this year, she said:

"in an education system, I think that it would be exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to get to the point of zero."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 18 January 2023; c 24.]

However, that does not mean that we should stop trying.

Any national 5 student of modern studies will tell us that the way out of poverty is through education, education, education. In 2016, the SNP

widely publicised its dedication to a shared commitment right across education to close the attainment gap between children from the most deprived and least deprived backgrounds. It said that that was a top priority. Seven years later, the situation has not improved. That is just not good enough, and we could be debating that today.

How about the SNP Government delivering on its promise of free breakfasts and lunches for all primary 1 to 7 pupils? In 2020, the then Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, said that, if the party retained power after the Holyrood elections in May, it would fund free breakfasts and lunches for all children in primaries 1 to 7 and that that would be implemented from August 2022, making Scotland the first nation in the UK to offer universal free primary school meals. How laudable. By August 2022, the promise had been broken.

In the programme for government, the First Minister announced that the Government would deliver free school meals to all pupils in primaries 1 to 5 and would work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in the coming year to prepare for the expansion of free school meals to primaries 6 and 7 during 2026. We should add that to the fact that Scotland has the lowest level of school breakfast provision of all four UK nations, with 41 per cent of schools in Scotland offering no breakfast provision. That is just not good enough, and we could be debating that today.

How about the Scottish Government making the investment required to ensure that the delivery of the Promise was on track and deliverable within the promised timescales? The Promise oversight board does not believe that delivering the original aims of plan 2021-24 is realistic within the timeframe. It has stated:

"Scotland does not yet have a single route-map to 2030 in place."

The former First Minister agreed with me on that point in the chamber.

The youngest, the most vulnerable and the most promising of our society in Scotland are being promised much, but the SNP has chosen to disregard those pledges, with no one taking any responsibility for those choices. Instead, it is resorting to using children in poverty for obvious political gain. That is just not good enough.

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

Roz McCall: I am not taking interventions; I am nearly finished.

Without sounding too clichéd, Scotland's children are the future of Scotland. We have a duty to provide them with the greatest opportunities, and that is not being done. For

nothing more than political tomfoolery today, we do them a disservice, and we should be ashamed.

Kevin Stewart: On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance. The motion is on the two-child benefit cap. It is very specific. I recognise that the Opposition parties do not really want to talk about that and are deviating. I am happy to debate any issue, but I seek your guidance, Deputy Presiding Officer, on the motion and the fact that there is so much deviation in this debate in the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank Mr Stewart for his contribution.

Mr Stewart needs to consider not only the motion but the amendments that were accepted by the Presiding Officer. I think that he will find the answers that he seeks there.

15:46

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I am the oldest of four children. Being one of four was great growing up but, interestingly enough, none of us was treated as more or less important or more or less entitled to support by virtue of our position in being born. That would, of course, be utterly bizarre and, indeed, immoral. Those are exactly the two words that I would use to characterise the two-child benefit cap. In fact, I would add in a few more: inexplicable, disgraceful and abhorrent.

Perhaps we are overfamiliar with references to the two-child benefit cap, so it has lost some of its initial shock factor. For clarity, the cap means that families are prevented from accessing essential welfare support for their third or subsequent children. In their time of need, a child is, in essence, abandoned by the state for one reason alone: the order of their birth.

Families often seek help because of unforeseen circumstances: bereavements, relationships breaking down, ill health, disability or caring responsibilities. None of those things is a child's fault, whether they are the oldest or the youngest. All those scenarios create unimaginable burdens that are far too heavy for any child to bear. However, rather than finding support and help, they are penalised, excluded and ignored. Their families are deprived of essential additional support.

We often associate Government diktats about family sizes with other—let us say more authoritarian—Governments. However, the two-child benefit cap is rooted in the same ideology.

In Scotland, we must unite in tackling child poverty. There have been lots of good debates in the Parliament about the work that we need to see to tackle child poverty. It is a disgrace and, in fact,

it shames us all that, in a land of plenty, children are homeless, hungry and cold. That is why the SNP has done a huge amount of work to tackle child poverty, including introducing the game-changing Scottish child payment. That matters enormously. As Kevin Stewart said, we can talk about figures, such as 90,000 children not living in poverty who would otherwise live in poverty. For every child who needs that, the difference is profound.

In Scotland, under the SNP, we build child welfare policies on fairness and dignity.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): On the point that Ms Forbes has just made, can she clarify why, when she was the finance cabinet secretary—and, before her, Mr Swinney—free school meals were still not rolled out in Scotland, although they both promised to do so?

Kate Forbes: The point is that they are being rolled out, but here is another point: the Scottish Government is spending three quarters of a billion pounds on combating UK Government policies—just to stand still. Imagine if all of that money was adding value and we did not need to ensure that the worst atrocities of UK welfare reforms were plunging children into poverty as we speak. We continue to spend much of our time fighting, and funding the mitigation of, policy decisions that a Conservative Government imposed on us.

The Tories' two-child benefit cap and their wider welfare policy have driven up to 30,000 children into poverty in Scotland. That is an atrocious legacy after more than a decade of Tory austerity. Across the UK, the two-child limit now affects one in 10 children. The Child Poverty Action Group called that "a tragic milestone". We will not see that in the Tory manifesto for the next election.

Scrapping the policy could lift up to 15,000 children out of poverty at the stroke of a pen. Who among us would opt to keep those children in poverty when they could be helped and supported with a simple change of policy? The Conservatives are opting to do so, and perhaps members would expect that. However, who would have thought that Labour would choose to continue the two-child cap for as long as it takes it to do a review of what we already know is wrong?

Michael Marra: I hear the calls for urgency from across the chamber, but does Ms Forbes realise that we are perhaps 14 months away from a general election and that her Government could mitigate that immoral situation now, in her own words?

Kate Forbes: Michael Marra raises a vitally important point. That is why three quarters of a billion pounds is currently being spent on mitigations. However, Michael Marra fails to recognise the £3 billion that is being spent right

now on supporting families and households across Scotland who face challenges around the cost of living and poverty. The Scottish child payment is directly ensuring that 90,000 children are not in poverty.

Labour is supposedly progressive and fair, but it is content to, at the very least, delay a change of policy. Let us say that it will be 14 months until the next election. Michael Marra is suggesting that we wait up to another year or two or three years on top of that while Labour does a review. That is not a great offer to the Scottish people.

The bottom line is that, for families in need, it does not matter whether there is a Tory Government or a Labour Government—the benefit cap will still apply. That is why it will only ever be the SNP and the Scottish Parliament that will stand up for every Scot—young and old.

15:53

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I am clear that the two-child limit is a cruel, damaging and appalling Tory policy and I fully oppose it. I agree that it is a punitive measure that targets working families, kills hope and aspiration, and has no place in the modern, progressive society that we want to create. As I have made clear before, I deplore the Tory Government's attack on working class people. The Tories are the friends of the rich and they show no interest in redistributing wealth to those people who are most in need.

Sadly, the Tories' amendment further highlights their ignorance of the damage that they have caused to people's lives and the economy. Given the Tory Government's incompetence, any incoming Labour Government will have to analyse the financial position left by the Tories, which will undoubtedly be extremely challenging. However, I and many other members on the Labour benches will chap on the doors and call for that policy, along with many other cruel welfare policies, to be removed.

Kevin Stewart: I get the fact that Labour will have to look at the finances. However, the shadow defence secretary has committed to the spending of billions upon billions of pounds on Trident. Why can Labour not do the same thing in relation to the two-child benefit cap?

Carol Mochan: Let me be honest: I do not want to play this game. I want us to have a proper discussion about how we change the lives of people who are living in poverty. In this debate, Labour has made it clear that it will do all that it can to review the dreadful, cruel welfare policies of the UK Government and bring in proper welfare for people. Despite what the cabinet secretary and back benchers have said, the SNP is unable to accept that Labour has a strong track record of

lifting people—including many children—out of poverty. I have every confidence that Labour will do that again.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): What discussions has Labour had with Rape Crisis Scotland about how we can make the rape clause fairer?

Carol Mochan: My first point is that we are debating the fact that the rape clause is absolutely not fair—that is a given. I, personally, am not aware of the level at which the party has had such discussions, but I have made my position absolutely clear. The rape clause should go. When a Labour Government comes to power—a Labour Government is coming—we will make changes that make people's lives easier.

I turn to the SNP Government and its motion. As other members have been, I am keen to outline some of the context for today's debate. Just this week, we learned from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that one in 10 Scots live in very deep poverty and that they make up almost half of those who live in poverty. The same report, which is rightly critical of the UK Government, maintains that the Scottish Government "could go much further", and I agree. The focus of today's debate should be on asking what this Parliament can do right here, right now, but the Government has chosen not to take that approach.

Labour members do not think that the current UK Government is setting a bar against which anyone should seek to compare themselves. Do SNP back benchers think that? I hope that they do not. We should be far exceeding the performance of a Conservative Government that has imposed austerity on our communities, wrecked the economy and hindered growth. The prominence of poverty—especially child poverty—in Scotland is devastating. I hear SNP members talking about that, yet it remains extremely prominent on the SNP Government's watch. I have often asked myself why the back benchers do not challenge their leadership to go further. My ask is that they do so. A good Government comes from the pressure of those behind it. Is the Scottish Government merely doing a bit better than the Tories? Is that enough for SNP back benchers?

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): On the subject of pressure from back benchers, the SNP's front-bench team needs no encouragement to do things such as increasing the Scottish child payment to £25 per week per child—it has been prepared to take that initiative. Carol Mochan must accept that, while this Government has acted, she is part of a Labour Party that is not acting to alleviate the suffering that is faced by children and young people in our society today.

Carol Mochan: I make it absolutely clear that I do not want to play this game. I have given credit to the party in government in Scotland many times.

I will prove my point by quoting from a recent report:

“The scale of the financial difficulties families are facing greatly outstrips the financial assistance offered by the Scottish Government.”

That report, which was published by Save the Children this year, goes on to say:

“there is more the Scottish Government must do to protect young children from the impacts of poverty.”

It is the responsibility of all of us, including back benchers, to push the Government to do all that it can. Scottish Labour’s amendment—

John Swinney: Will the member give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member give way?

Carol Mochan: I will make progress, if Mr Swinney and Ms Somerville do not mind, as I have only six minutes.

I am glad that the SNP will support our amendment.

In this challenge poverty week, I want to make one last point. Children in East Ayrshire and South Ayrshire, in my region, are growing up in a Scotland where one in four children are in poverty because of inaction and poor decision making from the Governments north and south of the border.

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

Carol Mochan: I will not.

I say to members that it is our responsibility to take action. Experts are saying that we are not going far enough. Communities are saying that we are not going far enough. It is time for the SNP and the Tories to listen and to act. Otherwise, they should immediately make way and give other parties the chance to deliver—rather than just saying that they will deliver—on policies that will change poverty in this country.

16:00

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I rise to speak in support of the Scottish Government’s motion, which is in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville. The two-child policy, with its abhorrent rape clause, is one of the most disgusting welfare policies to emerge from Westminster. It is designed to set families up to fail and to deny children the most basic levels of subsistence and support to help them to thrive.

