



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 25 April 2024

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 25 April 2024

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general questions.

Bat Conservation

1. **Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support bat conservation. (S6O-03348)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Net Zero and Energy (Màiri McAllan): All bat species that are found in Scotland are European protected species and we are committed to their protection and conservation. Through legislation, bats receive the highest level of species protection available.

We know that access to a suitable roost is vital, which is why any action that might disturb or damage a bat roost requires a licence from NatureScot. Another key issue that bats face is the loss of suitable habitats. Our commitment to biodiversity regeneration, for example, through the agricultural reform programme, will help improve the availability of foraging and prey for bats with the enhancement of farmland habitats.

Keith Brown: I have recently been contacted by a number of constituents employed by NatureScot as part of a group of 27 bat workers, all of whom I understand are to face redundancy. What consideration has been given to the impact that the redundancy of NatureScot's 27 bat workers, with their considerable experience and expertise, might have on bat conservation in Scotland?

Màiri McAllan: I understand those concerns. However, to clarify, I understand that we are not talking about the loss of 27 full-time bat workers. Although the workers are employed by NatureScot, I understand that the work is demand driven and that, in a year, the collective hours of those workers amount to around 140 days, or half those of a full-time member of staff.

Although NatureScot is looking to maximise efficiencies—which it does while addressing the needs of bats on the one hand and householders on the other—it is engaging with workers, as well as the Bat Conservation Trust, to maintain support for conservation, albeit in a different form than is currently provided, and all in advance of the next

bat season. I can ensure that Keith Brown is kept up to date on the matter.

Speed Limit (20mph)

2. **Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans to deliver a safer speed limit of 20mph by 2025 on all appropriate roads in built-up areas. (S6O-03349)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is committed to implementing 20mph speed limits on appropriate roads by the end of 2025. If someone is hit by a car in a built-up area at 20mph, they are seven times more likely to survive than if they were hit at 30mph.

In the 36-month period after the implementation of the limit, the City of Edinburgh Council has seen a 31 per cent reduction in casualty rates on the 20mph roads. All councils have now submitted their road assessments, identifying the appropriate roads for a speed limit of 20mph—and it is notable that councils are driving that work. A delivery subgroup that consists of officials from Transport Scotland, local authorities and wider road safety partners will oversee implementation and produce a detailed programme of delivery for meeting the 2025 deadline. The programme will contain the actual costs of completing this important road safety initiative.

I would also highlight Highland Council as a successful early adopter of the speed reductions, and communities that do not yet have 20mph speed limits have been asking for them.

Mark Ruskell: I thank the cabinet secretary for the constructive working that we have had on that and many other issues since she came back into Government last year.

From the Borders to the Highlands, communities have welcomed 20mph speed limits, which reduce dangerous speeds, make places feel safer and friendlier and, ultimately, as the cabinet secretary has said, save lives. I welcome the progress that every single council in Scotland is making on those 20mph plans. Is there funding for councils to deliver a co-ordinated national programme to ensure that no community is left behind and that no child in future has to live on a residential street with a dangerous speed limit?

Fiona Hyslop: The Scottish Government has allocated a record £36 million to road safety in order to reduce casualties and risks on our roads, and it is delivering against our priorities in the road safety framework. Local road authorities were asked to identify the number of roads that would be suitable for a 20mph speed limit and to provide the approximate costs of implementation in their respective areas. Highland Council, an early

adopter of the strategy, is currently 62 per cent below the original estimated budget, but I would just say that any speculation based on rough estimates rather than detailed plans would be premature. Once we have obtained detailed costs from local authorities through the delivery subgroup, we will consider what proportion of the overall road safety budget is required this financial year to deliver a co-ordinated programme through to 2025.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I hope that Mark Ruskell gets better soon, because he is obviously not too well.

Can the cabinet secretary confirm that this will be entirely a matter for local councils and that there will not be the same disastrous blanket roll-out of 20mph limits that we have seen in Wales and which has had economically disastrous consequences for that country? Has she done any economic analysis for Scotland in the event that such an approach were to be adopted?

Fiona Hyslop: If the Conservative member had kept up with developments—and having read some of his comments in the papers, I understand that he probably has not—he would know that the difference between us and Wales is that the Welsh Labour Government introduced a blanket 20mph reduction and is hastily introducing retrospective exemptions by council. The Scottish Government, on the other hand, has had up-front exemptions for councils, and those exemptions have been identified and led by councils, with a steady and agreed roll-out of 20mph speed reductions.

There have been positive studies from Wales on the impact of the speed limits. As for the economic development and business impact, high streets have felt the benefit of people being able to shop, walk and enjoy their town centres at leisure. That is certainly the feedback that we are receiving. The member might also want to visit some communities in the Highlands, including Rosemarkie, which campaigned for two decades to get the 20mph limit introduced.

Connectivity (Arran and Cumbrae)

3. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how it will improve connectivity on the islands of Arran and Cumbrae ahead of the busy summer tourist season. (S6O-03350)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I understand that yesterday's news from CalMac Ferries that the expected return date for the MV Caledonian Isles is now August will be frustrating for the community, and I continue to urge CalMac to work closely with both communities to make best use of available vessels

and to provide as much capacity as possible throughout this period of disruption.

I welcome and support the recent statements from Sheila Gilmore on Arran and Angus Campbell of the Cumbrae ferry committee. Both islands remain open for business; there is passenger capacity and there are public transport options for both islands. I appreciate the patience of passengers on other routes that have been disrupted as a consequence of the temporary vessel deployment to help support the islands that the member has identified.

Jamie Greene: It goes without saying that our islands are open for business, but the word "frustration" underestimates the strength of feeling on our islands. They are staring down the barrel of a summer of more chaos on their ferry network. The MV Loch Shira, which services Cumbrae, is out of action, which is causing a lot of consternation on that island. The MV Caledonian Isles will not be around this summer, and the Glen Sannox has been delayed. That simply leaves the MV Isle of Arran, which is a 40-year-old vessel that is prone to breaking down. Is it any wonder that our islanders are nervous about the forthcoming summer season? Perhaps I can give the cabinet secretary an opportunity to apologise in advance for the chaos that her Government is causing.

Fiona Hyslop: Jamie Greene would know, if he had listened to islanders, that they think that it is not necessarily taken as read that the message is that our islands are open for business. It is incumbent on all parties to reiterate that our islands are open for business. As for deployment to support the two islands that the member has mentioned, I said in my original answer that there is capacity and that passengers are able to travel.

This is a challenge, as we undoubtedly know. However, it is also important that we highlight the six new vessels that will be delivered by 2026 to support not just the islands that the member referred to, including Arran, but Islay and Little Minch. That will have an impact across the period. I have been up front in saying that this will be a difficult time, particularly with the dry docking, but let us get behind our islands and say with a united voice that they are open for business.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): We know that repairs to the Caley Isles are more extensive than were previously anticipated, but how can anyone have any confidence in CalMac's repair timescales, which went from March to June and, now, August? How can island businesses plan ahead with such constantly moving goalposts? I am delighted that the minister has reminded people that Arran is open for business, but what practical steps will the Government take to get the message over to the

wider public, who only see bad news on television, hear it on the radio or read it in the newspapers?

Fiona Hyslop: I am acutely aware of the impact that disruptions can have on people and businesses. However, as I have stated, there is capacity, and vessels are being deployed to support those vital areas. The complexity of the Caley Isles vessel design means that repairs must be carried out in a co-ordinated and controlled manner, which requires a highly complex repair effort. I have made it clear to CalMac that it would be helpful for it to be up front and realistic about timescales, as that will help provide confidence about planning.

The island remains open for business, and services will continue with the MV Isle of Arran and MV Alfred. Transport Scotland is urgently considering a request from the Isle of Arran ferry committee and CalMac for increased funding to enable full passenger capacity on the MV Alfred for the period that the MV Caledonian Isles is out of service. I will continue to stress to CalMac the need to clearly communicate the fact that the island remains open for business.

Housing (Scotland) Bill

4. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what role the Housing (Scotland) Bill will play in achieving a more sustainable private rented sector. (S6O-03351)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The Housing (Scotland) Bill includes a package of rented sector reforms that will provide additional rights and protections for tenants that aim to improve their experience of renting a home. A fairer and well-regulated rented sector is good for tenants and responsible landlords. The measures that we have introduced in the bill will support tenants while considering the needs of landlords and will help to drive and deliver a thriving sector that delivers good-quality, affordable options for those who rely on it for a home.

James Dornan: Will the minister outline how the policies in the Housing (Scotland) Bill can benefit tenants by securing them an affordable, quality home and, at the same time, benefit landlords who seek to reinvest in their property?

Paul McLennan: A thriving and fair rented sector allows landlords to provide good-quality homes at a reasonable cost for tenants, which is vital for meeting Scotland's housing needs. I will be taking forward the housing bill and will continue to discuss it with the sector and other stakeholders.

Action Plan to Address Depopulation

5. Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what activity it will undertake regarding its action plan to address depopulation. (S6O-03352)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The publication of our addressing depopulation action plan represents the first phase of a strategic long-term approach to supporting communities that are experiencing population decline, including a range of new commitments aimed at supporting local leadership in responding to these challenges.

We have committed to establishing an addressing depopulation delivery group, working closely with key regional, local and community partners. The group will monitor and evaluate the delivery of the action plan and ensure that valuable lessons and learning are captured, which can be applied more broadly across Scotland to deliver a sustainable solution to the challenges.

Tim Eagle: The action plan's addressing depopulation fund amounts to just £180,000, which is to be split between three local authorities over two years. Given the acute shortage of professionals—doctors, nurses, carers, teachers and more—along with the huge numbers of young people who are moving away from rural areas, is it not the reality that the fund is barely a sticking plaster for those communities that are suffering prolonged loss of local services and an exodus of people?

Paul McLennan: Initially, the fund will make available £180,000, to be split between a prospective three local authorities, as Tim Eagle has said. It will be operational across financial years 2024-25 and 2025-26, and it is intended that the interventions that are taken forward will generate learning that will be more broadly applicable to communities across Scotland.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The minister will be aware that Uist is being classified as a repopulation zone, which will provide temporary accommodation and long-term help to find employment and a permanent home for people moving to the area. The council, the public sector, the private sector and communities are involved in that, and they highlight that housing is the biggest issue. What is the Scottish Government doing to provide homes to both retain and attract populations to our rural and island communities?

Paul McLennan: I visited Uist a number of months ago, when I spoke to communities about not just housing but broader issues. We have announced our "Rural & Islands Housing Action Plan". There are opportunities in relation to renewables, which might bring additional homes to

the area. We are engaging with the likes of Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks on that.

I continue to engage with the local authority on the issue, and I will be happy to engage with the member further on that if she wishes me to do so.

The Presiding Officer: Let us keep questions and responses concise.

Thermo Fisher Scientific

6. Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is taking in response to reports of potential staff redundancies at the Thermo Fisher Scientific site in Paisley. (S6O-03353)

The Minister for Energy, Just Transition and Fair Work (Gillian Martin): I was concerned to learn of the proposed job losses at the Thermo Fisher Scientific site in Inchinnan. My immediate thoughts are with the employees affected by the announcement, who will undoubtedly be very anxious about their jobs and their futures. I wrote to the company to outline my concerns a number of weeks ago, and I spoke to it directly this morning to discuss the situation and how it might redeploy staff, where possible.

Scottish Enterprise has been engaging with the company, and the Scottish Government is on hand to provide support to staff who face redundancy through our initiative for responding to redundancy situations—partnership action for continuing employment. PACE has already engaged with the company.

Ross Greer: I thank the minister for the work that she has done to support Thermo Fisher staff.

Workers at the site have spoken to me about their concern that the real reason for the potential job losses is offshoring. Thermo Fisher plans to move the jobs overseas to cut costs and maximise profits. Although this Parliament has limited powers over employment, there are steps that the Government can take to drive up conditions for workers. The Scottish Greens delivered a raft of new conditions on the money that the Scottish Government spends, which ensure, for example, that more Scottish workers get paid a real living wage.

Given that Thermo Fisher has received £150 million-worth of contracts from the Government in the past five years, will the Scottish Government apply conditions to future contracts to ensure that companies that receive huge sums of public money keep those jobs here, in Scotland?