The perverse rationing of subsistence for children has no part in a decent society, yet the two main political parties that want to govern at Westminster are planning to keep that approach as part of their welfare state. The policy not only lacks compassion, but fails miserably at achieving the aims that the UK Government set out. It was asserted that its implementation would provide incentives for people to find more work and would influence decisions about having children. However, a three-year research project that was funded by the Nuffield Foundation looked at the two-child limit and the benefit cap and it found no evidence that either policy has met its behavioural aims. It found that, in some cases, they have had the opposite effect.

In fact, the research has gathered swathes of evidence demonstrating that the benefit cap and the two-child limit are causing extreme hardship to affected families. It is a cruel policy that has been widely condemned by anti-poverty campaigners. John Dickie of the Child Poverty Action Group describes it as a

“cruel tax on siblings”.

He is clear on its punishing impacts, saying:

“we wouldn’t deny a third child NHS care or an education—how is it right to deny children much-needed support because of the brothers or sisters they have?”

The two-child limit is one of the most brutal policies of our times. All that it does is to push more than 1 million children into poverty or deeper poverty. It is time for all Westminster party leaders to commit to removing the two-child limit before more children are harmed. The End Child Poverty coalition has described the two-child policy as one of the biggest drivers of child poverty. If that is not enough for people to want to scrap it, what about the rape clause, which is one of the most dreadful pieces of social policy ever imagined? Labour used to call it “immoral and outrageous”. Astonishingly, it now talks about making it fairer.

Engender has said that forced disclosure of sexual violence to gain access to social security

“will re-traumatise individual women who have survived rape by forcing them to disclose sexual violence at a time and in a context not of their own choosing, on pain of deeper impoverishment”

and that

“Forced disclosure of sexual violence can exacerbate post-traumatic stress disorder and increase a sense of shame and isolation.”

However, instead of having a commitment to scrap the policy at Westminster, we are told that it is here to stay regardless of which party forms the next UK Government.

If the two-child policy was not bad enough, there are families in the UK that are hit by the double whammy of that policy and the benefit cap.

In Scotland, fortunately, we are doing everything that we can to mitigate the benefit cap and other cruel UK policies. We are making available nearly £84 million in discretionary housing payments, with £69.7 million to mitigate the bedroom tax, £6.2 million for the benefit cap and another £7.9 million to mitigate other UK welfare cuts. We have also increased the Scottish child payment to £25 a week and expanded eligibility, with investment of £405 million, helping more than 300,000 children across the country. It is not that long ago that other political parties were asking to set just a fiver.

We are seeing a race to the bottom between the Tories and Labour on UK welfare policy. Their tough rhetoric increases stigma, and their social policy agenda gives little hope to the families in greatest need.

Paul O’Kane: The member speaks about “little hope”, but does she accept that, as I outlined in my contribution, universal credit is fundamentally broken and needs to be reformed in all its facets? Does she accept that Labour’s new deal for working people will be a huge game changer in getting people into well-paid work and lifting people out of poverty?

Marie McNair: The proof will be in the pudding.

The Institute for Public Policy Research points out that UK policy sees social security in narrow terms and uses

“harmful rhetoric and ill-informed stereotypes.”

It also says that

“conditions have enabled the UK to maintain one of the least generous rates of income replacement across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.”

The two-child policy contrasts heavily with the dignity, fairness and respect approach that is driving us forward in Scotland. To name just a few important differences in approach, I note that there is no two-child policy for the Scottish child payment; there is no abhorrent rape clause; there are no private sector medical assessments, which cause much pain and humiliation; and there is no sanctions regime, which has caused the cruel deaths of many.

It is clear that there is no desire from any of the political parties that aspire to govern at Westminster to bring about change that will provide a safety net for when life chances require it, or to show compassion and a belief that no child should be left in poverty. It is clear that change will come only when Scotland is independent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Maggie Chapman joins us remotely.

16:06

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Six years ago, the distinguished academic Professor Jonathan Bradshaw wrote:

“The two-child policy is the worst ever social security policy because it results in unprecedented cuts to the living standards of the poorest children in Britain. If the government needed to reduce the deficit, almost any other expenditure cut or tax increase would be less damaging. The aspiration of the policy to influence fertility is discriminatory and hopeless. The exceptions will be unpleasant to operate. It is morally odious, vindictively conceived and it will not last.”

He was right about everything—except, so far, his final point. Shamefully, it has lasted.

Another Jonathan, the Labour MP Jonathan Ashworth, who was then shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, gave an interview to the *Daily Mirror* earlier this year. He agreed with a former Tory welfare minister in describing the two-child limit as a “vicious policy” and said that

“The idea that this policy helps move people into work is completely offensive nonsense.”

A few weeks later, Keir Starmer was equally clear. Why would he not be? It is an issue of such moral clarity, as agreed by civil society, charities, academics, unions, faith groups, conscience-stricken Tories and voices from across the spectrum of Sir Keir’s party. So, what did he say? He said:

“We are not changing that policy.”

This is where the empty politics of focus groups has brought us. This is what our children face—a fate that is recognised as being morally repugnant yet is being normalised by both players in a cynical game of first past the post.

Let us remind ourselves of why both Jonathans were right. Austerity was, of course, based on a lie propped up by analytical incompetence, and it fed on bigotries of the cruellest and most inflammatory kind. The attempts to turn George Osborne into a sort of national treasure reveal some terrifyingly short memories. Like many other vials of austerity’s poison, the policy has failed in what it set out to do. It has not reduced public spending in anything but the most trivial and short-term sense, because, as we know, the real costs of the child poverty that it has created are wide and deep, and affect not only the children but their families and communities, and society beyond them.

The costs are borne in relationships and wellbeing, in health and education and in employment and economic stability. If the architects of austerity thought about child poverty for no other reason, they might have considered

that its impacts on the economy and public spending far outweighed the petty cash that they snatched away.

The policy has not enabled parents to find work, or—for the majority who are already employed—to work more hours or to receive higher pay. In fact, as this year's London School of Economics study showed, it often heightens the obstacles that they face, including childcare costs, time constraints and mental health pressures.

The cap has not stopped people from having more than two children. Again, the evidence is there—evidence that anyone with a heart could have expected to see. Families have three or more children for many reasons and in many circumstances. Storms may come to us all—bereavement or breakdown, loss of relationship or livelihood, illness or isolation. To slam the door on the smallest is neither social nor secure: it is barely even human.

The policy has real effects, though not those it was advertised that it would bring. As we know all too well, the two-child limit increases child poverty, especially for the most vulnerable families. It brings with it the old enemies of childhood: hunger, cold, homelessness and family debt. It punishes women—especially lone parents—as they struggle, going hungry themselves, to keep their children warm and fed.

It violates the most basic human rights, including the obligation, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to give primary consideration to the best interests of the child. It breaches reproductive rights and blatantly discriminates by religion, culture and gender.

Martin Whitfield: I am very grateful to Maggie Chapman for giving way. She is making a very powerful speech—particularly in relation to the UNCRC. Would she agree that, fundamentally, the safety net of the social security system is not in any way helped by the current universal credit system, and that a review of the whole system is what the people of the United Kingdom, who seek to rely on it, need?

Maggie Chapman: I agree partially with Martin Whitfield, that universal credit is part of the problem, but that is no excuse to delay the scrapping of the obscene and immoral two-child policy right now. It could be done tomorrow, if we so chose.

The policy undermines healthy relationships by incentivising separation and discouraging blended families. Its clumsy and cynical exceptions—including the chilling rape clause—reach new depths of indignity, dehumanisation and danger.

There is no more bitter example of the cost—the simple human cost—of our shackles to

Westminster. We know that the Scottish child payment is making a real and vital difference to thousands of children's lives, but that payment should be an addition, and not an attempt to fill the chasm that is left by this deliberate shortfall—this conscious cruelty.

Earlier, Miles Briggs talked about fairness in taxation and fairness in spending. I wonder when he will press his Westminster Government to tackle tax avoidance or the obscene profits that were made at our expense by energy companies during the current cost crisis. That money could be used for so much good. Poorer families should not be made to pay.

There are MSPs here who have spoken out against their party line—their party's infatuation with the spiteful policy—and I thank them, but I challenge them and their silent colleagues to do more. We are not here to represent Mondeo man, Waitrose woman or any other cartoon characters of the spin doctors' stunted imaginations. We are here to represent the children of Scotland, and the families and communities who care for them. If we are truly to do so, the two-child limit cannot last. It shall not last.

16:13

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Just a few weeks ago, I led a members' business debate seeking to secure cross-party support for speaking with one voice to oppose the deeply oppressive and damaging two-child cap and associated rape clause. I sought to phrase my motion such that it would be straightforward for colleagues in other parties—particularly the Labour Party—to support it. I was deeply disappointed that the Labour Party MSPs simply did not sign the motion.

Today's Scottish Government motion is another opportunity for Labour to show movement, to bow to pressure and to do the right thing. As Labour colleagues decide how to vote at decision time, I will refer them to the questions that I asked of Michael Marra and Paul O'Kane during that debate.

I made it clear that the motion that I had put before Parliament sought, at its heart, to do something very simple: it aimed to put pressure on a UK Conservative Government that is wedded to the rape clause and the two-child limit. It was an opportunity for Labour to join the SNP in defending the 4,000 children in Glasgow and 20,000 children across Scotland who have been pushed into poverty by those UK policies. Their replies illustrated the confusion and chaos that has been part of the Labour position on the matter for a prolonged period.

Mr O’Kane was asked to rule out the rape clause. He said:

“I talk about fundamental reform of universal credit because that is what I believe in. However, unfunded spending commitments cannot be made, because working people will pay the price.”

Wow! All I did was ask Mr O’Kane to reject the rape clause and the two-child cap, but that was the reply.

Mr Marra stated:

“I associate myself entirely with the contents of the motion”—

that I had before Parliament. He went on and said:

“There is very little in it—if anything at all—that I disagree with.

The challenge that is faced by any incoming Chancellor of the Exchequer in this country is that we have to have the money to be able to pay the bills.”—[*Official Report*, 12 September 2023; c 87, 90]

Mr Marra is, of course, in part right. The issue is that, with the rape clause and the two-child limit, the UK Conservative Government denies the most vulnerable families in Scotland the level of income that they require in order to pay their bills—their electricity bills, gas bills, food bills and shopping bills—to buy clothes for their children and much more. Those are the bills that should focus the minds of the UK Labour Party. Unfortunately, the conclusion that I had to reach then was that UK Labour’s elected representatives in Scotland would rather deny vital support to the most vulnerable citizens than challenge Sir Keir Starmer.

We should not be deflected by any chat about Labour reviewing universal credit. The two-child cap and rape clause can end now, irrespective of any future review of universal credit.

Michael Marra: I understand that that change could be made now by the Conservative Government. Does Bob Doris recognise that it cannot be made now by the Labour Party?

Bob Doris: I thank Mr Marra for that really helpful intervention. Should there be a future UK Labour Government, the policies could be abolished within months—perhaps even weeks—but that commitment has not been given this afternoon by Labour. [*Applause.*]

Can anyone imagine designing a UK benefit system that identifies need and seeks to support those who clearly have such need, but effectively also says, “We’ll help you support your first two children, but you’re on your own with any other siblings. They simply don’t count—their needs don’t count”? At its core, that is precisely what the benefits cap of the two-child limit does, and it does not require a Labour review of universal credit to reach that position.

The Scottish Government has been clear that any benefits system that operates in such a way is immoral and unethical. The Scottish Government has not only condemned the system, but has acted to put in place an alternative dignified system here in Scotland, within our devolved competences and within the constraints of our budgets. The difference has been transformational, with delivery of our game-changing Scottish child payment. We roundly rejected any suggestion of a two-child limit or a rape clause. We designed a system that is based on fairness, dignity and respect. That is all that we are asking Labour to do, as well.

Paul O’Kane: Does Bob Doris accept that there are significant challenges in delivery of social security in Scotland, not least in terms of the wait times that exist for adult disability payment and with getting the right advice and support for people across Scotland?

Bob Doris: What Mr O’Kane is saying is that Social Security Scotland will continue to strive to improve the service that it offers to the people of Scotland, based on dignity, fairness and respect. I am absolutely happy to confirm that.

This is not about politics; it is, of course, about people. It is about offering vital support to people and families who are really struggling. I have previously mentioned in the chamber how Glasgow North West Citizens Advice Bureau, which is based in my constituency, has been helping people who have been impacted by the rape clause and the benefits cap. Here is what the bureau told me:

“Our bureau supported a lone parent of four children aged between 14 and four months who needed help with energy debt and support to progress a child maintenance claim. No one plans to be in financial difficulty. The parent found herself in financial difficulty when she separated from her husband and became reliant on universal credit, and she was entitled to support for only two of her four children.”

Glasgow North West Citizens Advice Bureau assisted another lone parent with four children who ranged from 12 years old to three years old. The bureau assisted in applying for health-related benefits for two of the children, who had severe additional support needs. The parent had found himself in financial difficulty when his wife died and he gave up well-paid work to care for his children. In claiming universal credit, he was entitled to support for only two of his four children.

Presiding Officer, imagine experiencing such a bereavement or a relationship breakdown then facing such severe financial hardship under a UK benefits system—not by accident, but by design. That is the reality of the two-child limit in practice. It is also the early years of what a future UK Government is willing to put up with—for how long,

we just do not know. Today we can, however, come together as a Scottish Parliament and unite against the current UK system, the two-child cap and the rape clause. The system must change and it must go, and we do not need a review of universal credit to tell us that. What is needed is a conscience, political will and determination to act. Our SNP Government has the conscience, determination and political will. I hope that, at decision time, so will others.

16:21

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is, as always, a pleasure to follow Bob Doris in the debate.

We find ourselves here during challenge poverty week, and I am disappointed that the motion that the SNP Government chose is so narrow that we cannot laud the work that happens in challenge poverty week. I look, instead, to the various amendments to allow that discussion to happen. It is right to hold the Tory Government at Westminster to account for its failings, choices and decisions, but it is also right to look to the people of Scotland to see what we can do to challenge poverty.

Challenge poverty week was launched in 2013 to highlight the injustice of poverty in Scotland and to show that collective action based on justice and compassion can create solutions—that is a fascinating message for the debate. This week, in particular, the asks are for a Scotland where people

“value our communities”,

can be safe and secure in sustainable homes, can

“have enough to live a decent dignified life”,

and can travel where they need to go, and

“where no one goes hungry”.

Those asks, generic as they are, speak to the volume of the challenge that exists around poverty in Scotland, across the United Kingdom and across the world.

In today’s debate, some members have looked to labour a very specific point. It is their right to do so, and that is a political decision. However, it is a missed opportunity, in this week, not to look across our Scottish communities for answers on how to improve the wellbeing of our children, young adults, new families, people who are working and in poverty—whose number has increased recently—and older generations. Those people need the care and support of their communities, the Scottish Government and the Westminster Government so that they can have a dignified life.

I echo a comment that Miles Briggs made about the availability of childcare and the information that has become available today about the private sector. It is concerned not just about not being able to deliver the Scottish Government’s promise, but that, if it did so, it would lead to childcare providers going bankrupt and out of business, which would cause huge problems for families—particularly single-parent families, in which there are significant numbers of women—who need that childcare to allow people to go to work.

I would also like, in the short time that I have, to echo the point that Roz McCall made in her speech about “education, education, education”, which was a reference to a speech that Tony Blair made back in 2001 at the University of Southampton, which is one of the great education institutions. I welcome her acknowledgment that education is one of the long-term solutions to the problem of poverty. However, it is not one of the long-term causes of poverty, and the expectation that our schools, our teachers and the adults who support our young people can solve a problem such as poverty is disingenuous and unfair. It is putting unacceptable pressures on a system that should be there to allow young people to develop and mature, so that they can take part in their future life, and—to echo a previous debate in which John Swinney intervened on me—to allow us to have the discussion about the responsibilities and obligations that rest with parents and schools, and the difference between them.

Turning specifically to the debate that we have had this afternoon, it is right to echo Carol Mochan’s comments about whether there was a need for this to be the politically strong debate that has been brought about because of the phrasing of the motion. Of course, that is a choice for the Government. However, to make that choice in the way that it has done is disingenuous, particularly in this week of all weeks.

Bob Doris’s speech was interesting. He was right to talk about the provision of social security being a developing and iterative process that will hopefully result in people being dealt with more fairly, more equitably and—let us face it—just more kindly. However, reflecting on some of the other comments, I would ask, why can that not happen now? Why is it not happening now? Why can it not happen today? Bob Doris is fully aware of why it cannot happen today, and, again, I find it disingenuous that there seems to be a clarion call, particularly towards ourselves—

Bob Doris: I think that the member is conflating two opposite things. The Scottish Government started off with a £10 Scottish child payment, and that is now £25. That was not about process; it was about delivery. Similarly, abolishing the two-

child cap is not about process; it is about delivery, and UK Labour could do that immediately after it is elected.

Martin Whitfield: I compliment Bob Doris on recognising the potential privilege that Labour has of being in government at Westminster imminently—I deeply wish that it could be tomorrow, but we must deal with reality, and that brings me to the part that I was going to go on to.

I thank Bob Doris for that intervention, because there is a difference between delivery and a promise to deliver. The fact remains that—as, I hope, we can all agree—the role of social security, at one level, is to provide a safety net that individuals and communities can be confident they will not fall below and that should offer them the dignity that we have talked about. However, that does not involve the two-child cap; it involves the aberration that is universal credit, which fails to recognise the complexity of individuals' lives. It was initially brought in to even out the complexity in the system and make it a simple system that could be delivered. However, we have seen, through experience, that that has not happened. Under the Tory Government at Westminster, universal credit has become almost as complex as the myriad benefits that it sought to replace.

I will bring my comments to an end, Deputy Presiding Officer. We have said here today that Labour will review universal credit, and we will do so for the very reason that we spoke about earlier today in relation to the parental transition fund, which involves a promise of the SNP Government for £15 million a year. That was an original idea that came through parents themselves and was developed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. However, now, a year later, they are told that they cannot have that fund, because the Scottish Government does not have the power. I urge all Governments to be incredibly careful about what they promise and to make sure that they can deliver what they promise, because people feeling betrayed and upset lowers the reputation of politicians, Governments and, indeed, Parliaments.

16:28

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): It is challenge poverty week, and today's theme is adequate incomes, so it is apt that we are having this debate. The UK Government must scrap the two-child limit. It is abhorrent and punitive, and it undermines action to reduce child poverty in Scotland. The two-child cap likely affects around 1,000 children in my East Kilbride constituency and more than 80,000 children in Scotland. Last year, families in Scotland lost out on nearly £96 million as a result of the policy, compounding hardship during this Tory cost of living crisis, and

that is nothing short of disgraceful. As Engender pointed out, the policy disproportionately affects women and is part of a Tory welfare system that entrenches women's poverty.

Abolishing the two-child limit could lift 20,000 children in Scotland out of poverty. Research suggests that that would cost around £1.3 billion across the whole of the UK, which is a fraction of the £4.3 billion that the Tory Government wrote off in alleged fraudulent Covid loans.

The two-child limit is also known as the rape clause. The UK Government website says that there are exceptions to the two-child limit, including where a child was

“born as a result of a non-consensual conception”.

Women have to declare the name of their child and sign to confirm that they “believe” that this applies to their son or daughter. In Scotland last year, more than 2,500 women had to relive the trauma of sexual assault or coercive control just to put food on the table. That is just one example of the cruel effects of the two-child limit, an abhorrent policy introduced by the Tories and one that the Labour Party will keep.

A recent study led by the University of York found that the two-child limit is a “poverty-producing” policy that has failed even to meet its own aims. The researchers found families with three or more children that did not know about the two-child cap because they were not on benefits at the time of the birth. Of course, circumstances can change for anyone, and a person does not know when they might have to rely on the social security safety net. That safety net has been shrinking under the UK Tory Government.

With limited powers over social security, in recent years, the SNP in government has built a new system with dignity, fairness and respect at its core. The game-changing Scottish child payment has been rolled out by the Scottish Government, providing £25 per week for every eligible child. It is estimated that it will lift around 50,000 children out of poverty in the next 12 months. That policy highlights the stark difference between the cruelty of the Westminster system and the fairness of Scotland's social security system.

I welcome the fact that Scottish Labour is favourable to the SNP's calls to scrap the two-child cap. However, that means nothing, unfortunately, since its Westminster colleagues have made it clear that a UK Labour Government will keep the cap. Considering the Tory amendment, it is clear to me that the Tories just do not get it. They support austerity to manage public finances for future generations, but their austerity agenda and policies such as the rape clause are harming those future generations.

Leaving aside the immorality of the Tory Government's policy choices, with nearly one in three children in the UK living in poverty, that statement is a false economy. Child poverty affects future outcomes—it leads to future tax receipt losses for Government as well as additional social security spending in the long run. CPAG estimates that child poverty will cost the UK Government, at the very least, £39.5 billion this year. Therefore, the Tories do not actually care about the reality of the public finances, and they certainly do not care that their policies are creating poverty. The Conservatives say that they are the party of growth. Well, the economy is on the verge of recession, and the only thing that they are growing is child poverty.

I want to tackle and eradicate poverty. It is not easy, and there are many factors at play. However, it is clear to me that there are some easy choices that would relieve child poverty levels and help to ensure that no more children are dragged into poverty.

Carol Mochan: I hope that the member picked up from my speech that I am really keen for us to make progress on tackling child poverty. Therefore, I am keen to know what is discussed when the group meets in relation to what more can be done here and now on child poverty and how it ensures that it pushes members on the front benches in that regard.

Collette Stevenson: I ask the member to clarify what she meant by “the group”. Could she elaborate on that?

Carol Mochan: Of course. I meant the SNP group that the member sits on.

Collette Stevenson: What? I am sorry, but I will move on, as I am running out of time.

For as long as Scotland is at the mercy of right-wing Tory and Labour Governments, we will need to spend money mitigating the worst effects of Westminster decisions. In a union where policies such as the two-child benefit cap and the rape clause are allowed to exist, there can be no doubt that the only way to protect families in Scotland is with independence.

16:35

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank all members who have participated in the debate. Scottish Labour welcomes the opportunity to debate child poverty and broader poverty at every opportunity because—there is, I think, unanimity across the chamber on this point—child poverty is a moral affront.

The shape of our economy in Scotland determines that a quarter of children in this country grow up in grinding daily poverty, and that

should be and is, I believe, an affront to every one of us. Those children are not saved by social mobility, which has collapsed in Scotland in recent decades. It is still significantly more difficult for young people from the poorest backgrounds to aspire to a better and different life for themselves, their families and their communities. Access to higher education, particularly university courses that lead to the professions with the highest earnings, remains closed to far too many. If we are to address that, we have to build an economy that ensures that there is greater equality instead of seeking to accelerate divisions.