Gillian Martin: I would like to update Mr Greer and the Parliament on some of the things that came out of this morning's conversation, but first I will address his point about contracts.

Public contracts are awarded to companies in compliance with procurement legislation as well as international agreements such as the World Trade Organization's agreement on Government procurement. Contract terms and conditions are focused on the delivery of the contract and are proportionate and relevant to the contract's subject matter. The fact that procurement rules require equal treatment, transparency and proportionality in public procurement processes precludes the exclusion of companies that conduct their businesses lawfully.

In the meeting that I had this morning, I heard that 20 employees have already been redeployed within the company and that a number of the affected employees have already found jobs outwith Thermo Fisher. All the remaining employees have accepted voluntary redundancy packages from the firm. In addition, the firm has made a commitment to prioritise them for current in-house vacancies. It has around 65 vacancies in Inchinnan and around 30 across the United Kingdom, with remote working being allowed in some instances. It has also contracted a training services company to train the affected workers for recruitment.

“Beyond 2030”

7. Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its plans to achieve net zero by 2045, what its response is to the Electricity System Operator's report “Beyond 2030”. (S6O-03354)

The Minister for Energy, Just Transition and Fair Work (Gillian Martin): The Electricity System Operator's “Beyond 2030” report recommends that significant upgrades to electricity networks are needed across Great Britain, which would bring forward billions of pounds of investment in networks in Scotland.

Expansion of the electricity grid will be crucial in enabling us to deliver energy security, reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, reduce domestic fuel costs and maximise the economic opportunities of Scotland's abundant renewable resources. It is absolutely imperative that communities have the opportunity to engage in the process at an early stage, and developers must take every opportunity to work with those communities well ahead of submitting any applications for consent.

Douglas Lumsden: I think that we all accept that the grid needs upgrading, but we cannot allow the north-east of Scotland to be desecrated to achieve that. Many of my constituents in Turriff and New Deer are alarmed at the scale of industrialisation that is taking place on their doorstep. Can the minister confirm that the devolved Government will use the planning

powers that lie in its hands to stop the overdevelopment of those areas?

Gillian Martin: Mr Lumsden mentioned Turriff and New Deer, whose residents are my constituents as well. I want to engage with them as much as possible to ensure that they have the opportunity to engage with the transmission system operators and the Electricity System Operator about developments in their area, so that their voices are heard.

The Scottish Government and the Scottish ministers have no power to instruct transmission operators to opt for undergrounding cables, for example, and no influence on the applications that they submit. That is up to them. It is incumbent on them to engage with the affected communities and to bring them with them as they put forward their submissions.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Bute House Agreement

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I was going to ask the First Minister when the Cabinet last met and what issues were discussed, but I think that we all know that, so let us look at what Humza Yousaf said about the Scottish National Party's coalition with the Greens. He described it as

"worth its weight in gold".

Today, it has turned to dust.

The Greens have called the ending of the Bute house agreement

"an act of political cowardice"

and have accused Humza Yousaf of "selling out future generations". They said that he has—I am quoting his former colleagues' words—

"broken the bonds of trust with members".

They say that he has "betrayed the electorate" and they have called the current First Minister "weak". Have the Greens, for once, finally got something right?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We have achieved with the Bute house agreement—which, as I said this morning, has served its purpose—a record that I will come to shortly. The Bute house agreement has lasted 969 days or, to put it another way, 19 Liz Trusses.

The record of the Bute House agreement has seen the railways being taken into public ownership, free bus travel for those aged under 22, the banning of the most problematic single-use plastics and an increase in the game-changing Scottish child payment.

Let us remind Douglas Ross that our record is one that we can stand by and can be proud of. Can he say that? It is in stark contrast with the record of a Tory Government that has seen, and overseen, the biggest fall in living standards on record; a Brexit that has been a complete, utter and unmitigated disaster; and the worst cost of living crisis in a generation. That is why the Tories are on the brink of an absolutely almighty thumping from the electorate, and deserve nothing less. *[Applause.]*

Douglas Ross: I hope that the cameras were looking at the Greens, who all had their heads down and were not applauding.

Let us be clear: the Greens never belonged anywhere near the Scottish Government. Humza Yousaf should have ditched that extreme party on

day 1 of his leadership, but he said that they were worth their weight in gold. In his leadership campaign, just over a year ago, he promised to continue the SNP-Green alliance. Just 48 hours ago, he wanted the coalition to continue. This morning he said that it had come to a “natural conclusion”. At what point in the past 48 hours did it come to its natural conclusion, or did Humza Yousaf panic because the extreme Greens were about to jump before he could dump them?

The First Minister: I know that Douglas Ross does not want to talk about the substance of policy—so let us look at the substance of policy. Over the past year, Scotland has been the only part of the United Kingdom to avoid pay-related strike action in the national health service. We have delivered a council tax freeze in every single local authority in Scotland, despite the best efforts of the Conservative Party. We have removed peak fares from our railways and invested record amounts in our NHS, and it is estimated that our actions will lift 100,000 children out of poverty this year.

What has Douglas Ross supported in the past year? Over the past year, Douglas Ross and the Tories have supported the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill. They have supported tax cuts for the rich and a doubling down on austerity that is entrenching more children and more households in poverty. He has supported his colleagues in England in their insulting offer to doctors and nurses, who have been left with no option but to go on strike in NHS England. He has supported huge cuts to Scotland’s capital budget.

I am immensely proud of what my party has achieved not just over the past few years as part of the Bute house agreement, but in the past 17 years in government. I would bet that Douglas Ross and the Conservative Party cannot say the same thing about their party.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister completely avoided saying what happened in that 48-hour period between his saying that he was determined for the coalition deal to continue and saying that it has now reached its “natural conclusion”. However, I think that, based on the answers that we have just heard, he was not practising the lines that he is using today, because they are dismal. There is no defence at all.

We said from the very beginning that it was a coalition of chaos, and it has ended in absolute chaos. Humza Yousaf’s Government is in crisis: it has unravelled. He has—

The First Minister: That is rich coming from you guys. *[Interruption.]*

Douglas Ross: He has abandoned—

The Presiding Officer: First Minister—*[Interruption.]* Colleagues—

Douglas Ross: I think the First—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Colleagues, let us conduct our business in an orderly manner and let us not shout at one another.

Douglas Ross: I think that the First Minister might be a bit tetchy today. I wonder why. He has abandoned the platform that he stood on. He claims that there is now a “new beginning”, but really it is the beginning of the end. Is not Humza Yousaf a lame duck First Minister?

The First Minister: What an astonishing set of accusations to come from a Conservative. It is astonishing for a Conservative to even utter the word “chaos”. His is the party of Boris Johnson, the party of Liz Truss, the party of a Prime Minister who was outlasted by a lettuce, the party of Kwasi Kwarteng, the party of the disastrous mini-budget and the party of Brexit—yet he uttered the word “chaos”. No wonder Douglas Ross is getting redder and redder. The Conservative Party is a party that has decided time and again to attack the most vulnerable in our society. It is a party that, time and again, has denied climate science. It is a party that has inflamed community tensions.

On the Bute house agreement, I say yes—we can point to the fact that we have committed £75 million of the 10-year transition fund for the north-east and Moray. We can point to free bus travel for the under-22s. We can point to the great strides that we have made in lifting children out of poverty. We can point to the fact that we have some of the most generous grants for clean heat across the United Kingdom.

The Tories have not won an election in Scotland in well over half a century. With Douglas Ross in charge, that ain’t changing any time soon.

Douglas Ross: Humza Yousaf described the agreement as a coalition that was

“worth its weight in gold”.

He stood on a platform to continue it, and now that deal is broken. This week, the First Minister jumped before the Green members pushed him. Even his nationalist colleagues do not trust him.

I can confirm today that, on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, I am lodging a motion of no confidence in Humza Yousaf. He is a failed First Minister. He has focused on the wrong priorities for Scotland. He has governed in the SNP’s interests and not in Scotland’s interests. He is unfit for office. Should not this be the end of the road for this weak First Minister?

The First Minister: The Conservatives are nothing if not predictable. Here is an opportunity

for the Opposition parties to show what they are really made of. Do they want to govern in the national interest? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross.

The First Minister: Do they want to come together with ideas? Do they want to collaborate, or are they going to play, as Douglas Ross has demonstrated, political games? They will be judged very poorly for that. If they want to be judged on their record, let me say that we and I stand very proud of our record. Our actions will lift an estimated 100,000 children out of poverty. Our actions have seen us removing peak fares from our railways. Our actions have seen a council tax freeze that helps households in the midst of a cost of living crisis.

I will leave it to Douglas Ross to play the political games that he wants to play. If he wants to put our record and his party's record on the line, let us do that. There is a general election coming this year, and I can guarantee him that the electorate will give the Conservative Party—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: —an almighty thumping and show it the door. It deserves nothing less.

Bute House Agreement

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** In 2021, Nicola Sturgeon said that the Bute house agreement meant

“bold policy action on pressing issues ... A commitment to more affordable housing, a better deal for tenants ... Steps to accelerate our transition to net zero ... and ... A focus on green jobs”.

However, less than three years on, under the current First Minister's weak leadership, the affordable housing budget has been slashed, new rents are rising faster in Scotland than in the rest of the United Kingdom, climate targets have been abandoned and the only two green jobs that have been created—Patrick Harvie's and Lorna Slater's—have come to an end, just like the Bute house agreement. Given the Government's record of failure and incompetence, people across Scotland will be asking, “Why have only two ministers lost their jobs today?”

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Anas Sarwar asked me about a whole range of climate change-related questions. This week, we have seen consent and approval for the world's largest commercial round for floating offshore wind, which puts Scotland at the global forefront of offshore wind development.

Let us look at Labour's credibility when it comes to tackling climate change. It is, of course, the

party that ditched its commitment to invest £28 billion in green energy—giving in to pressure from the Tories and risking the squandering of Scotland's immense renewable energy potential. In Glasgow, Labour used to support a low-emission zone, then it tried to stop one being introduced. It teamed up with the Tories to oppose workplace parking levies. Whether at Westminster, at Holyrood or in councils across the country, Labour is guilty of not just the worst type of political cowardice but hypocrisy and—frankly—climate denial, at a time when the Scottish National Party is taking the action that is necessary.

I say to Anas Sarwar that we will continue to support and take action where necessary to tackle not just the climate crisis but the nature crisis. Would it not be quite something if, as opposed to opposing every measure that we take to tackle the climate crisis, Anas Sarwar supported them and demonstrated that he is serious about tackling the climate emergency?

Anas Sarwar: I am happy for Humza Yousaf to delude himself that everything is going well and that he is having a great week. Keep it up, First Minister.

The First Minister has spent weeks defending what is a discredited Government. He protests now; however, if Humza Yousaf will not listen to me, perhaps he will listen to Humza Yousaf. Just days ago, he said that the Bute house agreement was

“worth its weight in gold”.

[Interruption.] I know that the Deputy First Minister will not want to hear this—

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister was pleading with Green Party members to keep his shambolic Government together. He said:

“I hope that cooperation agreement will continue and I hope that Green members will also see the benefit of that cooperation”,

but now he has been forced into a humiliating U-turn, and he knows it. These are his words:

“I can't imagine being the ... leader of the SNP and the first thing I do is destabilise the government by going into a minority government ... I think that would be a tremendously foolish thing to do.”

Does he feel tremendously foolish today?

The First Minister: Not content with stealing Tory policies, Anas Sarwar is now nicking Tory lines when it comes to the questions that he asks. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: This year, Anas Sarwar talks about ditching principles—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Let me remind Anas Sarwar about his record when it comes to his principles. Anas Sarwar described lifting the cap on bankers' bonuses, when the Tories did it, as "economically illiterate" and morally repugnant; however, when Keir Starmer does it, Anas Sarwar, like a good boy, falls into line. Anas Sarwar used to oppose the two-child limit; he now supports Keir Starmer in retaining it. Anas Sarwar used to believe in progressive taxation; he now supports tax cuts for the wealthy at the expense of public services. Is it not the case that the only principles that Anas Sarwar has are those that Keir Starmer tells him that he is allowed to have?

Anas Sarwar: I am rebuilding my party and looking forward to the next general election. The First Minister is destroying his party and wants to run away from a general election.