However, we should reflect on the political context in which we are having this conversation today. The scenes that we have been watching from Manchester have been, frankly, to be expected. There is standing room only for Liz Truss, who is a year on from crashing the UK economy, while the rest is a sparsely attended Trump rally in which conspiracy theories abound in all the speeches. Conservative ministers are making speeches that are anti-15-minute neighbourhoods and on the control of populations. There are also calls to remove the woke from science, which is one of the most ludicrous things that has come from the Tory party this week. Frankly, the Conservative Party meeting in Manchester in recent days is anti-reality. That party is desperate to divide people by whatever means, wherever it can.

I would not apply the entirety of that to the SNP—far from it, I have to say—but it has been making up things today. There are things that have been entirely made up.

Scottish Labour remains opposed to the two-child limit. We have been abundantly clear on that; our position has not changed. My colleagues Paul O’Kane, Carol Mochan and Martin Whitfield have set that out in clear detail. We are absolutely clear that universal credit requires fundamental reform, and that must happen. However, we are in the fourth debate in two weeks from the SNP specifically about the Labour Party—not about its job of governing the country, but about the Labour Party.

As Mr Whitfield pointed out to Mr Doris, on some levels it is great that the SNP has faith in the Labour Party's ability to form a Government across the UK and bring change to the people of Scotland. However, I gently say to the SNP that just saying things about the Labour Party in these debates does not make them true. I can tell the SNP that misrepresenting the position of the Labour Party in this or any other area will not change a single vote in Rutherglen tomorrow. Our approach to politics is defined by the issue of poverty and child poverty. Labour's record in that area stands up to scrutiny.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: I will take the member in a moment.

The scourge of child poverty holds back this country. It is a malignant legacy of collective moral failure, and addressing it will be a defining purpose of any Labour Government at any time. It has been in the past and it will be in the future.

Kate Forbes: In that vein, and taking that at face value, if a policy were presented to the Labour Party that would, tomorrow, lift 15,000 children out of poverty, such as scrapping the two-child limit, would the Labour Party do that rather than wait for a review?

Michael Marra: I absolutely can comment on that. If this Government wants to bring forward a policy tomorrow to scrap the cap and if it wants to lift 15,000 children out of poverty, Scottish Labour would happily back that position.

Kate Forbes might want reminding that Labour is not in power here or at Westminster—and her party is. Her party could do it, and could do it now.

We have heard various statements during the debate, which I will quote. Mr Stewart said that he wanted it done. He said:

“We want an ... end to”

it immediately, so

“let us get rid of it now.”

Maggie Chapman said,

“It could be done tomorrow”

but it could be done by the SNP, not by the Labour Party. The SNP Government could mitigate the policy tomorrow, should it take the option to do so.

Kate Forbes: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: No thank you, Ms Forbes—on that point, you have had your chance. I may come back to you later.

Members: Oh!

Michael Marra: Yes, well, I think that that is a fair comment. The point was answered.

On the issue of timing, the Labour Party cannot act on the issue now. We think that a fundamental review of universal credit is required—that is absolutely clear.

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Marra give way?

Michael Marra: No, thank you.

If we are to make real inroads into bringing child poverty levels back down again in this country, we must tackle the scourge of in-work poverty. I have

heard nothing, or very little, about that today from SNP members, other than some warm words about Labour’s position on the new deal for working people.

In government, we would ban zero-hours contracts, which is obviously bad news for the SNP’s by-election strategy in that regard. We would outlaw fire and rehire, with day 1 rights to sick pay, parental leave and on unfair dismissal, and we would ensure that the minimum wage is a liveable wage.

Mr Stewart might want to listen to this, because that programme—

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: No thank you, Mr Doris.

That programme has been endorsed by the Trades Union Congress, which calls those proposals “transformative”—

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member give way?

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: Absolutely—yes.

Kevin Stewart: I recognise that the TUC has made positive comments around about some of those things. Mr Marra has just said that the Labour Party will scrap fire and rehire on day 1. Why can it not do the same with the two-child cap? It is that simple. If it can do that for one thing, why not for this one?

The Presiding Officer: In conclusion, Michael Marra.

Michael Marra: I move to conclude, Presiding Officer.

I am afraid Mr Stewart will find that that is not what I said—

Kevin Stewart: You did say that.

Michael Marra: No, I did not—he can check the *Official Report*. I said “day 1 rights to sick pay”, so that when someone goes into a job, they have day 1 rights.

The member should check the *Official Report*, and he will find out what the Labour Party’s policy is. It is as I have related it, and if those on the Government benches try to misrepresent it on a weekly basis, it will do them no favours.

16:42

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): It is always interesting to find out that the Scottish Government is bringing to the chamber a debate on social security. I always find myself wondering what the topic of the debate will be. Will it address the unacceptable processing times that are

experienced by those who are trying to claim benefits through Social Security Scotland? Will it be about how long it is taking to transfer the devolved benefits to Social Security Scotland, and will it maybe thank the DWP for agreeing to continue to administrate some benefits in the meantime? Or will it be simply the Scottish Government taking the time to apologise to all those who have been failed by its shambolic attempt to distribute much-needed support?

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: Not at the moment.

Of course it will not, because Government is not interested in looking at its own failings. It would rather deflect than own up to the mess that it has made.

Today, we have seen tactic number 1 from the Green-nationalist playbook: members shout about something that the UK Government is doing, while sitting on their hands and not taking action that it is well within their competence to take.

The truth is that, if the Scottish Government really cared so deeply about the two-child cap, it could do something about it. I say to Kevin Stewart, Alex Cole-Hamilton, Kate Forbes, Marie McNair, Maggie Chapman, Bob Doris and Collette Stevenson: here is the good news—we, in this Parliament, have the power to deal with the issue here and now. This Government has decided to sit on its hands and do nothing about it, except slag off other Governments.

That is not student politics—it is school politics. It is simply members shouting at somebody else while taking no responsibility themselves. This Government could decide to give those families more money if it wanted to, but it has chosen simply not to do that.

Martin Whitfield: Will the member give way?

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: Oh my goodness—there are so many. I will take an intervention from Ms Forbes, as I heard her first.

Kate Forbes: Jeremy Balfour is a member of the Conservatives and, according to campaigners, the Conservatives have plunged 15,000 children into poverty. In the spirit of taking responsibility, does he take responsibility for that?

Jeremy Balfour: Let us look at the number of children in temporary accommodation that the

Scottish Government has put into trouble. Actually, I do not take responsibility because, like Ms Forbes, I was elected to this Parliament to deal with the issues that we are responsible for. If I wanted to go to Westminster, I would have gone there—depending on the electorate—but I chose to come here. The point is that we have the powers, but SNP ministers sit on the front bench and are simply happy to point fingers at other Governments and do nothing.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: I need to move on.

The reality of governance is that choices have to be made. The Government has to decide what its priorities are and then make difficult decisions. If the Scottish Government wants to lift the two-child cap, it should top up payments for bigger families, finding the money from another budget such as health or education. That is exactly the same process that the Scottish Government is asking the UK Government to do.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member give way?

Jeremy Balfour: No.

The UK Government has to make decisions about where to spend its finite budget. It is time for the SNP to follow its own advice, if the issue means that much to it.

Miles Briggs helpfully pointed out the amount of money that the UK has spent in the past number of years, particularly during Covid, in protecting the most vulnerable in Scotland. Roz McCall made the absolutely right point that the Scottish Government has failed to keep its promise on free school meals, and neither John Swinney nor Kate Forbes has given us a reason why that promise has been broken.

What we should be debating today is how to get more people out of poverty. Martin Whitfield was right to talk about childcare and education, but let us look at what the Government is doing to get more disabled people into employment. The number of disabled people looking to get into employment is higher in Scotland than anywhere else in the UK. Let us look at what we are doing with regard to education, as we fall further and further down the leagues across the world. Let us look at what we are doing to help people from all backgrounds into employment—we are simply failing them.

I am sure that, collectively, we do not want to see any individual or family on benefits. We want to give people the opportunity to work and the ability to provide for their families. The Scottish

Government should start debating the devolved powers that we have in the Scottish Parliament.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I invite the member to work with the Scottish Government. If he wants us to do more with the powers that we have, he should help us to stop having to spend £127 million per year to mitigate the worst excesses of the UK Government and having to spend £405 million on the Scottish child payment because universal credit is absolutely pitiful in this country. He should help us to have an essentials guarantee that allows us to help people, because people cannot always be in work and, even if they are in work, they will need support from the benefits system. Why do the Scottish Conservatives not work with us to see what we can do to stop us having to mitigate the worst excesses of the UK Government, and then we can spend that money on employability, childcare and other matters?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Please conclude, Mr Balfour.

Jeremy Balfour: The issue here is about political choices. The UK Government has made choices and the Scottish Government has made choices. The Scottish Government's choice has been not to intervene to get rid of this policy. That is a choice that the cabinet secretary and her Government have made.

We all need to work to help the most vulnerable in our society. Let us start talking more about what we can do in the Scottish Parliament and what the Government can do, and let us stop talking about other Parliaments that we have not been elected to.

16:49

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): Let me be clear from the outset: the Scottish Government does not have the powers to scrap the two-child cap. Jeremy Balfour might want to check again which Parliament he was elected to and where the powers sit. Members who are calling for mitigation are calling for us not to scrap the cap but to allow people to go through the awful rape clause process and then come to us to ask for the money that the UK Government should have given them in the first place. We do not have the powers to scrap the policy. If we were in charge of income benefits, we would not dream of denying vital support to children. The powers to change the policy sit with the UK Government, and it is only the SNP and the Greens that are trying to do anything about it.

In a debate about whether children who did not choose to be born should be exempt from state support due to archaic judgments about people who need to rely on benefits and the number of

siblings a child has, it is astounding that there has been so much disagreement. The Scottish Government has consistently called on the UK Government to scrap the policy and support all children. It is a shame that others refuse to follow our example, even when they completely agree on how awful the policy is.

Michael Marra: I can confirm to the minister that Scottish Labour will vote for the motion on that basis. There is unanimity on it; there is not a word in it on which we disagree.

Emma Roddick: The difference is that, if Labour is successful in the next Westminster election, it will not scrap the two-child cap. It is talking about reviews. It says that it will wait and see and that it will look into whether the policy is terrible, but we all know that it is. As a social democrat and someone who wants child poverty to be eradicated, I have been really disappointed with Scottish Labour, so I cannot imagine how its supporters feel.

Carol Mochan: I want to understand what the conflict is. We will support the motion, and I have called on us to work together, but it seems that we are placing conflict in a place where it should not be.

Emma Roddick: I think that the policy is in a place where it should not be. We would scrap the policy immediately, whereas Labour refuses to go down that road. Labour had the opportunity to say that it would ditch the cap if it got into power. Instead, it is dancing around the issue, presumably playing to the gallery of Conservative voters.

What have we heard from Labour today? Labour members have said, "We're not going to ditch the policy if we get in, but why don't you mitigate it?" Scottish Labour does not support the devolution of the powers that would allow us to change the system, but it is asking us to mitigate the Conservative decision that its UK colleagues have decided to inherit and safeguard. How brazen can you get?

Paul O'Kane: Does the minister agree that universal credit is fundamentally flawed and that all its parts need to be reformed? Such reform is about more than just one policy, as abhorrent as the policy is. It is about making universal credit a proper safety net for people who need it, and it is about ensuring that work pays and that it pays well.