The First Minister claims that this is all a sign of strength. The louder he shouts, the weaker he sounds. However, for once, people agree with Lorna Slater—he is weak, hopeless and untrustworthy. The challenges that our country faces have never been so great, but Scotland's Government has never been so poor and its leadership has never been so weak.

One in seven Scots are stuck on a national health service waiting list as the First Minister fails to get a grip on the NHS crisis. Families are struggling to make ends meet, while the Government wastes public money. Green jobs are going elsewhere, while the First Minister scraps Scotland's climate targets. The people of Scotland can see that the SNP has lost its way—it is weak, divided, incompetent and putting party before country.

The people of Scotland did not vote for this First Minister. The people of Scotland did not vote for this mess and this chaos. Is it not time to end the circus and call an election?

The First Minister: The country will be going to the polls—I hope sooner rather than later—in a general election. Here are the messages that each of our parties will be able to take. I will be able to look in the whites of the eyes of the people of Scotland, on every doorstep in the country, and say that people should vote for a party whose values are the values of the people of Scotland. Our actions are estimated to have lifted 100,000 children out of poverty. We are a party that has chosen investment in the NHS over tax cuts for the wealthy. This nation is the only one in the United Kingdom that has not had its junior doctors or nurses going on strike.

Anas Sarwar's party is the party that would lift the cap on bankers' bonuses but retain the cap on child benefits. It is a party that wants to retain the rape clause. It is a party that wants to spend billions of pounds on the obscenity of nuclear weapons, not on reducing household poverty. It is a party that wants to keep Scotland out of the European Union.

Anas Sarwar used to believe in many of the values that this Government believes in. He has flip-flopped, dumped and ditched those principles because his bosses in London have told him to do so. That is the height of hypocrisy, and the people of Scotland will see through it.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-03043)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Tuesday.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The two partners to the failed agreement are at each other's throats. They are now trying to blame each other, but in reality they have both failed the people of Scotland. Together, they have cut our national health service off at the knees, butchered the housing budget, junked climate targets and made life harder for business. Islanders still do not have the ferries that they desperately need, and Scottish schools are tumbling down the international rankings.

The First Minister is ditching things left, right and centre. Two clowns have left the clown car, but the circus continues. [*Interruption.*] We do not just need—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Mr Cole-Hamilton, I remind you of the requirement to treat all members with courtesy and respect.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I apologise, Presiding Officer.

We do not just need an end to the Bute house agreement; we need an end to this entire Government. When will Humza Yousaf finally look himself in the mirror and say, "I am the problem. It is me"?

The First Minister: I saw that that got a thumping endorsement from the four Liberal Democrat MSPs in the chamber. Maybe I should listen to what Alex Cole-Hamilton has to say because, if there is a lesson in relation to coalitions and co-operation agreements, we should probably remember the lesson of the Liberal Democrats. When they entered into a disastrous coalition with the Conservatives, they ushered in 14 years of austerity, and to this day, people are suffering the consequences. That is why Alex Cole-Hamilton leads a party that could not even field a five-a-side football team.

What we have achieved as part of the Bute house agreement in the past year, but also through 17 years in government, is that Scotland is the only part of the United Kingdom to have avoided pay-related strike action in the NHS. We have delivered a council tax freeze that is helping households up and down the country. We have removed peak fares on our railways and invested record amounts in the NHS and, through our actions, we are lifting 100,000 children out of poverty.

When the general election is called by the Conservatives, we will take our record proudly to every single doorstep in the country. I do not think that Alex Cole-Hamilton can do the same.

Medicines (Availability)

4. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on NHS Scotland's ability to treat patients, in light of the reported scarcity of life-saving medicines in the United Kingdom due to Brexit. (S6F-03047)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I know that reports of medicine shortages are concerning for patients and their families, so I thank Kevin Stewart for raising that important question. Although the shortages are caused by several factors, such as manufacturing issues and an increase in global demand, a recent report by the Nuffield Trust makes it abundantly clear that the situation has undoubtedly been exacerbated by Brexit and the associated loss of European supply chains and authorisations. Although the supply of medicines is reserved to the UK Government, I reassure members that NHS Scotland has robust processes in place to manage shortages when they arise, and in most instances alternative products can be prescribed. I encourage anyone who is experiencing difficulties with shortages to speak to their doctor or pharmacist. We continue to press the UK Government, the industry and health boards to find a lasting solution to minimise the impact on patients.

Kevin Stewart: The Nuffield Trust's research has revealed that in the UK there are shortages of life-saving medicines such as antibiotics, epilepsy treatments, medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and vital chemotherapy drugs such as cisplatin and carboplatin, all of which have been exacerbated by Brexit and the UK's broken supply chain. Will the First Minister once again assure members, and the public, that the Scottish Government is doing everything within its powers to alleviate shortages and ensure that folks get the medicines that they need? Does he share my view that the situation is yet another symptom of the sickness that is broken Brexit Britain?

The First Minister: Yes, I absolutely agree with Kevin Stewart. That is just another example of the disastrous impacts of a Brexit that the people of Scotland simply did not vote for. I want to reassure members and reiterate to them that NHS Scotland has robust processes in place to manage shortages when they arise. In most instances, alternative products can be prescribed. Scottish Government officials are regularly updated on any supply disruptions and will provide advice to the national health service in Scotland on options to address any shortages that might arise. The chief pharmaceutical officer for Scotland is a member of the UK-wide medicines shortage response group, which has been set up to identify and co-ordinate responses to any medicine shortages across the UK, and to provide advice to clinicians on alternative therapeutic options. As the pricing and supply of medicines are matters that are reserved to the UK Government, we will continue to press it to find a lasting solution to minimise the impact of medicine shortages on patients.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Last Saturday, campaigners in Portree protested about failures to deliver in Skye, Lochalsh and south-west Ross the recommendations of the Ritchie report on health provision. They are calling for 24/7 urgent care to be restored at Portree hospital as a matter of priority and for the beds that have been lost there to be reinstated. In recognising that NHS Highland has been unable to deliver on those recommendations, will the First Minister—or his health secretary, if he is still in place—agree to meet campaigners in Portree to hear at first hand their frustrations and concerns about what the on-going delays in restoring services mean for families and communities in north Skye, and to tell them how his Government will ensure that those recommendations are delivered?

The First Minister: I am not sure what that has to do with medicine shortages, but on Jamie Halcro Johnston's point about services, I will ensure that the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care continues to engage with members and with NHS Highland.

I am aware of the issue from my time as health secretary. I assure both Jamie Halcro Johnston and his constituents in Skye that we have provided an increase to NHS Highland's budget and a record amount of more than £19.5 billion of funding to the NHS. That is because we prioritised investment in the NHS and public services as opposed to tax cuts for the wealthy, in stark contrast to the approach of the UK Conservative Government. I will ask the health secretary to continue to engage with Jamie Halcro Johnston and NHS Highland.

2030 Emissions Target

5. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the First Minister what impact he anticipates the Scottish Government's decision to remove the target to reduce emissions by 75 per cent by 2030 will have on infrastructure projects throughout Scotland. (S6F-03053)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Liam Kerr has a brass neck to raise infrastructure projects with me when his Tory colleagues in Westminster are responsible for a £1.3 billion cut to our capital budget to 2027-28.

We know that investment in Scotland's infrastructure is vital for our sustainable economic future, and investment in net zero brings huge employment and economic growth opportunities. That is why, last week, we affirmed the Scottish Government's unwavering commitment to deliver net zero by 2045 and announced a whole new package of climate actions to strengthen our existing bold measures to help achieve and deliver net zero. Those include a commitment to publish a new route map for the delivery of approximately 24,000 additional electric vehicle charge points by 2030 through a mix of public and private finance, and our budget has committed substantial funding towards delivery of our climate change goals.

Liam Kerr: The First Minister is ignorant of having the largest cash-terms block grant in history. One infrastructure project that was promised in 2011 to stimulate the economy, reduce emissions and stop the senseless carnage was the dualling of the A96. The Green Party demanded an unnecessary climate review to stall and prevent that, which, having cost £5 million so far and despite £37 million already having been spent on preparatory work, will not report until the end of the summer. Now that the beyond-credible targets and the economically illiterate Greens have been jettisoned, can the First Minister confirm that all barriers have finally been removed from fully dualling the A96?

The First Minister: Liam Kerr talks about an "unnecessary climate review". That is incredible language, given that 2023 was the hottest year on record, and with extreme weather events if not by the day then by the week or by the month right across the world, including here in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Liam Kerr talks about an "unnecessary climate review" in the face of all that evidence. That is why the Conservative Party is fast turning into a party of climate deniers, when what we need is further climate action, which we will promise to bring forward. The reality of the situation is that, in real terms, there will be a £1.3 billion cut to our capital budget over the coming year.

We will continue to invest in infrastructure right across Scotland, as we have done in the north-east, be that through the Aberdeen western peripheral route, the new station at Kintore and health infrastructure such as the Baird family hospital and other infrastructure projects. If Liam Kerr had any influence whatever, he would be telling his Conservative colleagues in Westminster to overturn the disgraceful £1.3 billion capital cut.

"Scoping a Domestic Legal Framework for Ecocide in Scotland"

6. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I refer to my voluntary entry in the register of members' interests, as I receive support from Stop Ecocide International.

To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the report, "Scoping a Domestic Legal Framework for Ecocide in Scotland", which was published by the Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland. (S6F-03060)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): The Scottish Government is committed to protecting our natural environment to ensure that there are appropriate legal consequences for those who cause significant damage. I know that Monica Lennon is also committed to that objective.

I welcome the report, which is a valuable contribution to the debate on how the law can best achieve the goal. The report demonstrates the complexity of considering a standalone criminal offence of ecocide, and it will take time to consider the recommendations. The Scottish Government's starting point will be to consider the new European environmental crime directive, which requires the introduction of new qualified offences where damage comparable to ecocide has been caused. It is our consistent aim to remain aligned, where appropriate, with developments in European Union law and EU environmental standards.

Monica Lennon: I thank the First Minister for his response; it is good to get that on the record. I am grateful to members across the Parliament for their constructive cross-party engagement with my proposed member's bill on ecocide law.

Preventing severe environmental harm is vital to protect nature and the climate, to support a just transition for workers and communities and to help our economy deliver for the people of Scotland. In these uncertain times, when climate action is needed more than ever, will the First Minister confirm that his Government is committed to working with me and all parties and stakeholders on the contribution that ecocide prevention can make, including by continuing the positive dialogue that I have had with ministers on my proposed bill?

The First Minister: Yes, I can commit to continuing to engage constructively with Monica Lennon on that important proposed member's bill. It is important to say that some challenges have been aired in relation to designing a new criminal offence, and they have to be considered.

I note that the Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland's report concludes:

"there are reasons for Scotland to be cautious before simply integrating"

the internationally recognised

"definition into domestic law."

I know that Monica Lennon is very aware of that. We are working through those issues.

I look forward to seeing the detail of Monica Lennon's draft bill. We continue, of course, to commit to working constructively with her on the detail.

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

Bute House Agreement

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Who does the First Minister think that he has pleased most today? Is it Douglas Ross, Fergus Ewing or Alex Salmond? More to the point, which of them does he think he can rely on for a majority in Parliament now?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Obviously, Patrick Harvie and I spoke this morning. I go back to the points and comments that I made this morning. I thank him and Lorna Slater for their contribution to the Government and to this country. Both parties take great pride in what the Bute house agreement has achieved in almost three years. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: However, it is time for the Scottish National Party to govern as a minority Government and to reach out on an issue-by-issue basis to other political parties across the chamber in the best interests of this country. I believe that many issues unite us. One of the issues that unite the SNP and the Green Party, for example, and one that we will never demur from in any way, shape or form is that we think that all decisions about Scotland are best made by the people of Scotland.

Freedom of Movement (European Union)

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): The United Kingdom Government's decision to reject out of hand the European Union's youth mobility offer to make it easier for people aged between 18

and 30 in the UK to study and work abroad in the wake of Brexit shines a dark light on its ideological obsession with a hard Brexit and a perverse desire to submit to the right wing, with Labour hellbent on an outright outwinging of the Tories on Brexit. Does the First Minister share my concerns about that, and will he make it clear today that the Scottish Government will continue to fight for the restoration of freedom of movement so that people across the UK can continue to study and work in the EU?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Anas Sarwar on Labour's front bench is getting extremely agitated by that question—and no wonder. That is because he is embarrassed by Labour's dismal response to the youth mobility scheme. I would expect a Tory UK Government to completely reject the European Commission's sensible proposal to negotiate a youth mobility scheme. For Labour to do that is just another example of how it is moving away from its principles. What on earth does the party even stand for if it will not stand for a youth mobility scheme with the European Commission?