Emma Roddick: Certainly, but Labour could scrap the policy and have a review—it could do both. If even Scottish Labour has accepted that, no matter who is in power down south, it will fall to the Scottish Government to step in and provide a bit of sense and fairness in welfare policy, it is perhaps time for it to stop shouting down every

mention of independence, because it is very close to getting the point that we have been making the whole time. In Paul O'Kane's words, little changes here and there will not do it; we need fundamental change. The UK is even more broken than universal credit, and we do not need a lengthy review to tell us that.

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

Emma Roddick: I am going to make progress.

In Scotland, we do not choose to cap the number of kids who we think should not be hungry. The Scottish child payment is available for all eligible children. There are no questions about how many siblings they have or whether they were a planned conception, because asking those questions would be wrong. It is astounding to me that we are debating that.

It is also astounding to me that Miles Briggs said that the policy is about fairness. There is no fairness in the policy. The Conservatives—including Miles Briggs in his comments about employment—seemed to echo George Osborne's comments when the policy was first launched. He claimed that it would force families in receipt of benefits to make

“the same financial choices about having children as those supporting themselves solely in work”.

If Miles Briggs had accepted one of my interventions earlier, I would have asked him whether he realises that 59 per cent of the families who are affected by the cap are in work. People who are in work face unprecedented challenges with budgeting thanks to his party crashing the economy and refusing to protect children from bearing the brunt of that.

I cannot get my head around the idea of someone who looks at a hungry child and decides that we should not do anything about it because of uninformed judgments about the personal decisions of the parents.

Regardless of that, Nuffield Foundation analysis shows that the policy has had little impact on birth rates. That is just as well, because we want and need more babies to be born in Scotland, but it shows that, whatever the Tories thought they were doing with this policy, it has not worked.

Carol Mochan's assessment of the Tory amendment today was absolutely right. It is a bizarre rewriting of history that completely fails to acknowledge that the future generations that they are talking about carefully managing finances for are growing up in poverty now.

Jeremy Balfour: I asked the question of both Ms Forbes and Mr Swinney, but neither of them answered, so perhaps the minister will. If it is so

concerned about children growing up in poverty, why has the Scottish Government failed to deliver on its promise on free school meals by now? Why the delay if the Government is so concerned?

Emma Roddick: We are absolutely behind that commitment. We will roll out universal free school meals.

On the later points that were made by Carol Mochan, I extend the invitation that the cabinet secretary tried to offer to her or Scottish Labour spokespeople to come along to meetings in the run-up to the budget to tell us what they want us to do when they come to debates and say, “Do more.” Give us some detail, tell us what it will cost and where the money should come from, because we do always want to do more. However, we have to do the work and not just say, “Do more.”

I am sitting here as part of a Government that has spent more than £400 million this year on the Scottish child payment and almost £3 billion on policies that tackle poverty. Labour is in opposition—it has not even made it to government yet—and it is prevaricating about ditching something as awful as the two-child cap.

Martin Whitfield was right to talk about what we can do here in Scotland. There is plenty that we are doing and plenty more that we could do if we had the financial, welfare or employment powers that we need or if we were not having to constantly mitigate the worst of UK decisions.

Miles Briggs: Just before the debate, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice sent me a letter; at First Minister's questions, I had asked when all benefits would be devolved to Scotland. The Scottish Government still does not have a date for that, so why, when the Government says that it is doing so much, has it not managed to find the ways to deliver what it has the powers for here in the Scottish Parliament?

Emma Roddick: This is a joint programme with the Department for Work and Pensions, so it is not entirely within our gift to state when—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the minister.

Emma Roddick: —powers will be devolved, but not all powers are planned to be devolved, so that might be a question that the member should ask of the UK Government.

When our mitigation bill is sitting at more than £1 billion and Scottish Labour keeps coming to the chamber and asking us to add to that—when it will not put its money where its mouth is but instead abandons its principles before it even takes office—I suggest that there is a bigger problem at play. My colleagues behind me were right to keep pointing out that independence is needed if we

want to tackle the issue without constantly fighting against the tide.

Official figures that were released on 13 July revealed that a total of 2,590 women had to disclose details of rape in order to receive welfare support for a third or subsequent child. Rape Crisis Scotland said:

“The two-child policy for accessing child tax credits is cruel and forces families into poverty, particularly during the cost-of-living crisis.”

Nobody should be forced to disclose sexual violence in order to access welfare.

That clause lays bare the unfairness at the heart of this cap. If your policies are retraumatising survivors, you need to be very sure that that is necessary. People are being forced to prove rape, sexual assault and domestic abuse just to prove that their kids should be financially supported. For children who are conceived by other means, it tells parents, “Well, that’s your fault for getting pregnant,” as though circumstances do not change, as though assault and abuse are easy to prove and as though how they are conceived or born could ever justify a child growing up in poverty.

By telling women that they must be raped to be deserving of help, the two-child cap ignores bodily autonomy, the possibility of contraception failing and religious views on the use of contraception or abortion. It ignores the experiences of women. It is misogynistic at heart. The two-child cap also punishes children because their parents are on low incomes. It cannot be right to limit the financial support that is available to children. We do not need a review to tell us any of this: the two-child cap is one of the most blatantly punitive and plain wrong policies that I can ever remember.

Labour needs to take a step back, listen to the lines that it is repeating and wake up. I cannot believe that my colleagues over there, who often speak very passionately about tackling poverty, genuinely want to defend the indefensible.

Carol Mochan: Will the minister give way?

The Presiding Officer: The minister must conclude.

Emma Roddick: No exceptions to the cap could ever be enough. There should be no exceptions to our efforts to eradicate child poverty. Nobody deserves poverty.

Energy Bill

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-10709, in the name of Gillian Martin, on a legislative consent motion on the Energy Bill, United Kingdom legislation.

I would be grateful if members who wish to speak in the debate were to press their request-to-speak buttons.

I call Gillian Martin to speak to and move the motion, for up to seven minutes.

17:00

The Minister for Energy and the Environment (Gillian Martin): As our energy consenting powers are largely executively devolved rather than legislatively devolved, any changes to those schemes require the agreement of the UK Government and legislation at Westminster.

The UK Energy Bill has presented an opportunity to refresh the legislative framework under which we operate. We have engaged with the UK Government on the bill in good faith over many months in order to meet our joint objectives of reaching net zero and enhancing domestic energy security while ensuring that the devolution settlement and, indeed, the powers of this Parliament are respected.

The Scottish Government has secured amendments to the bill that are good for Scotland, provide a degree of protection for devolution and support a just energy transition. The bill will support our efforts to decarbonise heat in buildings by providing new powers for Scottish ministers to make and amend regulations covering energy performance certificates, replacing powers that were lost across the UK at European Union exit. It enables us to introduce regulation of heat networks, which will be critical to meeting our statutory heat networks targets and spreading the costs of heat networks regulation fairly by pooling costs across Great Britain. It will also give Scottish ministers formal influence over a significant new UK-wide market mechanism to encourage the supply of low-carbon heat appliances by manufacturers.

The Scottish Government has also negotiated amendments to mitigate potential negative effects of the bill. The offshore wind provisions have been amended to greatly limit the scope for a marine recovery fund to be used to undermine Scottish ministers’ current functions in relation to compensatory measures, and more generally to reduce the negative impacts of those clauses on devolved functions.

Enhanced consultation requirements have been secured to require the UK Government to more fully engage with the Scottish Government on the energy savings opportunities scheme. Although not perfect, that is an improvement on the UK Government's original intentions.

The bill has also been amended to include detailed consultation requirements for a number of clauses relating to carbon capture, utilisation and storage, and hydrogen, and the UK Government has committed to setting up a ministerial working group on CCUS, which will enable us to drive forward work that is vital to delivering our net zero ambitions. However, the UK Government has rejected amendments that would have improved the bill in relation to issues such as CCUS and hydrogen.

Although those changes are welcome, I must emphasise that the changes to the bill do not go nearly far enough. It is the clearly established position of the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament that, where provisions in a bill touch on devolved competence, legislation should include a requirement for the consent of Scottish ministers. The UK Government has refused to include those consent mechanisms for all but a very small number of clauses.

That is not how devolution is supposed to work. The UK Government should respect the views of this Parliament and promote amendments to reflect that. To make matters worse, the UK Government has made it clear that, unless we agree to recommend that legislative consent be given to the bill as a whole—including those areas in which we believe it is riding roughshod over devolution—it will revert to the bill as it was originally envisaged. The Scottish Government has made it clear that such a negotiation tactic is unacceptable. It is tantamount to blackmail and it is incompatible with good-faith negotiation on important topics.

The Sewel convention is supposed to require the UK Government to amend legislation to reflect the legitimate expectation that the UK Government will not legislate in devolved areas without the consent of the Scottish Parliament. However, the UK Government has now chosen to turn the convention on its head with that take-it-or-leave-it approach.

Instead of the need for legislative consent protecting the interests of this Parliament, the threat of proceeding without consent has become a weapon for the UK Government. That is yet another way in which the UK Government is failing to respect the Sewel convention, which it has now breached on 11 separate occasions.

The Scottish Government remains committed to the Sewel convention and continues to work within

both its letter and spirit, despite the current UK Government's repeated disregard for its requirements. We have written to the UK Government to detail our objections to its approach.

Securing amendments to the bill is vital to the delivery of our net zero ambitions at this crucial juncture, and our decision to recommend consent is made on that basis. Although I recommend that consent be given, I do so reluctantly, and it must be made clear that we are being asked to accept a diminution of this Parliament's powers under the threat of having those powers further weakened if we do not—jeopardising investment in our renewable sector and undermining our efforts to reach net zero. That is not a partnership of equals; those are the actions of a bully, treating the Scottish Parliament—and, by extension, the Scottish people—with nothing but contempt. Our recommendation of consent on this occasion should in no way be taken as acceptance of the UK Government's approach to negotiations on the bill.

The Scottish Government is determined to deliver a just energy transition that enables the people of Scotland to realise the benefits of our rich renewables endowment and achieve a net zero future.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that all relevant provisions of the Energy Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 6 July 2022 and subsequently amended, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I call Douglas Lumsden to speak for up to six minutes.

17:06

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): We are happy to support the legislative consent motion if not the tone in which the minister has presented it to the chamber this afternoon.

It is heartening to see a good level of co-operation between the Scottish and Westminster Governments, which is much needed but seldom found. This is an issue that the whole of the UK should be working together on, as it affects us all. Ensuring our energy supply and sustainability is key to us achieving our net zero targets, and exploring and legislating for new technologies is vital to our energy security.

We also thank the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee and the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee for the time that they have taken to consider the matter and their careful scrutiny of the lengthy and complicated bill. I was

happy that the work was done by the net zero committee before I joined, because I can see how much was involved. With more than 300 clauses, there was a lot to get through and, clearly, there are many areas that require a UK-wide response that also includes powers that are delegated to the Scottish Government.

I welcome the consultation and, obviously, the detailed conversations that have happened between civil servants and ministers across both Governments. It is refreshing to see both of our Governments working together on this.

Many of the concerns that were raised by the net zero committee—and its report of 17 March—have now been addressed, which is reflected in the report that it published on 26 September.

I am also grateful to my fellow committee members and the clerks for bringing me up to speed so quickly on a complicated and detailed bill.