The ending of free movement has again damaged the future of our young people in Scotland, which is a part of the United Kingdom that did not vote for Brexit. We have long argued that our young people should enjoy the opportunities that are offered by mobility, such as study and work experience. We urge the UK Government to respond positively to that proposal and to negotiate a deep and generous agreement with the European Union.

Railway Station (Winchburgh)

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Last week, the First Minister's Government scrapped its commitment to reducing carbon emissions by 75 per cent by 2030. The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Net Zero and Energy stated:

"we accept the CCC's recent rearticulation that this Parliament's interim 2030 target is out of reach. We must now act to chart a course to 2045 at a pace and on a scale that are feasible, fair and just."—[*Official Report*, 18 April 2024; c 64.]

With that in mind, the residents of Winchburgh presented a petition with more than 2,000 signatures to the First Minister's Government last week that asked for a train station to be built that serves their town and the surrounding area and which could take almost 500,000 car journeys off the road. Will the First Minister's Government now take the lead and back and build a station at Winchburgh?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We have a proud record of building infrastructure on our railways. However, that job becomes markedly more difficult when Sue Webber's party takes a

hatchet to our capital budget by cutting it by £1.3 billion over the next few years.

When it comes to ensuring that we take action to tackle the climate crisis, it would be exceptionally helpful if the Conservatives did not oppose every single measure that we bring forward to tackle the climate crisis. Of course, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport or other members of the Government—the cabinet secretary may well be recused from the Winchburgh decision—will look at the petition that has been lodged, but I say once again to Sue Webber that our investment in infrastructure is very much hampered by the fact that her Conservative Government has instructed a £1.3 billion capital cut in real terms to our budget.

Care Workers

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Today, we have with us in the public gallery care workers who are bringing the Scottish Trades Union Congress missing millions campaign to Parliament. Can the Government hear the workers outside, and answer them: does the Scottish Government support the STUC's missing millions campaign, and will the Government ever deliver for our essential care workers?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): My colleagues the health secretary and Maree Todd will both be meeting care workers. We meet care workers regularly; that is why, as part of the budget—which I think that Carol Mochan voted against—we instructed another pay rise for social care workers, to £12 an hour.

What I have not seen from the Labour Party in any budget negotiations, in particular over the past year, is one costed suggestion for how it would increase the pay of social care workers. In fact, I do not think that it has made one single positive suggestion about how we would invest in social care. We will continue to invest in, and engage with, our social care workers. That is why the national care service, and getting some support from the Labour Party around that, would be most helpful, because it will improve the terms and conditions of social care workers across the country.

Councillors' Pay

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): What is the Government's reaction to the recommendation that local councillors should be paid £24,500 from 1 April?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We will look at and consider the recommendations of the independent Scottish local authorities remuneration committee, in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. It is

important that appropriate consideration and deliberation is supplied, and a response will be published in due course. I can confirm that councillors have already received a 6.2 per cent uplift for 2024-25 through the current legislation.

I refer members to my entry in the register of ministerial interests, as my wife is currently a serving councillor.

Apprenticeship Funding

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): On a visit to Prestwick airport by the Economy and Fair Work Committee this week, we learned that the engineering cluster that includes the airport and surrounding companies is burgeoning at the seams and is desperate to expand. However, there is a severe shortage of apprentices. That is also the message in respect of potential investment from XLCC at Hunterston.

Ayrshire College is very keen to deliver the required apprenticeships, but it has had its apprenticeship funding cut. There is now £84 million of public funding put back into the pot with the demise of the Mangata Networks proposal at Prestwick; that was an investment from the Ayrshire growth deal. Would it not make sense to redeploy that money through the regional skills initiative, invest in the Ayrshire College apprenticeship programme and solve the issues that Ayrshire's engineering works are facing?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Brian Whittle raises a very important point, and I am grateful to him for raising it in the chamber. With regard to the Ayrshire growth deal, that will be a decision for all the partners as part of the deal. I thank Brian Whittle for making a suggestion that is well worth exploring, in particular in relation to funding for apprentices. We know how valuable apprentices are, and how valuable the apprenticeship scheme is. I promise him that we will take a look at that suggestion, and I would encourage local partners, as part of the Ayrshire growth deal, to take a look at it, too, and we can see whether we can find a resolution.

Employability Funding

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): In recent days, there have been worrying reports with regard to Scottish Government delays in allocating employability funding. Failure to confirm funds to local authorities for the no one left behind programme is having a devastating impact on training organisations. Across the sector, 40 people have already been made redundant, and many more are at risk if funding is not released quickly.

Skills and employability systems should be about creating opportunities, not making people

redundant. What commitment can the First Minister give to training providers, and to those whom they seek to help, as to when that crucial funding will be released?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I will take an immediate look at the particular example that Daniel Johnson has raised in the chamber. We have had a good record on employability grants over the years regarding the apprenticeships and the employability opportunities that have been created, in particular for some of the most marginalised groups in our society. It is important that those grant letters get out of the door as soon as possible so that the situation that Daniel Johnson mentions does not transpire. We will take a look at the specific example that he has raised, and I will ensure that the appropriate cabinet secretary writes to him.

Wood-burning Stoves

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): There is a well-established business in West Linton that supplies log-burning stoves and accessories. I am very concerned that, after 30 years, the business may very well be under threat. I understand that clean, eco-designed wood-burning stoves that use locally supplied wood can be used in conjunction with other renewable energy heating options, and that that position is supported by a Government study that was done a few years ago. Will the First Minister ask the appropriate cabinet secretary to revisit that study, as the issue may affect other small rural businesses?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I will ensure that we continue to keep those regulations under review. I say to Christine Grahame that there are appropriate exemptions in place and we take account of unique circumstances, particularly in rural and island Scotland. I will ask the cabinet secretary to look at the detailed case that Christine Grahame has raised, and to write to her to provide an update.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (Rural Areas)

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): "The Rural Divide: the realities of mental healthcare for children and young people in rural Scotland" is a new report by the charity Change Mental Health that reveals the stark inequalities that are facing children and young people in rural Scotland when they access mental health care services. In NHS Dumfries and Galloway, some 44 per cent of children and young people were not seen by child and adolescent mental health services within 18 weeks of referral. The report shows us, once again, that children and young

people in some of the most rural areas are not getting the support that they need, when they need it.

The First Minister has overseen the closure of our rural hospitals and our rural maternity services and the industrialisation of our rural landscape. His Government has repeatedly failed rural Scotland and, now, it is letting down young folk in our rural communities. Will the First Minister commit to delivering targeted action to tackle those significant rural mental health inequalities?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Under this Government, we have doubled investment in mental health and ensured that we have recruited record levels of staff into CAMHS and mental health services. We have a proud track record of investing in mental health. We know that there are challenges, particularly as our services recover post the global pandemic. Organisations such as Change Mental Health are very important across the country. I will ask the minister who has responsibility for mental health to write to the member about the actions that we are taking nationally as well as locally to support people who are facing difficult challenges with their mental health.

Scottish Income Tax (Effect on Migration)

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): New research from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has shown that, in the period after Scottish income tax was introduced, thousands more taxpayers moved to Scotland than those who left each year. That seems to be somewhat at odds with the warnings from the Tories and even some Labour members that progressive taxation would deter taxpayers from coming to live here. Does the First Minister agree that that research confirms that Scotland is an attractive place to live and work, with a progressive approach to taxation that raises additional funds for public services?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I agree with that. It flies in the face of some of the rhetoric that we hear from the Opposition, who claim that the fact that we have progressive taxation would somehow lead to an exodus of Scots. HMRC data has shown that more people from the rest of the United Kingdom want to come to Scotland as opposed to those who are leaving Scotland. I can tell you one thing, Presiding Officer: the Opposition absolutely hates that fact.

The simple fact is that people make choices about where to live and work based on a range of factors, not just tax. In Scotland, people have access to a range of services that simply do not exist in other parts of the UK, such as free prescriptions and free access to higher education. The latest HMRC data confirms that, on average, 4,200 more taxpayers have come to Scotland from

the rest of the UK than have left since 2017-18. In 2021-22, which is the latest year for which data is available, net migration of taxpayers improved across all tax bands—which is crucial—and £200 million in additional taxable income was brought into Scotland. It is for others to set out how slashing taxes and running down our public services would make Scotland a better place to live, work, study and do business in. I do not think that that is the case.

Workplace Racial Abuse

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Yesterday, I chaired a meeting of campaigners and business representatives on anti-racism in the workplace. I was disappointed to hear that so many people in our businesses and public organisations felt that they were unable to report the racial abuse that they face at work. Can the First Minister outline what measures the Scottish Government is taking to empower people to report racial abuse in the workplace?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I thank Foyso Choudhury for raising an exceptionally important question, and for the time that he spent on the issue before he was a member of the Scottish Parliament, when he consistently raised such issues as chair of the Edinburgh and Lothians Regional Equality Council and other such organisations. He has been a tireless campaigner against racism and hatred of any form over many years.

On the actions that we are taking, I will ensure that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs writes to Foyso Choudhury with the detail. For example, third-party reporting centres are really important, but there has been some misinformation and disinformation over the weeks and months about why they exist. They are important because some people might not quite feel as confident reporting directly to the police. We have to remove and dismantle those barriers where they exist, and third-party reporting centres can play a role in that.

I will ask the appropriate cabinet secretary to write to Foyso Choudhury with the detail of what we are doing so that everybody feels safe in the workplace to be able to report racism, wherever it exists.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. The next item of business is a members' business debate in the name of Liam Kerr. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so before the debate begins.

12:46

Meeting suspended.

12:47

On resuming—

Railway Stations (North of Central Belt)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I ask those leaving the gallery to do so as quickly and as quietly as possible. The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-12727, in the name of Liam Kerr, on the need for new railway stations north of the central belt. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the recent Nestrans report that recommends that the potential new railway stations at Cove and Newtonhill should undergo a detailed appraisal; notes the view that there is a desperate need for these communities to be linked up with the rail network after, it considers, years of transport funding being directed to the Central Belt; understands that over 1,550 people have signed a petition calling on the stations to be opened, and thanks the Campaign for North East Rail and local residents for their tireless campaigning on this issue.

12:47

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank colleagues from across the chamber who have supported my motion.

In 1956, the communities of Cove and Newtonhill lost their stations, but in recent years, both places have expanded exponentially, such that Newtonhill now has a population of more than 3,000 and Cove has a population of more than 8,000. Surrounding areas, including the lovely new town at Chapelton, swell those numbers even further, yet Newtonhill remains connected to Aberdeen principally by the A92, and Cove by the A956. There is a far-from-regular or cheap, and sometimes unreliable, bus service, which takes nearly an hour to get from Newtonhill to Aberdeen, or at least half an hour from Cove.

It is no surprise that, when it comes to travelling between Newtonhill or Cove and Aberdeen, the number of people who use a car is higher than the national average, as hard-working families are forced to rely on their cars to commute, to get to school or college and to see family and friends. Now, they are faced with a massively unpopular low-emission zone in Aberdeen, random new bus gates and new parking charges when they get into the city.

The Campaign for North East Rail's Jordan Jack called it right when he said:

“Building new stations for Cove and Newtonhill will give residents a sustainable travel choice while halving travel time and will open new economic opportunities.”

That is indeed so. Let us think of the environmental benefits as fewer people drive to the city and, instead, jump on a train that takes them right to the heart of Union Street, where we so badly need to increase footfall. That would decrease car use in a context in which the Scottish Government acknowledges that it is not really sure how to reduce car kilometres by 20 per cent, and it would help to achieve what I think the ill-thought-through LEZ will not.

Let us think of the economic benefits of more people looking to live in those fine communities, while also working, shopping and schooling in the city. As the North East of Scotland Transport Partnership points out, the two new stations could service thousands of potential passengers each day, travelling to Dundee and the central belt. Russell Borthwick, the chief executive of the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce, told me just this week that the proposals to open Cove and Newtonhill stations would allow many people to access Aberdeen city centre for work and leisure at a time when measures to restrict car access continue to be extended.

Just yesterday, the Railway Industry Association, which represents the vital supply chain within the rail industry, told me that greater investment in the rail network would help to secure more jobs for the north-east and beyond and, thus, more spending in north-east communities. The association reminded me that railway industry jobs have among the best training and highest standards in the United Kingdom.

Of course, there is the health and wellbeing angle, as more people use sustainable public transport and active travel. Indeed, the Nestrans report specifically highlights opportunities to provide facilities such as secure cycle parking, cycle hire and electric vehicle charging points.

It is important to ensure that those communities want new stations, and 95 per cent of Cove residents and 90 per cent of Newtonhill residents who took part in a 2022 study say that they would like to see a station in their area, and almost half of the population who responded to the study said that new stations at Cove and Newtonhill would encourage them to use the train more.

The petition that I launched last summer in both localities has more than 1,500 signatures. Even Scottish National Party councillor Miranda Radley agrees. When she was campaigning to get elected to the council in 2022, she said:

“A train station in Cove just makes sense”,

and promised in her literature that, if elected, she would help to bring forward the delivery of a

station in Cove. I have recently written to her and to the council leader, Christian Allard, to ask how they have enacted and are delivering on that promise. To date, I have not had an answer, but I look forward to receiving that promptly.

The support is there but what about the practicalities? The Nestrans report quotes £40 million for two stations. That is a lot of money, although it is only about 10 per cent of the cost of two new SNP ferries. However, the people of the north-east will remember that in 2016, the SNP Government promised us that it would invest £200 million in north-east rail. Specifically, Nestrans notes that that funding

“may be an opportunity to introduce new stations on the line between Aberdeen and Laurencekirk.”

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Does Liam Kerr have any confidence that the £200 million will actually be spent by 2026, as was the commitment?

Liam Kerr: I am not sure that I do have confidence in that because only 3 per cent of the funding has been delivered so far, about eight years on. The SNP Government has recently suggested that the pledge is under review, so perhaps the minister can allay those concerns in her closing speech.

However, the minister will be pleased to note that Nestrans also suggests that

“external funding may be available for this package subject to the funding application process”

and that both stations are

“on an existing line and would be serviced using existing services and therefore operational costs are likely to be low.”

The people of the north-east have watched, somewhat perplexed, as the likes of Reston in the Borders, East Linton in East Lothian and Levenmouth in Fife have got excellent new lines and stations. When SNP Angus Council decided to snub the opportunity of £18 million of free money to extend the Caledonian railway in Brechin, people began to suspect that that was yet another central belt thing.

However, the Government has a chance to allay those fears. The people of the north-east have spoken, with more than 1,500 local people signing my petition. Nestrans is on board, and Cove Rangers, whose team is upgrading its stadium to increase capacity, backs the petition. We know the environmental, economic and social benefits that proper public transport and stations would bring. The Parliament has shown its support through signatures to my motion, and there is cross-party support.

I will finish with the words of Keith Moorhouse, resident of Cove and chair of Cove Rangers.

Speaking about those two stations specifically, he said:

“It is a no-brainer, the more and more rail links you put in and the more options you give people to travel the better for everyone”,

and

“just get a move on”.

Amen to that, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

12:55

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I thank Liam Kerr for bringing the motion to the chamber. I think that we will have a fairly good debate around all of this today.

I should probably put on the record that I was the chair of Nestrans between 2007 and 2011. I am always pleased to see the good work that emanates from the offices of Nestrans, and I pay tribute to the people of the organisation for the report.

During the time of the SNP Government, we have seen new stations in the north-east that have made a real difference to the communities of the region. Although there was some scepticism about it, the station at Laurencekirk opened and patronage was—if I remember rightly—more than 80 per cent greater than had been anticipated from the reports. I am pleased, too, that we have recently seen the station at Kintore open, which, again, has made a real difference to people.

Liam Kerr is right to highlight the communities of Newtonhill and Cove, which, as he has said, have grown in numbers. However, there are other opportunities in the north-east. I put on the record my thanks to the Campaign for North East Rail for the work that it has done. It has looked not only at the opportunities for new stations on existing lines, but also at what can be done to reopen the lines north—the Formartine and Buchan lines—that should never have been closed, just as the stations at Cove and Newtonhill should not have been closed in 1956, as Mr Kerr has mentioned.

The Government has put a huge amount of money into the infrastructure of the north-east. We have the western peripheral route, thanks to the investment from the SNP Government, and we have the investments that I have mentioned in relation to Kintore and Laurencekirk. To our advantage has been the opening of other stations on the Aberdeen to Inverness line, such as the one at Inverness airport, which opened recently.

Whether we be from the north-east or not, we should all take cognisance of the investment that the Scottish Government has made in our

railways. The banner headline of the most recent *Railwatch* magazine, which was published this month, reads “Scotland shows the way”. Scotland does show the way, with five successful rail station openings in the past three years: Reston opened in 2022, Inverness airport and East Linton in 2023 and, later this year, we will see the opening of the line to Cameron Bridge and Levenmouth, with new stations there.

Scotland does show the way, but we could do so much better for the north-east, for the folk of Cove, Newtonhill and maybe even Kittybrewster and Bucksburn, if we had more money to spend on infrastructure. Sadly, we have seen a massive reduction in our capital budget from the UK Tory Government, which is money that could be spent on Cove and Newtonhill, but unfortunately is not there.

To end on a lighter note, we in the north-east of Scotland recognise the growth in some of those areas and the difficulties that the closing of railways has caused in the past. It is time to invest in our infrastructure and to look at what can be done not only in Cove and Newtonhill but—as with the Borders railway and Levenmouth station—to open up new lines to the north of Aberdeen.

13:00

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank my colleague and train geek—I know that he will not mind me calling him that—Liam Kerr for bringing the debate to the chamber. This debate is vital for the people of the north-east to force the SNP Government to look beyond the needs of the central belt and towards those of my constituents in the north-east. Perhaps with the SNP’s new-found freedom, having dropped the Green extremists, we can hope for more.

My constituents are all too aware of poor access to railway services in the north-east, whether that relates to the frequency of trains, the accessibility of stations, the reliability of services or the time that it takes to make a journey. All those areas require improvement, and I welcome the valuable work of bodies such as Nestrans, which is putting forward sensible solutions to the challenges of public transport. I would like to know the minister’s response to its excellent preliminary appraisal of the Aberdeen to Laurencekirk multimodal transport corridor.

We have seen the difference that new stations can make. In 2023, a new station opened on the Borders railway at Reston, and there has been growth in that community before and since, with other services such as on-demand bus transport feeding into stations and their links. It is estimated that the economic benefit of that development for

the local community will be well over £7 per every £1 spent.

We have seen that that is possible, and we want to bring the same success to the north-east, including to communities such as Cove and Newtonhill. Moving ahead with those projects would make a huge difference to people who live in and around those communities, and to the centre of Aberdeen, as Liam Kerr said. More people would have an easy option to come and enjoy what the city centre has to offer.

A survey was done in Cove, and the results were telling. Sixty-nine per cent of respondents said that there are journeys that they would like to make by rail but cannot due to the lack of a rail link. Businesses and individuals in those communities are overreliant on their cars.

If the Government is serious about reaching net zero and actually meeting some of its targets, investment is needed in such schemes, but why stop there? The Campaign for North East Rail has been calling for the east coast line to be extended up to Ellon, Peterhead and Fraserburgh. The campaigners have been doing an excellent job, and I hope that this devolved Government will give the project real consideration in the years ahead.

Màiri McAllan said only the other day that this devolved Government had missed most of its net zero targets. Here is the opportunity to demonstrate commitment to the north-east, commitment to net zero, commitment to multimodal transport systems and commitment to our railway network, which is in dire need of investment.

When it comes to investment in the rail network, we must not forget about the promise that the Government made back in 2016. That commitment was to spend £200 million to reduce rail journey times between Aberdeen and the central belt by 20 minutes by 2026. Eight years down the line, very little has been spent and no journey time improvements have been made. That, like other grand announcements that have been made by the SNP, seems like a lot of hot air, and everyone in the chamber knows that there is not a cat in hell's chance of that commitment being delivered—another promise broken by the SNP.

If we can do it in the Borders, we can do it in the north-east. I am proud to support my colleague Liam Kerr in bringing forward this debate, because only the Scottish Conservatives are standing up for the north-east and talking about the issues that are at the heart of economic growth and securing jobs, stability and the future of our residents.

13:04

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I congratulate Liam Kerr on bringing this important issue to the chamber. I welcome the Nestrans report. The campaign for new stations in Newtonhill and Cove shows that people across Scotland are crying out for improved rail connections.

Rail can do so much for communities; it can provide a vital link for people who live in rural areas. The elderly and people who are not able to drive due to disability cannot rely on irregular and lengthy bus services. Tourists, who can bring so much money into communities outside the central belt, use trains to see our country, and the ability to travel by train easily will play a massive part in reducing car usage on our path to net zero.

Much of Scotland is poorly served by rail. The north-east, in particular, is underserved when compared with other regions, yet it has been so important to Scotland's economy through agriculture, its natural resources and fishing, to name just a few. It is being neglected, yet the demand is there. More than 225,000 journeys were made in the first three years following a new station being opened in Kintore, in Aberdeenshire. Imagine what more investment could do.

I join members in thanking the Campaign for North East Rail for campaigning for greater rail connections in the north-east. Local community campaigns for new rail are important in bringing attention to underserved areas. For example, I recently joined residents of Winchburgh, a village in West Lothian, in delivering a petition to the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, Jim Fairlie, that calls on the Scottish Government to name a date for the opening of a train station there. Residents and developers were granted planning permission in principle for the station 12 years ago, but the fast-growing village is losing out.

The success of the campaign for stations in Cove and Newtonhill in gaining feasibility studies through Liam Kerr's petition, which was signed by more than 1,500 people, gives me confidence that it is possible for progress to be made.

New rail stations prevent the isolation of people living in our rural communities and bring tourists to places that, previously, they would have ignored. Scotland has great potential for new railway stations all over the country, whether that be in Winchburgh, Fraserburgh or Cove. Rail travel is good for the environment, good for the economy and good for people. I welcome the motion and hope for a successful outcome from the studies.

13:07

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I apologise to members, because I might have to leave before the conclusion of the debate due to a previous commitment. I thank Liam Kerr for securing the debate. As north-east MSPs, we have a common interest in this issue.

The Nestrans announcement that new rail stations at Cove and Newtonhill are to be “examined in more detail” as part of the work to develop sustainable travel between Aberdeen and Laurencekirk is extremely welcome. As Liam Kerr has outlined, Cove is a residential area on the south side of Aberdeen, and Newtonhill is a commuter town that is a little further south. Both are in my constituency and, historically, both had train stops that served the local populations.

I have supported these improvements since I was a councillor for the Torry/Ferryhill ward of Aberdeen City Council. Indeed, I campaigned for the reinstatement of the train stops as part of my election campaign for the Scottish Parliament. I have since remained focused and active on the issue and, more recently, I wrote to the now cabinet secretary seeking her support on the matter. I know that Mr Kerr has been equally passionate and active on the issue.

The question to be asked and answered is why there is such consensus on the issue. The Parliament is, of course, aware of the critical role that the north-east plays in our national economy. A skilled workforce is spread across a number of communities that were once stand-alone small towns and villages and are now home to considerably bigger populations. Those communities continue to grow, with further development situated in or near them.

Regional transport links to the south of Aberdeen are primarily road based, with the exception of the rail links between Aberdeen and the central belt. As we continue to transition to a greener economy, people have become conscious of the need to consider alternative and more green travel options.

Local bus companies have delivered green transport options. Electric and hydrogen fleets, which have expanded rapidly in recent times, serve communities across the area.

The north-east communities at Newtonhill and Cove, as well as those that lie further north, along the Ellon to Peterhead corridor, are aware of the post-Beeching cuts that affected those communities. To one extent or another, the infrastructure that would make modern transport links viable again still exists.

Like other communities in the north-east, the communities of Cove and Newtonhill are seeking innovative connectivity with wider regional centres and beyond. The proposals for electrification and the reopening of rail links that were closed under Beeching offer the multimodal options that our communities are now seeking as a necessary part of 21st century living.