Throughout the clauses that are before us today, there is reference to the ministerial forum that will address many of the issues of contention in the bill. I ask the minister for clarity—if she has it—on the frequency of the meeting for the forum, the process for agreeing the agenda and how the minister proposes to update this chamber on those discussions. It might also be helpful to the minister if the relevant party spokespeople could meet her before and after the meetings to discuss progress. It is important that the process be as transparent as possible, given the implications for business and communities throughout Scotland and in the north-east, in particular.

It would also be helpful if the minister could share the details of the memorandum of understanding that is to be established between the Scottish and UK Governments on how they will work together on the policy relating to the economic regulation of CO₂ transport and storage. That will be a new market, and any information would be appreciated.

Those points are picked up in the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee's recommendation that the Scottish Parliament must be given the means by which to scrutinise and hold

“ministers to account for their position in any agreement with the UK Government.”

Perhaps the minister would like to update us now or in her closing remarks.

The fact that a key area of the bill concerns the relatively new industry of carbon capture is really exciting for our Acorn project. I say “new”, but I think that certain parts of the world have been doing carbon capture for a while now. With its deep underground depleted oil and gas wells,

Scotland is uniquely well placed to store huge amounts of carbon deep underground. The carbon capture industry is, we hope, one that can bring huge economic benefit for the whole of Scotland.

It is vital that we all see the benefits of the move away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy. Businesses and communities in the north-east are eager to play their part—that is a topic that I spoke about just last week—and the measures in the bill will assist with that. They will ensure that we have clear and consistent policy from both Governments on carbon capture, hydrogen, the reduction of emissions from industry and transport, and the provision of low-carbon power.

I also welcome the bill's focus on the offshore wind environmental improvement package, as well as the habitats assessment process for offshore wind projects. The bill as amended now also imposes on the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets the express mandate of supporting the achievement of net zero, which will be key to ensuring that everyone, at all levels of government and in associated bodies, is focused on that goal.

District heating systems, too, are covered in the bill. I am convinced that district heating networks will have a huge role to play as we move away from traditional gas boilers, especially in large parts of our urban areas, where older, traditional flats may not be suitable for air-source heat pumps.

Without wanting to be too negative, one area that still disappoints me is this devolved Government's stance against new nuclear. Wind power is great, but we need to understand that, on cold, still days, the wind does not blow and our turbines do not turn. We need to have a good, reliable baseload and not rely on imported electricity for our base. We have some great skills in nuclear and we have some great sites that are connected to the grid. I urge the Scottish Government to keep an open mind. Technology is changing, as is decommissioning. New nuclear could provide a real economic benefit to Scotland.

That said, I support the LCM before us today.

17:12

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Labour will support the LCM at decision time. The Energy Bill that is currently progressing through the UK Parliament is the first piece of energy legislation of such scale to be considered since 2015, so it represents a huge opportunity to address all the key ambitions regarding the just transition and the shift to net zero. However, although commentators have described it as a “mammoth” bill, it still does not go far enough. There is much more that needs to be done.

We have just heard about where the Scottish National Party and the Conservative Party disagree, but what I will take from the debate is the fact that the Scottish Government has achieved some negotiating successes in relation to amendments to the bill. That is important.

It is important not only that the UK and Scottish Governments work together, but that our local authorities do so, too, because they are key players in delivering planning and the community heat and energy projects that we urgently need in our communities. It is important that we do not forget that.

Although the Energy Bill makes some progress, it will leave the UK falling behind in the global race for the jobs and industries of the future. The bill's stated aims are to leverage private investment in clean technologies such as carbon capture and storage and hydrogen, and to reform the energy system so that it is fit for the future by, for example, facilitating the deployment of energy storage, appointing Ofgem as the regulator for heat networks and ensuring the safety, security and resilience of the UK's energy system.

However, the bill could have done so much more. Although it deals with a lot of technical considerations, many of the measures that it proposes are actually quite piecemeal and timid, and they fall short of the action that is required.

I was pleased that some amendments that were tabled by my Labour colleagues in the House of Commons and the House of Lords were agreed to. I want to highlight two in particular. The amendment that removed the hydrogen levy from consumers' bills will mean that although investment to increase use of hydrogen will still be put in place, it will not be done on the backs of consumers, who would have had to fork out huge amounts of money for high energy bills. I emphasise that it is important that we maintain a focus on the push for green hydrogen and that we support such developments across Scotland. It is a huge technological process that offers major opportunities to use our renewables—especially offshore renewables.

In addition, establishing a net zero duty for Ofgem ensures that net zero is at the heart of the regulator's work, which is absolutely critical. There are a number of changes that need to be made, but net zero needs to hold them together.

Although the bill is a step forward, I believe that there is so much more that needs to be done in order to deliver the just transition that we urgently need. Labour supported amendments in the House of Lords that were subsequently removed from the final stage of the bill, such as on banning coal mines, which would be absolutely key to net zero.

The bill also fails to support energy efficiency standards for private sector housing in England, which would have saved tenants in England hundreds of pounds—one of the progressive policies that were cancelled in Rishi Sunak's net zero speech. That is a huge disappointment, especially as we are discussing the bill during challenge poverty week.

Let us not kid ourselves: the bill is not perfect. We will vote for the motion at decision time, but our view is that the bill was a missed opportunity, as Renewables UK and other industry groups have commented.

If a Labour Government were to be elected in the near future, we would continue the co-operative approach of the UK and Scottish Governments working together, but we would be much bolder, because we need a sprint to achieve clean energy by 2030. We would establish "GB Energy"—a publicly owned energy generation company that would be headquartered in Scotland. We would invest in the skills that we need now in order to develop the jobs, supply chains and infrastructure to transition our energy supply. That need has come across from all the renewables industry representatives whom I have met, as well as all the companies that are involved in oil and gas that want to transition. It is critical and we need political support now. The Scottish Government needs to step up to the mark.

In addition, the development of community-owned energy projects is crucial. We are missing a huge opportunity right across the UK as well as in Scotland. That goes back to the point about having resources at the local level to get going on such projects.

Finally, Labour would establish a national wealth fund that would help to secure the private investment that would ensure that there is finance available now and in the future. That finance would support the aspirations of some of the provisions in the bill, as well as the aspirations that many of us have for a decarbonised clean power energy network in Scotland that would be affordable for households as well as businesses. That will not come from the bill. We need change, but we will support it because of the small steps forward that it will make.

17:17

Gillian Martin: First, I will address some of Douglas Lumsden's questions, and points that were raised by Sarah Boyack.

Douglas Lumsden asked about a memorandum of understanding, which is still to be negotiated, agreed to and established. He asked about the ministerial forum on CCUS—I called it the "working group". My officials have had some initial

meetings on that, but it has not yet been formalised.

I will also address Douglas Lumsden's remark about the provisions for hydrogen production and transport. We wanted to have the consent of Scottish ministers in relation to clause 154, but that was not agreed to. That is unfortunate, because at the moment the language is about consultation of Scottish ministers. We will have to beef up the ministerial forum so that it is, in effect, consent by another name.

We have really worked together on the bill. There have been a lot of negotiations between UK Government ministers and Scottish Government ministers. I hope that that is the spirit in which we will continue.

Sarah Boyack mentioned amendments that the Labour Party put in place: we broadly welcomed most of those amendments. It was nice to hear her recognising some of the work that the Scottish Government has done in order to get some amendments over the line that will be good for Scotland and its people. On hydrogen—I hope that this is where she was going with the comments that she made about it—we need more agreement on hydrogen standards and labelling, particularly when we talk about exporting it. The people who want to buy the hydrogen that is produced in Scotland want green hydrogen. We need to get those standards agreed, so I am glad to hear that Labour supports us on that.

I will wind up, Presiding Officer. Notwithstanding the issues around the negotiating tactics, which is a wider issue—I understand why the Welsh Government has not given consent because of that—much that is in the bill is long overdue. The stated aims of the bill are to increase resilience and reliability of energy systems across the UK, to support delivery of the UK's climate change commitments and to reform the UK's energy system while minimising costs to consumers and protecting them from unfair pricing.

I agree with Sarah Boyack that the bill could have gone further. Perhaps certain things will go further in the future, but I hope that everyone agrees that despite the negotiations and some of the tactics around them, and despite the bill's limitations, the bill is in Scotland's best interests. I hope that everyone votes to agree to the consent motion.

Business Motions

17:20

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-10729, 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 24 October 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Ministerial Statement: Planning for Winter 2023-24 and Ongoing Resilience Across Health and Social Care

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Transvaginal Mesh

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill - UK Legislation

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.30 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 25 October 2023

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture; Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Scottish Labour 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 26 October 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: Education and Skills

followed by Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee Debate: Public Participation

Inquiry

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 31 October 2023

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 1 November 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 2 November 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:
Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition

followed by Scottish Government Business

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 23 October 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-10730, on a stage 1 timetable, and S6M-

10731, on a stage 1 extension, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 19 January 2024.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be extended to 23 February 2024.—[George Adam]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:21

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-10732, on committee meeting times, and S6M-10733, on designation of a lead committee.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, the Criminal Justice Committee and the Social Justice and Social Security Committee can meet jointly, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament between 1.00 pm and 2.15 pm on 2 November 2023.

That the Parliament agrees that the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.—[George Adam]

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

Motion without Notice

17:21

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 5:22 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:22

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-10716.2, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-10716, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on reversal of the United Kingdom Government's two-child benefit cap, 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 digital voting.

17:22

Meeting suspended.

17:25

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My machine presented the vote twice, so I voted no twice. I hope that it registered only once.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Whitfield. I can confirm that your vote has been registered.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 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)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 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)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-10716.2, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 28, Against 78, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-10716.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-10716, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on reversal of the UK Government's two-child benefit cap, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not refresh. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: 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)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)

Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 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)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-10716.1, in the name of Paul O’Kane, is: For 75, Against 28, Abstentions 3.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-10716, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on reversal of the UK Government’s two-child benefit cap, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not refresh. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Beattie. 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)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)

Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)

McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the vote on motion S6M-10716, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, as amended, is: For 78, Against 29, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament calls on the UK Government to scrap the punitive two-child limit, which limits the amount of Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit a family can receive and undermines action to reduce child poverty in Scotland; notes that an estimated two thirds of children in poverty live in working households, 10% of all employees in Scotland are stuck in low pay, and that 72% of that group are women, and welcomes, therefore, the proposal for a New Deal for Working People, which has been endorsed by the TUC and includes plans to ban zero-hours contracts, outlaw fire and rehire practices, and raise the minimum wage in order to tackle insecure work and to make sure that work pays as a key route to ending poverty.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-10709, in the name of Gillian Martin, on the Energy Bill, UK legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that all relevant provisions of the Energy Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 6 July 2022 and subsequently amended, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on two Parliamentary Bureau motions. As no member objects, the question is, that motions S6M-10732, on committee meeting times, and S6M-10733, on designation of a lead committee, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, the Criminal Justice Committee and the Social Justice and Social Security Committee can meet jointly, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament between 1.00 pm and 2.15 pm on 2 November 2023.

That the Parliament agrees that the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Stoma Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-10345, in the name of Edward Mountain, on stoma care in Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges what it sees as the importance of stoma formation in healthcare, and congratulates all those involved in supporting people with them, including in the Highlands and Islands region; notes the dedication shown by those who work in this field in ensuring that the best care is provided in what is considered a life-changing event, and notes calls for all organisations to play their part in ensuring that those with stomas are able to lead normal and full lives.