A previous Nestrans study on multimodal transport along the Aberdeen to Laurencekirk corridor indicated a clear willingness on the part of residents to support improvements to the rail network of the kind that, I believe, the opening of stations at Cove and Newtonhill would bring.

Where similar improvements have progressed, such as at Kintore, which other members have mentioned, it has quickly become clear that projects to deliver local transport infrastructure make a significant positive difference to local residents. I will put the Kintore improvements into focus: according to the most recent figures for journeys to and from Kintore station, about 85,000 passengers per annum use the station, and Kintore has a population that is half the size of the combined population of Newtonhill and Cove.

Kintore has shown us the way forward in providing travel options for our communities, and what has been done there can and should be replicated elsewhere. I hope that the Nestrans appraisal brings forward a positive case for stations at Cove and Newtonhill.

13:11

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I thank Liam Kerr for securing the debate and for making a very compelling case, as Audrey Nicoll has just done. I know Newtonhill and Cove very well. They are large and growing communities. They are also very mobile communities, and I think that there is a powerful case for allowing the trains that go through those communities to stop there. We are not talking about new railway lines; we are talking simply about allowing the trains to stop in those communities to let passengers on. Those are relatively low-cost options for quite a big impact.

The same goes for a station at Newburgh, in my constituency, which is not in what I would regard as the far north-east, although it is certainly north of the central belt—Fifers in the north-east of Fife do not regard themselves as central beltters. I want to make the powerful case that I think has been developed by the Newburgh train station campaign. It has huge local support, as has the campaign for stations at Newtonhill and Cove. Members of the community are united: young and old are really motivated by the campaign, and it has gathered support from neighbouring communities such as Abernethy, which lies over

into Perth and Kinross. It is clear that a station at Newburgh would be low cost and would have a high impact. It would mean a 12-minute journey to Ladybank or to Perth. The railway line runs right through the burgh. A modular station is proposed, which would be relatively low cost.

Newburgh is in a part of Fife that is quite cut off from other parts. For those who do not know it, I point out that it is right on the Tay estuary. A new station could give the area a big economic boost, because it is not the wealthiest part of my constituency. A big move is under way towards more estuary living, and a new station at Newburgh fits right into that potential. The economic boost that would be brought to that part of Fife is significant. One of the strong arguments of the Levenmouth campaign was the economic boost that the Levenmouth rail link would bring to that part of Fife, and I congratulate the Government on getting that scheme up and running. It will open within days. I think that the Levenmouth link will be great for the east of Fife, and part of the case for it was that it would bring significant economic developments.

However, we cannot rest on our laurels. There is a shortage of finance, as Kevin Stewart highlighted, so we need to identify schemes that are quite low cost but that will have a big impact. I think that the proposals for stations at Newtonhill and Cove, and at Newburgh in my constituency, meet those criteria.

The process—especially the low-cost process—is incredibly slow. The budget that the South East of Scotland Transport Partnership has set aside has already been blown apart because of the extra requirements placed on it by Transport Scotland. The Scottish transport appraisal guidance document was first submitted in June 2022, but it was six months before comments came back from the Government. SEStran resubmitted the proposal, but it took another six months for comments to come back, and we are going on and on.

I suspect that that process will carry on for a very long time, so I hope that the minister will reflect on the fact that there seems to be a disproportionate time and cost demand for schemes that are relatively low cost but that could have a big impact. I hope that we can adjust the process to ensure that schemes like the one for Newburgh have a chance to progress far more quickly. As I said, the Government has made good progress on the Levenmouth scheme and others, but there is a dearth of schemes coming through now. I hope the Government will see the need to adopt low-cost, high-impact schemes, and I urge the minister to reflect on the process, to look again at and advance the Newburgh project and to move

it up the priority list, alongside Newtonhill and Cove.

13:15

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Liam Kerr for bringing the debate to the chamber. I did not know that he is a train buff—we can talk about that later. He has secured an important debate about how the Government needs to be proactive in connecting communities across the whole of Scotland to the rail network as they expand and grow. The issue is particularly acute for me, as someone who lives in Moray. After this debate, I will run to Waverley station to get a train all the way back to Keith, in the very north.

As we approach May, with the sun rising and warmth in the air, I do not really want to talk about Christmas, but some of my constituents in Oban and in Argyll and Bute have contacted me about what they are now calling the “polar express” on the west Highland line, which is so cold in the mornings that they are wrapping themselves up in sleeping bags. Perhaps they should get sponsorship from ScotRail for a live-action remake of that film every day on the run-up to Christmas. They are raising an important point and not just because of health concerns about hypothermia on that line. We need modern infrastructure, not only for stations but for our rolling stock, and I hope that we will see the current situation remedied soon. *The Oban Times* recently reported that story, and I am glad that it did so, because it brings to light concerns not only in Oban but across the Highlands and Islands region, which I represent.

It is great to hear from Liam Kerr that the populations of Cove and Newtonhill have expanded considerably in recent years, meaning that they certainly warrant the new train stations he is asking for. Conversely, many communities across the Highlands and Islands are witnessing alarming rates of depopulation, partly because of a lack of investment in such infrastructure. Argyll and Bute is at particular risk, with a report published by the Scottish Parliament information centre in 2022 showing that Argyll’s islands have experienced the highest level of depopulation in Scotland in the past 20 years. The isle of Bute was worst hit and is, of course, heavily reliant on both a ferry service and rail infrastructure at Wemyss Bay.

The issue affects all parts of my region and more investment is needed, as was recognised during the initial options appraisal carried out as part of the second strategic transport projects review. That initial process was forward thinking, suggesting that there could be a new rail connection to and from Cowal to the west

Highland line and also to Kintyre, through the use of fixed links. It suggested improving rail connectivity between Oban and London by the introduction of a sleeper service, which would have been very welcome and would have helped tourism. The review even suggested that the rail network could be extended to the islands via fixed links.

Disappointingly, none of those suggestions made it into the final report, which recommended no new stations or new lines. In the end, that report recommended only corridor enhancement to the Highland main line—basically passing places. That is all that it recommended, which is a massive missed opportunity for the Scottish Government.

However, all is not lost. The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership has announced a consultation on its new draft regional transport strategy, setting out a 20-year vision for transport improvement across the Highlands and Islands. I particularly welcome its support for the planning and delivery of new railway stations. The devil will be in the detail, of course, but this is hopeful news for the Highlands and Islands.

The Highlands and Islands region needs more train stations, but it also needs wider investment in infrastructure across the board, especially if we are to tackle the real issues of rural depopulation. I would also love it if we could cure, once and for all, our polar express.

13:20

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I thank Liam Kerr for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is not too long since we walked the Buchan line together in the north-east sunshine—yes, it does exist—with the then Minister for Transport, Jenny Gilruth.

At the meeting that I and my team and the Campaign for North East Rail were at, we had discussions relating to the just transition fund, and a member of my team suggested that the campaign apply for that funding. I put it on the record that the Scottish Government has been a great supporter of the Campaign for North East Rail in every conversation that I have brought to it in that regard. In particular, it has awarded the campaign £250,000 from the just transition fund for a feasibility study to explore the possibility of passenger and freight services running north of Dyce and on to Peterhead and Fraserburgh. We expect the findings of that feasibility study very soon.

In a survey that I carried out recently that received more than 1,000 responses, two in five respondents said that they rely on bus services so that they can attend national health service

appointments. We know that bus journeys to Aberdeen royal infirmary take two or three times as long as car journeys. Connecting our coast is about more than transport: it is necessary for the health, safety and wellbeing of my constituents.

From carbon capture projects to wind farms, our north-east corner is playing a vital role in delivering Scotland's transition to net zero, but that means that heavy goods vehicle numbers on the roads remain consistently high every hour of every day of the working week. The key difference between the Campaign for North East Rail's study and previous studies is the key focus on rail-freight opportunities in the area. Reconnecting Fraserburgh and Peterhead to the railway would allow many HGV movements to be transferred to the railway, which would result in cleaner air, fewer emissions, safer roads and more economic growth opportunities.

Peterhead and Fraserburgh have been identified as regeneration priority areas, and unemployment there is higher than the national average. We have a chance to replicate the success that we have seen in other schemes, such as the Borders railway, and to bring real regeneration to some of the most deprived areas in Aberdeenshire.

Peterhead south harbour, which is operated by ASCO, is the largest offshore-support facility in Europe. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will join me in celebrating this week's fantastic news that the world's biggest offshore floating wind farm is set to be built just off the coast of Peterhead. That project will bring billions to Scotland's economy. The Blue Toon and the Broch, as they are affectionately known—Peterhead and Fraserburgh—will be vital to the site, and heavy equipment, parts and specialised workers are expected to come to the area once the wind farm is up and running.

Douglas Lumsden: The project is great news for Peterhead, but do such projects not make improvements in places such as Toll of Birness even more vital? The Government needs to get on with that work, because it is a real safety issue.

Karen Adam: I support any calls for improvements to roads and infrastructure in the north-east. I will make a point on that later in my speech.

I whole-heartedly welcome the growth in my constituency, but we must recognise that the existing infrastructure is already congested with HGV, bus and car traffic. Introducing rail would go a long way towards providing much-needed and welcome relief.

I conclude by asking the Scottish Government whether it will continue to support the Campaign for North East Rail's work by continuing to

consider funding for the project, including for a detailed options appraisal when analysis of the latest study is complete. We are putting a lot of pressure on the Scottish Government to help and support the project. That is right, and it is our job as constituency MSPs to do that.

However, the UK Government has a part to play, as well. If a fraction of the money that has been spent on high-speed rail south of the border were to be spent in the north-east corner, we would not have rail just to Peterhead and Fraserburgh—it could go to Banff and Buckie and beyond. We have the potential to make a boom time for the north-east and beyond. I hope that we all recognise and will take full advantage of that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Sue Webber is the final speaker in the open debate.

13:25

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I thank Liam Kerr for bringing the debate to the chamber. Improving rail connections in the north-east would be not just a regional benefit but a national benefit, and is a national priority. By enhancing the infrastructure in the north-east, we would not only foster local community cohesion but bolster the entire country's transport network.

Members will be aware that there are other initiatives across the country, including the campaign to open a train station on the existing main line at Winchburgh, in West Lothian. That exemplifies strategic investments that can significantly contribute to broader economic and social development across Scotland. The same benefits have been clearly articulated by north-east members today—specifically, by Liam Kerr.

Winchburgh, which is a vibrant and growing community in West Lothian, currently finds itself isolated from the national rail network because the trains pass on by, and—as Willie Rennie mentioned in respect of other places—do not stop there. That lack of direct access severely restricts the ability of residents to reach essential medical services, pursue educational opportunities and connect with employment opportunities. The establishment of a new railway station would dramatically enhance connectivity, ease congestion in West Lothian and the west of Edinburgh, and support our ambitions to provide sustainable transport solutions.

I commend Winchburgh Developments Ltd for its commitment and substantial contributions to making that vision a reality. Its involvement is a testament to the power of community and corporate collaboration in driving forward public projects. Along with the community of Winchburgh, it presented a petition of more than 2,000 signatures to the Scottish Government. When it

comes to community empowerment, that reflects the petition that was presented on Cove and Newtonhill, which had more than 1,500 signatures.

Winchburgh Developments Ltd is the principal landowner and has worked in partnership with Winchburgh community council and the Winchburgh Community Development Trust. The developer has already funded a new junction on the M9 to alleviate congestion and has shown considerable commitment to expanding the community. It is now time for the Scottish Government to match that.

As Cove and Newtonhill do, the region anticipates significant population growth. As a direct result of investment that is being leveraged from the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal, up to 4,000 new families will move there. Demand for more robust public transport options has never been more urgent, and the area will continue to grow.

A new station at Winchburgh is essential. Not only is it necessary for alleviating mounting congestion in our capital city, but it is a critical factor in meeting the Scottish Government's failing net zero ambitions. The pace of progress has been staggeringly slow and bogged down in bureaucracy. Despite repeated promises to do so, Transport Scotland has still not shared Network Rail's cost estimate or design estimate with the developer, which delays any realistic assessment that the developer can make about what its contribution can be, and simply adds to the transport woes of the West Lothian community, which is getting larger by the month.

However, there could be some good news. Winchburgh is a rare example of a station project that will not need to be wholly funded from the public purse because it will receive a generous contribution from the developer. Surely the Scottish Government should be pulling out all the stops to make that happen. That model could transform not only Winchburgh but so many of the badly needed infrastructure projects that we have heard about this afternoon.

I will be clear. The needs of the community are obvious. The benefits of the project can be seen from either end of the crowded M8, and they all require urgent action from the SNP Government to get something moving: no more meetings, no more talk about different types of meetings—just actual action.

I therefore call, yet again, on the Scottish ministers to do something—to re-establish the steering group to get the project moving and to commit to a timetable to deliver a station for the communities around Winchburgh, without any further obfuscation or delay.

13:29

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I thank Liam Kerr for raising the subject of new railway stations—in this case, at Cove and Newtonhill. I also thank Nestrans and its stakeholders for their efforts in progressing the work that has been undertaken to date on the transport appraisal, which is an issue that I will come back to.

Before I do so, I will offer my own reflections on the topic of the desire for a new railway station. I have received requests for new stations almost weekly since I took on the transport portfolio, and we have heard the same in all the contributions today. I understand the desire of the Newtonhill and Cove communities to see trains calling again at those stations after almost seven decades since their initial closure. Both communities and the Campaign for North East Railway have worked over the years to highlight the case for rail enhancements in the region, and I admire the ambition of any local rail campaign.

Indeed, as a constituency MSP, I know at first hand what a new rail station can do for an area, having campaigned successfully for new stations at Armadale and Blackridge as part of the Airdrie to Bathgate line. In my role as a constituency MSP, I am also a firm, long-standing and continuing supporter of the campaign for the Winchburgh railway station.

The potential value and opportunities that a railway station can bring to a community has been proven again and again by our investment in rail. I am therefore rightly proud of this Government's record of opening new stations across Scotland, which stands at 18 to date, including two in the north-east at Laurencekirk, which opened in 2009, and Kintore, which, as we have heard, opened in 2020. That total is due to increase by a further two in the coming weeks, with the opening of the Levenmouth rail line and its new stations at Cameron Bridge and Leven. I have seen and heard what a new station means to a local community, having had the great pleasure of officially opening East Linton station back in December.

However, despite the numerous requests that I see for new stations and the evidence of the benefits that they might bring, I need to set the realities of the many other priorities for new rail investment against the unprecedented challenge that we face with regard to our capital position.

I turn to the work being led by Nestrans in its study of transport and travel between Laurencekirk and Aberdeen. I am aware that the Aberdeen to Laurencekirk multimodal study started life back in 2020, having been commissioned with funding from the Scottish Government's local rail

development fund. Following initial work, the study has evolved to incorporate and include the wider regional aspirations for an Aberdeen rapid transit project. It is the same corridor that was considered in the initial LRDF study, and it includes the A90 and A92 towards Aberdeen.

The previous work and the most recent options for Aberdeen rapid transit have taken the study to completion of the preliminary options appraisal report. The recommendations from that phase of work, which were approved by the Nestrans board in February, include options for strategic active travel interventions, implementation of a mobility hub facility to the south of Aberdeen, bus priority measures and new rail stations at Cove and Newtonhill. As all those options have scored sufficiently well against the study's transport planning objectives and other appraisal criteria, they have met the necessary threshold to advance to the next stage, which is a detailed appraisal.

Moving forward, and in line with Scottish transport appraisal guidance, the next stage of the work will involve a detailed appraisal of the shortlisted packages. I therefore expect to see those options being developed further and their impact quantified as part of that assessment. That might include the packaging of options to identify the most effective solution for the corridor.

It is at that detailed appraisal stage that I would expect to see potential passenger demand forecasts for each option, together with the detailed cost estimates and the outcome of any public and stakeholder engagement. I understand from my officials that Nestrans is expecting to do that work this summer. All the evidence that has been gathered and consideration of the further risks will be required as part of that detailed assessment.

Let me be clear: even if the detailed appraisal concludes that one or both of the rail stations might have a strong case for moving forward, and even if my officials agree, a number of hurdles will still need to be cleared before it can progress. Top amongst those hurdles is affordability. As I have said on numerous occasions in the chamber recently, our ambitions to invest in Scotland's infrastructure have been severely hampered by the UK Government's failure to inflation proof its capital budget.

Douglas Lumsden: I have been listening carefully to the concerns being expressed about capital. Will the cabinet secretary explain what impact that will have on the £200 million investment that was meant to be made to reduce journey times by 20 minutes by 2026? Is that project not progressing now? It does not seem to have made much progress in the past eight years.

Fiona Hyslop: The member was at the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee when Màiri McAllan talked about our need to review timescales. Indeed, I think that he asked her about that very point.

We have commitments. The scope of the £200 million takes in a series of infrastructure upgrades, including signalling enhancement and station works at Aberdeen, Dundee, Montrose and Arbroath, and new freight loops that will specifically enable the operation of more and faster trains on the same route. Of course, Liam Kerr would want to use that funding for Cove and Newtonhill—I think that that was his suggestion.

Liam Kerr: Can I intervene on that point?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes—very briefly.

Liam Kerr: I am genuinely grateful. On the point about capital, once the line to Leven opens, which I think is on 2 June, only one new station has been committed to—Balgray, I think, which I believe is being funded through the Glasgow city region city deal. Is that level of funding being considered for Cove and Newtonhill?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I can give you the time back for the intervention.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you very much.

We have to be realistic. With the cumulative loss of more than £1.3 billion to our budget, we face challenges with completing existing commitments, and, obviously, we have additional commitments coming on top of that. That is why it is more important than ever to get strong business cases and detailed STAG appraisals.

For that reason, I must be assured of the robustness of the final recommendations in the Nestrans study, particularly given that the work is now being funded through the Aberdeen city region deal and that there might be calls for further Scottish Government investment to implement its recommendations. I reiterate that any changes to any city region deal have to be agreed by all the partners, as I think everybody has acknowledged.

In conclusion, the Government remains committed to investing in our railways, including in the opening of new stations, where there are strong business cases to do so. We are committed to the north-east, and indeed, we have demonstrated that commitment, not least through our contribution in respect of the rail line that Karen Adam is pursuing.

It is vital that, whichever option emerges from Nestrans's detailed appraisal, it is backed by a strong evidence base that supports a business case for future investment. Without wishing to prejudice the outcome of the work, I say that that

will be critical if the option requires Government support.

I look forward to the conclusion of the detailed appraisal phase and the outcome of the work, and I congratulate everybody involved in campaigning for Cove and Newtonhill, not least the communities involved. I know that they are passionate about securing those stations. Like me, Nestrans is focusing on making sure that the north-east can achieve the transport ambitions that it so rightly deserves. I hope, as I am sure that the campaigners do, that that work will come to a successful conclusion.

13:37

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The next item of business is portfolio questions on education and skills. I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

College Budgets (North-east)

1. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what it anticipates the impact will be of reported reductions to college budgets in the north-east. (S6O-03340)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Despite the United Kingdom Government's autumn statement delivering a worst-case scenario for Scotland's finances, we have been able to maintain funding levels and core teaching at Scottish colleges, including those in the north-east. That is indicative of the Government's commitment to investing in our colleges despite the challenges that have been posed by UK Government austerity.

Liam Kerr: Despite the largest block grant, in cash terms, in the history of devolution, there has been a real-terms slashing of North East Scotland College's budget next year, which comes alongside the flat cash settlements of previous years. The college now faces a funding gap of £2.7 million.

Principal Neil Cowie and his team have worked miracles to preserve places and to focus on reducing non-staff costs while they are dealing with the withdrawal of training opportunities following the scrapping of the flexible workforce development fund.

What impacts does the minister think those specific cuts will have on the north-east economy, the just transition and our young people's futures?

Graeme Dey: I welcome Liam Kerr's acknowledgement that the cut—there is a cut, and it was delivered by the budget settlement—is nowhere near the scale that a number of members have suggested would be the case. A good deal of scaremongering has taken place.

I note Neil Cowie's acknowledgement in *The Press and Journal* of the honest position that has been arrived at, which is in line with what I said at the outset would happen—that we would deliver the same level of funding as colleges received in

the current year. Mr Kerr may sit there and gesture, but that is a fact. I am glad that he has acknowledged that the scale of the cut is not on a par with that which was suggested.

That said, of course this presents challenges for our colleges—I recognise that. However, I do not recall Mr Kerr or any other member of the Parliament coming forward during the budget process with a costed proposal to deliver more money for colleges. I seriously do not remember that.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Can the minister provide an update on the work to ensure that colleges can utilise their assets that become available for disposal to enhance local investment?

Graeme Dey: As the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills set out at yesterday's Colleges Scotland conference, we are working hard to support our colleges to invest creatively and with greater certainty. That includes making changes that enable colleges to retain a significant proportion of the proceeds from the sale of an asset such as a building or land and to invest that money locally to improve facilities, college infrastructure and estates. The sector has indicated to me a preference for a 70:30 split in what can be used to support vital local investment and what should continue to be released for wider strategic sectoral needs. That is what we will look to deliver for them.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I can understand why, yesterday, the First Minister felt that he could not face a conference of colleges. Last month, this year's funding allocations for colleges revealed the latest cut of a £12 million reduction to the student support budget. I am sure that the minister will agree that that funding is crucial for enabling colleges and students to succeed. How does the minister expect colleges to continue supporting students when he is cutting that vital funding?

Graeme Dey: I am at a loss with that question, because I am not aware of any such cut to student funding support being planned.

Gaelic Officers Scheme

2. Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its approach alongside Bòrd na Gàidhlig to secure the long-term future of the Gaelic officers scheme. (S6O-03341)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government recognises the importance of the Gaelic officers scheme for the promotion of Gaelic in local projects that benefit Gaelic communities. For that reason, the Scottish Government provided

additional funding over three financial years to support the scheme.

In this exceptionally tight financial climate, the Scottish Government has made available up to £175,000 to ensure immediate support for the Gaelic officers scheme. That will maintain the continuity of employment and the good work that is already being done. As part of that, the Scottish Government has asked Bòrd na Gàidhlig to review the scheme and provide a plan for its operation in 2024-25.

Alasdair Allan: I welcome the cabinet secretary's intervention in this matter. Clearly, acute financial pressures on Scotland's budget remain. What can the Scottish Government do to maintain other Gaelic initiatives such as Spòrs Gàidhlig, which seeks to encourage the use of the language through sporting activities? Has the cabinet secretary had discussions with organisations on the long-term sustainability of those initiatives, particularly in the light of the Scottish Languages Bill?

Jenny Gilruth: Alasdair Allan is absolutely correct. Funding decisions taken by Governments elsewhere have had a devastating impact on the spending power of the Scottish Government. As the Deputy First Minister noted last month, the spring budget

"failed to deliver the funding that Scotland needs for public services, infrastructure and cost of living measures."

However, it is in that context that we have protected the Gaelic budget. Indeed, the Scottish Government supports a network of Gaelic organisations, including Bòrd na Gàidhlig. For example, Spòrs Gàidhlig is currently in receipt of funding from Bòrd na Gàidhlig. In addition, last year, the Scottish Government provided direct funding of £45,000 to Spòrs Gàidhlig.

We will continue to engage with Gaelic organisations that support young people outside the classroom. As Alasdair Allan knows, I look forward to working with him to that end.

Lecturers (Industrial Dispute)

3. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is taking to help resolve the industrial dispute by lecturers. (S6O-03342)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): I meet campus unions biannually and representatives of the sector in several forums regularly. Although I can—and should—have no direct role in those negotiations, I have made it clear that I expect college management and unions to work together to reach a settlement that is affordable and fair for workers and that

minimises disruption for students. I am aware that, at formal meetings of the National Joint Negotiation Committee in March, both sides agreed to continue with informal discussions to seek a resolution to the dispute. I am pleased that such on-going dialogue continues, and I encourage both sides to keep talking as they work to break the impasse.

Katy Clark: Lecturers have been taking action short of strike action since February. Despite that action being lawful, colleges have been threatening to deduct up to 100 per cent of lecturers' pay, even when they attend work as normal. Does the minister agree that that is completely unacceptable?