17:34

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): It is a privilege to stand in the chamber to speak to the motion and, in doing so, fulfil a promise and meet a challenge. In 2022, I promised to highlight the importance of bowel cancer awareness and I committed to raising stoma awareness. Last summer, I was challenged by Brian Devlin—sadly, he could not make it here tonight—to do something to promote greater understanding of stomas in the Scottish Parliament. I hope that I will do both those things today. I thank all the members across the chamber who signed my motion to make the debate happen.

At lunch time today, a group of ostomates set out from the Parliament to walk to the top of Arthur's Seat. They did so to trumpet loudly that there is little that they cannot do. In planning for today, I had to use all my skills to prevent a parachute drop by some of the more enthusiastic ostomates, who thought that that would make a great display. Ostomates are quietly getting on with their lives—the lives that their bags give them.

Our debate will be watched by lots of people in the chamber, including ostomates and their friends. I welcome them all. Some of them faced considerable challenges to be here, but they are a tough lot. They handle much more unpleasant things daily than most of us have to.

Our lives are a journey that sometimes has bumps in the road and diversions. When we reach those diversions, we have more often than not to embrace the route change, because not to do so can be a disaster.

On 28 January 2022—the day before my operation—a string of people visited me. One nurse, who came in with more purpose than the others, clutched a large bag and a black marker

pen. With little explanation, I was told to remove my top and made to stand up, sit down, lean forward, lean back, breathe in, breathe out and do a heap of other exercises. Off came the pen lid, and a large black spot was marked on my tummy. I was told that that was where my stoma would go and that it would be a perfect fit—and it was. That was the choice not of my surgeon but of my stoma nurse.

I praise our stoma nurses, who are key to good stoma care. We need to bring more people into that profession. We need such nurses now more than ever, as there are more than 20,000 ostomates in Scotland. Many people have trouble-free stomas, but some do not.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am grateful to—[*Interruption.*] My apologies, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can we have Mr Cole-Hamilton's microphone on, please?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am sorry for derailing the wonderful momentum of Edward Mountain's excellent speech. I think that I speak for the whole chamber in saluting his bravery in talking about his stoma experience and bringing light to what he calls the challenges for the many thousands of Scots who face life with a stoma but who in no way let it conquer their indefatigability.

Does Edward Mountain recognise that we, as a society, still have a long way to go to tackle the stigma of stomas and to address access to lavatories in public places for people with stoma bags, so that they can go to the shops, cinemas and bars with confidence? Will he join me in saluting not just stoma nurses for their work but everyone in the stoma community, including the companies that produce stoma kits?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I give Edward Mountain the time back for the intervention.

Edward Mountain: I will join Alex Cole-Hamilton in that, and I welcome his intervention. There is stigma, perhaps for people who face having a stoma and among people who know nothing about it. I can honestly say that, the day before my operation, I knew little or nothing about stoma care. I had been a typical male ostrich and had buried my head in the sand. My wife found out everything by googling, but I refused to let her tell me about it. However, as I came to know more about stomas, I realised how normal they could be.

I return to what I was saying about trouble-free stomas. Some ostomates do not have a trouble-free time. They face constant struggles with leaks and sores, and they struggle to get the help that they need. That is why I call tonight on all health boards in Scotland to collaborate on a "once for

Scotland" approach to ensure best practice to deliver the highest quality care.

As part of that excellent care, we should offer an annual check to all those who have a stoma. It is clear that some will not need that, but some will. We should remember that, although stomas can stabilise, equipment changes and improves, which means that a review can make things better.

Prior to this evening's debate, MSPs received a colostomy bag. There is a huge range. One size can be cut to fit all, but there are subtle differences. It is those differences that make the difference. There are 15 or so companies that bring their skills to designing and making the bags. However, there is a danger that, in future, we might end up having one bag maker and supplier. I encourage everyone, including our stoma nurses, to consider the full range, because not to do so would not be making the best use of technology.

I look forward to hearing the speeches of other members, but, before we do, I would like to make a plea. The five asks that are being promoted tonight—and, hopefully, promised by the Government at the reception—can be delivered by the Government at a very low cost, and I believe that we all can support them.

However, there is one other thing that I suggest we can all champion, and it comes back to what Alex Cole-Hamilton said. I urge every member of the Parliament, when they next go into a building, to ask the owner whether the disabled toilet has a shelf. It is a strange question, but the answer is that it should have. Why? It is because, if someone wants to change a stoma bag, they will need a variety of equipment—replacement bags, possibly scissors, a mirror, wet wipes, a disposal bag and perhaps even a stoma collar—and, if there is no shelf, the only option is to lay everything out on the floor, which is not great and is certainly not hygienic. A simple shelf costing a few quid could change that.

I would like to start the ball rolling on that tonight, Presiding Officer, by asking you if you know whether the Parliament's disabled toilets have shelves.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Edward Mountain: Yes, of course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Christine Grahame—on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, I suspect.

Christine Grahame: I cannot speak on behalf of it, but I am a member of the SPCB. However, before I make my point, I must say that I have found this an emotional speech to listen to, and I commend you from my heart, Edward, for

speaking in that way and for bringing the issue to the chamber.

As a member of the SPCB, I can say that I have listened to what you have said, and we will have something done about it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Even though that intervention was not through the chair, I will allow it.

Edward Mountain: That is one of the things that would make my evening, because I asked the Parliament more than a year ago whether it would fit shelves in the disabled toilets, and the latest news is that it is still thinking about it. If the SPCB, through Christine Grahame, is going to make that promise tonight, that is welcome. I think that there might be other SPCB members in the room whose views might need to be considered, but let us go for that.

It is not only in the Parliament that there is a problem. NHS Highland's disabled toilets do not have a shelf, and I bet that it is not the only health board where that is the case, so we have a way to go. If the Parliament installs shelves, it could make a real change and lead the way.

Frankly, I think that I have said enough. I have the greatest admiration for everyone in the stoma world: those who make the bags, those who fit them, those who wear them and those who look after the people who wear them. However, my greatest admiration is for those who wear them and prove every day that they are no different from anyone else and that, whatever the challenges that they face, life is for living.

I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, and congratulations, Mr Mountain—even if you have exposed divisions in the corporate body.

17:44

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this short debate. I congratulate Edward Mountain on securing it, and I welcome everybody to the public gallery. I recognise the work that the member has done to raise awareness of bowel cancer and stoma care in Scotland and to champion stoma care for people across Scotland. That includes hosting the reception in the Parliament this evening—unfortunately, I will not be able to attend because I am chairing a cross-party group meeting, but I wish the member well at his event.

I remind members that I am a registered nurse. During my time in the operating theatre, I assisted in many cancer and stoma-creation surgeries. I know that stomas can be created for a number of reasons, such as Crohn's disease and ulcerative

colitis, or—as I experienced when I worked in Los Angeles—even as a result of trauma inflicted on people by stab wound injuries.

Not all stomas are permanent.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank Emma Harper for taking an intervention, and I thank Edward Mountain for bringing the debate to the chamber and being so honest and forthcoming about his experience in his speech.

I am co-convenor of the cross-party group on inflammatory bowel disease. One of the things in Edward Mountain's speech that resonated with me was what he said about different sizes of stoma being required. We have not yet talked about the fact that, while for cancer patients, the treatment can be life saving, for Crohn's disease and colitis patients, it is life changing. Those conditions can affect a lot of young people and children, so we should think about how they are impacted by stigma, lack of facilities in schools and everything else that has been mentioned.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Ms Harper.

Emma Harper: I thank Clare Adamson for her intervention. That aspect is important, in my experience. I have looked after children who have had stomas created, and it is important that we highlight the associated stigma.

I will pick up on Edward Mountain's point about disabled toilets in the Parliament. In the toilets on the fourth floor, where my office is, there was a table during Covid, but now it is not there. It would be really simple to return a table there, while the Parliament is working on the shelf issue. I absolutely support the ask that Edward Mountain has made in the chamber this evening.

I will pick up on the point about bowel screening. It is now quicker and easier to do, with one wee small sample to send instead of the three samples that were previously required. I know that people who are diagnosed with bowel cancer early are 14 times more likely to survive it.

Bowel cancer is one of the main reasons why stomas are created in the first place. The screening test is offered to people who are aged between 50 and 74. I was interested to read that the latest screening uptake statistics for Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders are as follows. A total of 60,677 people in D and G were invited for their screening test, and 38,070 were screened. That was an uptake of 62.7 per cent, which has gone up from previous years in which uptake has been noted. For the same period in the Scottish Borders, 47,389 people were invited for screening, and 30,944 sent in their samples. The Borders uptake, at 65.3 per cent, is therefore

slightly better than the uptake in D and G, so there is a wee bit of competition there. Those are good figures, but we need to improve them.

The fact that we are discussing this issue in the chamber today and raising awareness about the importance of screening is really important.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland)
(Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Emma Harper: I note that our time is really short tonight—I will take the intervention, but I think that I am almost out of time.

Douglas Lumsden: I thank Emma Harper for taking my intervention. She mentioned the figures—it sounds as though almost a third of people are getting the test but not doing it. Does she have any ideas about how we can increase the figures to get them nearer to 100 per cent?

Emma Harper: Sure. Obviously, work needs to be done to continue to raise awareness of the importance of screening, and we are helping by talking about it today. I am sure that work will be taken forward to continue to raise awareness of the importance of not only screening for bowel cancer but other screening that we do.

Finally, I want to mention the stoma care nurse specialists, because if we didnae have them, it would be challenging for people to find out about certain things. For example, Edward Mountain described the black marker on his abdomen—I have seen that being done for people. Sometimes, I can see that patients are well informed about it, but, at other times, they need really good support and information. The stoma nurse network in Scotland should be valued and supported, because those nurses do a phenomenal job.

In closing, I thank Edward Mountain again for his courage in bringing the debate to the chamber. All the people who work in stoma services should be recognised for doing a fantastic job, and I encourage everyone who is eligible to ensure that they take up their screening invite.

17:50

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife)
(Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this members' business debate, and I commend Edward Mountain for his courage in bringing the debate to the chamber.

I apologise to you, Presiding Officer, and to Edward Mountain and other members, because I have to leave after my speech. I will not be able to attend Mr Mountain's event, because I am hosting another event in the building myself, but my thoughts are with him.

I echo the motion for debate, and I put on record my own sincere thanks and my commendations to

all the dedicated professionals who are involved in the care of those living with stoma. It really is a big life change for individuals, and they have to be congratulated on how they manage that process with courage. They are supported by a network of individuals, including nurses, who are worth their weight in gold and who, by their very actions, give much-needed support, comfort and reassurance to people every day.

As we have already heard, some people have to deal with the trauma of leaks from their bag, and have to think about how they can manage that and where they can change the bag. All that can present a major issue, day to day, for some individuals. However, the teams of stoma nurses providing support can offer reassurance. In my region, we have such teams based in the Forth Valley royal hospital and Perth royal infirmary, and I know about the work that they do to support individuals in communities the length and breadth of those areas.

However, care has become expensive, which is an issue. We cannot look away from the processes that are taking place, and some of those processes need to be streamlined to enable us to look at where we are going.

Back in 2020, *Nursing Times* reported that,

“Senior nurses are seeking to establish a ‘Once for Scotland’ national approach to stoma care, to end variations in practice and bring down ... costs”.

We know that some of those costs have mushroomed over the past few years: with a 65 per cent increase over the past five years, the costs have now reached £31 million, although there has been only a 10 per cent increase in the number of patients. How that is managed needs to be looked at, as the average cost for dealing with these patients should be roughly between £700 and £2,000 a year, but in some areas it now exceeds £5,000 or £6,000.

Back in 2018, the NHS Scotland executive nurse director group commissioned the national stoma quality improvement short-life working group to look into the matter. The working group made many recommendations—because of Covid, that process took some time—and highlighted that a review is required. I look forward to hearing from the minister, in her summing up—although I will not be here, so I look forward to reading it later—about how we can manage some of that, because it is vitally important that we give those individuals the support that they need.

The review flagged up issues around general practitioners, including an “over reliance” on GPs, who were “often stretched” with regard to their capacity to manage and support individuals. The groups of healthcare professionals highlighted in the review have a common denominator: they are

all looking to provide support and do as much as they can for people across Scotland.

In conclusion, on a personal level, I am aware of the benefits and challenges that arise with stoma, because my mother has had one for a number of years. I look forward to the minister telling us in her summing up how the Scottish Government can ensure that the streamlining of stoma care and its costs results in resilient care. We must empower stoma care nurses as practitioners. They do a phenomenal job, but they are sometimes the unsung heroes, and we need to commend them for, and congratulate them on, what they do to support individuals, day in and day out.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It sounds like it will be a busy evening of events in Parliament.

17:54

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I thank Edward Mountain for lodging the motion and securing the debate. I was not intending to speak tonight, but, having heard Mr Mountain's earlier question to the minister, I thought that it was important to highlight my experience as an ostomate and one of the one in 335 people across the United Kingdom who has lived with a stoma. I have learned to live with having a stoma over the past seven years. I take this opportunity to thank the staff of the Western general hospital, especially my consultants Mr Wilson and Mr Clark, and the stoma nurses Isla and Sheena.

Earlier, Mr Mountain suggested that there was a need for an annual review for all ostomates. In my experience, that is not necessary. Support is required but predominantly that support is needed when a person first finds themselves with a stoma. When a patient leaves hospital after major surgery to have the stoma formed, the stoma nurses visit them at home to provide stoma care support. The stoma nurses then invite the ostomate to their clinic, where they will receive a regular check-up until such time as their stoma settles into a regular pattern.

The Western general hospital also has a dedicated helpline, and if a patient does not manage to speak to a stoma nurse immediately, they will phone them back, no matter how trivial the inquiry is, as it is about providing reassurance.

Anyone who lives with a stoma has many questions, especially at the start, such as about the food they can eat, how much liquid they can drink and whether they should avoid anything, how they should deal with ballooning and pancaking, whether there are any activities that they should avoid, such as heavy lifting, and whether they can travel abroad.

In my experience, the current system works, given the pressures on our national health service. This Saturday is stoma awareness day, and this year's theme is "Smash social exclusion". Many people, including me, have that hidden condition and can, from time to time, require toilet facilities that are safe and clean to make stoma bag-changing easier. We require simple changes to facilities to make life easier, such as a hook on the door, shelf space, a mirror and a disposable bin. Research by Colostomy UK found that some people living with a stoma found that a lack of suitable toilet facilities led them to feel socially excluded, as they have concerns that clean, safe and suitable facilities will be difficult to find when out in public or at events.

Edward Mountain has said that we have accessible toilets in Parliament, but even here they are not suitable for stoma users. Minor changes would resolve that situation, and I am sure that, now that it has been highlighted in public, the facilities management team will address that shortcoming.

Those of us in Scotland with a stoma are fortunate that we do not face the prescription charge of £9.60 an item that is chargeable south of the border. For my stoma care, I require seven individual items, five of which must be ordered by prescription from my medical practice. In England, a person may qualify for free prescriptions if they have a stoma but not if they have a temporary ileostomy. Given the cost of living crisis, the UK Government should introduce free prescriptions for all those individuals living with serious health conditions, as the Scottish National Party Government did in Scotland.

17:58

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Edward Mountain for securing this debate and for making such a personal speech tonight, and I thank other members who have done so as well. I also take the opportunity to welcome those in the public gallery. It is called the people's Parliament for a reason. It is really important that the public come along and bring to us the things that they want us to talk about. We in the Scottish Parliament can raise awareness of the issue of stoma care and of the team of experts helping to make life manageable for people who have been through what the motion describes—quite rightly—as "a life-changing event".

We have heard about what a stoma is, how it affects lives, and, as Edward Mountain described, the "bumps in the road". We have also heard that around 20,000 people in Scotland receive stoma support.

I, too, want to mention the exceptional teams around patients. There are so many different roles in those teams. I looked into what support people might need through that journey: the stoma care nurses who have been mentioned, community pharmacy and community care workers, general practitioners, practice nurses and family carers—the list is endless. We should all take the time to thank the people who support individuals through this journey and at different times in that journey.

In my career before I entered Parliament, I was fortunate enough to see many patients who had positive stories of going through this very difficult journey and reaching a place of acceptance, hope and understanding that life goes on. I want to make the point that, honestly, that was often possible through the support of the stoma care nurses, who really do help to change lives.

When we get the opportunity to raise issues with ministers, we have a responsibility to do that, so, in the short time that I have, I want to raise with the minister the need to secure that service for the future. We need to ensure that we have well-educated, skilled nurses in the future. That links to a point that Edward Mountain made earlier about ensuring that we have the skilled nurses and that we have a workforce plan for them, because, to get those extremely skilled stoma care nurses, we have to have people coming through training and into the profession.

Recently, I visited the Ayr campus of the University of the West of Scotland, in my South Scotland region, and had a tour of the absolutely cutting-edge facilities that are provided to nursing students. I also had an extremely useful discussion with the teaching team around the drop in the number of applications to nursing. With such facilities and such skilled nurses, I would hope that we could start to encourage many more students to come into the nursing profession. It is disappointing that the figures for June 2023 show a decline in the number of applicants to the Scottish programme—I think that there were 6,450 applicants as opposed to 7,930 in 2022. The Royal College of Nursing has asked the Scottish Government to work on how we make sure that nursing is seen as a valued career with good career choices, which, of course, it is. Having seen the university provision in Ayr, I think that we can all champion nursing as a profession.

Emma Harper: Carol Mochan should be commended for encouraging folk into nursing—I say that as someone who was a nurse for 30 years before coming here. Through the comprehensive holistic care that they deliver, stoma care nurse specialists are central to enabling people to have good lives. Does the member agree that that message is part of what

we need to send in order to encourage people into nursing?

Carol Mochan: That was an excellent intervention from the nurse among us. I also had a career in the health service and I believe that we need to ensure that people see all the career avenues that are available to them in the NHS. It is a wonderful workforce to be part of. The Scottish Government has a responsibility to make nursing an appealing avenue for students.

I recognise that I need to conclude, Presiding Officer. I again thank Edward Mountain for bringing this debate to the chamber and I thank all the hard-working staff and teams who are around people who receive stoma care in our hospitals and our communities. I am sure that people also want me to thank the families for their support. It is good that we have had the opportunity to discuss the issue tonight, and I commit to ensuring that, if I am able, I will ask anywhere that has a disabled toilet to please place a shelf in it.

18:03

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I begin by congratulating Edward Mountain on securing today's debate, and I welcome everyone who is in the public gallery. I very much appreciate Edward Mountain taking advantage of the opportunity that he has as an elected member of the Scottish Parliament to raise the profile of stoma awareness. As he knows, my father had bowel cancer and, for the final three years of his life, he was accompanied by his stoma, so this is a very personal issue for me.

I also appreciate Gordon MacDonald sharing his experiences. I remember the questions that he referred to—I recall my dad asking what he could eat and drink. However, I had completely forgotten about ballooning and pancaking until Gordon MacDonald mentioned that. It is strange, what memories come back. I thank him for raising those points.

Edward Mountain has done a great service by raising this issue previously, and I have spoken to him about the subject before. He posted an amazing sequence of tweets about his experience. I remember my husband telling me when I got home one day that he had just liked one of Edward Mountain's tweets, and I have to admit that I nearly fell off my chair. However, when I understood what the subject was, I appreciated what he—and Edward Mountain—had done, and I want to take this opportunity to support Edward Mountain's message and encourage anyone who believes that they may have symptoms that could indicate the presence of cancer to contact their general practitioner immediately.

The sooner that cancer is caught, the greater the chance of it being successfully treated. Emma Harper and others also underlined that message. I say to Douglas Lumsden that I know that some people, like my husband, are great users of social media, and we have a responsibility to use our privileged position to ensure that we are sending out to our constituents the important message that we are talking about today. I note the Scottish Government's "Be the Early Bird" campaign, which I think is important. If all of us in this chamber can take the time to promote it, that would be hugely useful.

I am glad that we have had the opportunity to speak about stomas here today, as it is an aspect of healthcare that is not in the public eye. As Emma Harper said, there are many reasons for having a stoma other than having cancer. It is important for us to recognise that.

On the request for shelves in disabled toilets, that is something that I am going to start looking out for. I believe that Sainsbury's has been moving in that direction.

Christine Grahame: In the interests of harmony, I had better discuss that matter with Jackson Carlaw and the rest of the corporate body. However, I think that, collectively, we can address it. I am glad that Gordon MacDonald brought up the issue of shelves, too, because they would be useful to many people who use the disabled toilets, not just those with stoma bags. I want to put that on the record, so that Jackson Carlaw and I will speak to each other afterwards.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A sensible U-turn.

Jenni Minto: I thought, from Jackson Carlaw's reaction earlier, that he would be willing to talk about it. Perhaps he just wishes that he had suggested it as a contribution to the debate.

The speeches that we have heard underline the importance of the support that we can give to those who live with a stoma. As Carol Mochan clearly outlined, there is a network of people supporting stoma patients and their support can come in many guises, from the surgeons and stoma nurses in our hospitals, whom everyone has mentioned, to district nurses, once the patients return home, and from third sector organisations such as Colostomy UK, to family members and partners. Of course, it is important to recognise that those family members and partners need support, too, and need help to understand how their loved one is living with this bag that gives them life, as I think that I heard Edward Mountain describe it earlier.

It is important that those with stomas have access to the support that they need, especially in the early days, as they get used to their stoma.

That support need not be restricted to healthcare professionals, but can come from other people with a stoma, who can be a useful source of advice and encouragement.

I am happy to discuss with the chief nursing officer the points that Carol Mochan and Alexander Stewart raised and ask whether those points can be raised with the directors of nursing to see what progress can be made. I appreciate that Alexander Stewart is no longer in the chamber, but I thank both members for raising those points.

I, too, will be attending the event in the garden lobby and look forward to speaking to the people who will join us there tonight. I thank Edward Mountain for organising that.

In conclusion, it is important that we have debates such as this one. Since I was elected, I have felt that one of the privileges that we have is the ability to use members' business debates to increase awareness across Scotland and further of various things that we can help with. I am clear that stoma formation is an important aspect of healthcare and that its benefits are perhaps not as widely known as they should be. I hope that tonight's debate will have gone some way towards correcting that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes this debate. I suggest that Edward Mountain point his colleague Jackson Carlaw in the direction of the *Official Report* of the debate, and I wish him well with his event this evening.

Meeting closed at 18:11.

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