Graeme Dey: I reiterate that we would all want the dispute to be settled and the heat to be taken out of the current situation. My understanding is that all the colleges took legal advice, which said that they were within their rights to consider such action. I understand, too, that the Educational Institute of Scotland Further Education Lecturers Association has acknowledged that in the advice that it has given its own members. However, let us be honest: we would all rather that agreement was found and that such action was avoided.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): How is the Scottish Government ensuring that fair work principles are embedded throughout the further education sector?

Graeme Dey: In the letter of guidance that the Government issued to the Scottish Funding Council on 29 March, I set out that implementation of fair work first principles must be the guiding criterion for promoting fairer work practices for staff in the college sector. The Government expects the Scottish Funding Council to continue monitoring adherence across the sector.

To further support fair work in the college sector, the Government recently introduced legislation to add trade union nominees to college boards, which will improve trade union recognition and confidence in college governance. Not every college has yet arrived at that position. I encourage those colleges and the trade unions to work actively to achieve that position.

Cass Review

4. **Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to update its guidance to schools regarding gender affirmation for children in light of the recommendations in the final report of the Cass review. (S6O-03343)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that the guidance on supporting transgender young people in schools

remains up to date and fit for purpose. As with any significant legal or policy developments, we will consider whether the guidance requires to be updated to reflect the points in the recommendations.

Stephen Kerr: I express my respect for the journalistic integrity of Marion Scott, of the *Sunday Post*, and Dan Sanderson, the Scottish correspondent for *The Daily Telegraph*. What they have uncovered in recent weeks has been distressing to parents and ought to concern us all. How campaigning groups are using Scotland's schools to push gender ideology on young children is unscientific, and the Cass review has shown the harm that it can cause. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is time that she reviewed the practice of allowing campaign groups such as LGBT Youth Scotland to influence classroom lesson content and school activities? Does she agree, too, that we must act now to stop such activists pushing their ideology on our children?

Jenny Gilruth: Broadly, as Mr Kerr knows, the Cass review was predominantly a review of the gender health service offered by the national health service in England. However, as I intimated in my original response, we are considering the implications that it may have for our guidance at the current time, and we want to ensure that that guidance is kept up to date. To that end, I am more than happy to engage with the member on that and on any views that he may have in that regard.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): It has been 24 years since section 28 was overhauled and 10 years since same-sex marriage was legalised, yet the LGBTQ+ community, particularly the young community, are being caught up in an increasingly toxic debate. How are we working in education to ensure that LGBTQ+ young people are included and supported in their school communities?

Jenny Gilruth: As the member has outlined, it is really important that we have a curriculum that is as diverse as the young people who learn in our schools. I am in and out of Scotland's schools regularly, and we have a really rich curriculum across our country. We have made significant progress in embedding LGBT-inclusive education across the curriculum, and that policy received cross-party support in the previous session of the Parliament.

Universities Scotland 40 Faces Campaign

5. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support the Universities Scotland 40 faces campaign. (S6O-03344)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): I very much welcome and support Universities Scotland's 40 faces campaign, and I look forward to hearing the views of students and graduates. It had been planned for either the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills or me to attend the official launch event in May, but it has since been postponed. However, one of us will absolutely look to speak at it when it takes place.

I will be looking in detail at the findings. The student support offer and our continuing commitment to free tuition are ensuring that more people can access our world-class institutions, whatever their background. The campaign supports the progress that we have made collectively to ensure that 20 per cent of university entrants come from the most deprived backgrounds by 2030. There is more working in partnership to be done, however, and the campaign's findings will contribute to our making the progress required.

Audrey Nicoll: Indeed, the Universities Scotland 40 faces campaign highlights the access stories of students and graduates at Scotland's universities and other higher education institutions from underrepresented groups such as students from the most deprived 20 per cent of postcodes, those from low-participation schools, students with care experience and/or those who are estranged from their families. Does the minister agree with Universities Scotland and the commissioner for fair access that transitioning towards using individual-level indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage further strengthens the widening access agenda, as opposed to using SIMD20 from the Scottish index of multiple deprivation alone?

Graeme Dey: I do. In fact, my officials have been working with institutions in Aberdeen to set up a pilot project to share data on applicants who are eligible for free school meals in order to identify individuals living in socioeconomic disadvantage. I am keen to explore all options for measures that could be used to reach people living in deprivation. One potential measure that has been suggested, as I mentioned in the debate on the subject a few weeks ago, is the school clothing grant. My officials are exploring whether that is feasible. I will shortly host a round-table event at which stakeholders will be invited to share any constructive ideas that they have.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Widening participation is a fundamental pillar of the 40 faces campaign, and the University of the West of Scotland is Scotland's leading university in widening access. Last week, the Scottish Funding Council published its indicative allocations, and the UWS will have the number of its funded places cut by a staggering 734. Of those, 220 will be

reallocated to another institution. The UWS wrote to you on 19 April, detailing its concerns that that will limit its ability to continue to lead in widening access. When was the decision to reallocate the places from the UWS to another institution brought to the attention of the minister? Will you meet the principal and vice-chancellor of the university to discuss the unintended consequences of the decision?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please.

Graeme Dey: I acknowledge receipt of that letter, and I will respond to it in due course. I understand that the UWS is unhappy about the decision that the SFC has taken, but I will offer a bit of context. The 220 places that were moved to another institution have gone to an institution that has been overproviding. We had places that were not being used and that are now being deployed to support delivery in another institution. Surely it is a good thing that we are supporting young people to be educated.

The other point to make is that, even with the change that has been made, the UWS still retains a substantial number of places beyond what it has been delivering over the past two years. I will be happy to discuss the matter further with the UWS. It is important to realise that it will still have the scope to make the contribution that we all hope it will make to the widening access agenda.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): In the past hour, the principals of the University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University have sent a scathing letter that highlights the huge financial pressures that they are under. They say that universities cannot continue to deliver the wide-ranging contributions that are expected of them with the continuing downward trajectory of funding. Does the minister understand that the financial crisis that they are in will impact programmes such as the 40 faces campaign?

Graeme Dey: I go back to a point that I made earlier. We have a funding envelope that we have to work within. I reiterate that I do not remember Douglas Lumsden or any other member in the chamber suggesting, during the budget process, that we should do things differently and that we should find more money for universities. There was a lot of hand wringing, and there continues to be a lot of hand wringing, but there has been no actual action from the Conservatives.

I say gently to Douglas Lumsden that funding is, of course, an issue for our universities, but if we talk to them openly and honestly, they will tell us that the biggest threat to their future is not lack of funding from the Scottish Government but what has been described to me as an “existential

threat”—that is, the on-going migration rhetoric coming from Douglas Lumsden’s Government in Westminster.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6 was not lodged.

Music Tuition

7. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what provision it is making to ensure that all school pupils have access to music tuition. (S6O-03346)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Government has transformed music tuition in Scotland by supporting councils to eradicate unfair instrumental music tuition charges across the country. This year, we are providing £12 million to local authorities to support the continued delivery of free instrumental music tuition. The most recent instrumental music survey, which was published in December 2023, shows the number of pupils participating in instrumental music tuition to be at a record high. Local authorities are responsible for ensuring access to music tuition for pupils in schools across Scotland’s 32 local authority areas.

Liz Smith: The cabinet secretary is well aware of the fact that there have been significant financial pressures on some local authorities, including those in Mid Scotland and Fife, to ensure that they can maintain the no-fee principle when it comes to pupils accessing free instrumental tuition. Obviously, there have been some staff cutbacks, and charges have been reintroduced for participation in some central music groups and music camps, including those that cater for special needs. Is the Scottish Government prepared to examine a public trust model to assist with the funding of music tuition in order to maintain the commitment that the Parliament made to pupils in 2021?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Liz Smith for her interest in the matter. She and I served on the Education and Skills Committee in the previous parliamentary session, and that committee made the recommendation to the Government that led to the scrapping of instrumental music tuition fees.

It is worth while recounting the progress that has been made since that time. For example, after a dip during the pandemic, the number of pupils participating in instrumental music lessons has rebounded very strongly. The number was about 61,715, which is the highest number on record since the survey began. That represents a 7 per cent increase since the previous year. The uptake also tells us that the proportion of the school roll participating in the scheme sits at record levels.

As the former principal of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, John Wallace, has observed, the Scottish Government

“have kept their end of the bargain, providing an extra £12 million to local instrumental music services ... The music teachers on the ground are responding with passion, music education is flourishing”.

He said that Scots should be celebrating the fact that the Scottish Government has abolished fees for music tuition in schools.

On Liz Smith’s specific point about the public trust model, if she would like to write to me, I would be more than happy to look at that issue in more detail.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): On a matter that is very dear to my heart, how will the recently announced national centre for music engage with education practitioners to support and inspire young people into music careers?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much welcome the development of the old Royal high school building into a national centre for music, and I can see the important role that it will play in inspiring young people in the future. I welcome the fact that the Royal High School Preservation Trust wants the centre to engage teachers as well as community music organisations and professional performers.

Bullying in Schools

8. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps are being taken to tackle bullying in schools. (S6O-03347)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Bullying of any kind is unacceptable and must be addressed quickly and efficiently. In order to support schools, we continue to fully fund respectme, Scotland’s anti-bullying service, to build confidence and capacity to address bullying effectively.

We are reviewing our national anti-bullying guidance, “Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland’s Children and Young People”, which is for all adults who work with children and young people. The update includes consideration of the definition of bullying, online bullying, recording and monitoring of incidents, and prejudice-based bullying. The updated guidance is expected to be published by the end of the year, and the national action plan on behaviour in schools will be published in the coming weeks.

Colin Beattie: More children and young people have been identified as having additional support needs, and we know that, since 2007, there has been an eightfold increase in the number of

children with ASN who spend all their time in mainstream primary school classrooms.

A lack of tailored support can result in behavioural concerns arising from the inability of the mainstream setting to accommodate support needs. What is being done to ensure that children with ASN receive appropriate support in an educational environment that benefits them?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much recognise that the number of children and young people who are identified as having an additional support need continues to increase year on year. It is also important to highlight that spending on additional support for learning by local authorities reached a record high of £926 million in 2022-23.

Since 2019-20, the Government has continued to invest an additional £15 million per year to help local councils to respond to the individual needs of their pupils. We also provide an additional £11 million of funding every year to directly support pupils with complex additional support needs and services for children and families.

On behaviour specifically, as members will be aware, the national action plan is currently being developed through the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools and is due to be published this spring. In addition, the additional support for learning project board will consider the actions relating to additional support for learning. That will include consideration of the Education, Children and Young People Committee’s report on ASL, which I understand will be published soon.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As the cabinet secretary will be aware, bullying in Fife schools is an on-going issue, with Fife Council’s policy saying that those who attack and abuse other children should not experience “negative consequences”. The NASUWT teaching union has labelled that policy as counterproductive and has said:

“There needs to be serious consequences for serious misbehaviour.”

Does the Scottish Government agree with the teaching unions? Will the cabinet secretary outline what more the Government can do to give local authorities a strong message to toughen up their anti-bullying policies?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for her interest in the issue, which she has raised with me in the chamber on a number of occasions. As I intimated in my response to the previous question, we will, in the coming weeks, publish the national action plan, which will set the parameters for national Government and for local authorities. It is worth while to note that the teaching unions,

including the one that the member cited, have been included in the development of that plan.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for the constructive discussion that she had with Opposition spokespeople. I think that she understands the scale of the problem of bullied children, bruised teachers and—this is really important—disrupted education. Does she agree that we need a clear message about the power of the classroom teacher and the back-up resources that they can expect in order to manage such behaviour, distress and violence?

Jenny Gilruth: I broadly agree with the points that Mr Rennie has made. As he said, I had a very helpful meeting with Opposition members last week to talk about progress with the national action plan. It is worth while highlighting that teachers have a number of powers at their disposal right now to respond to challenging behaviour. I know that teachers across Scotland are really good at managing to defuse challenging situations—that is part of the job of being a teacher. However, I recognise the challenge, as the member knows, and I hope that the national action plan will provide more clarity on the issue.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I seek your guidance on a matter relating to the answer to my question this afternoon to the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans, in which I asked for his response to the £12 million deduction from the student support budget for colleges.

On 28 March 2024, the Scottish Funding Council published “College Indicative Funding Allocations 2024-25”, in which it set the student support budget at £123 million. In the previous year, that budget had been set at £135 million, thus leaving a £12 million cut. Presiding Officer, I ask for your guidance on how the minister—who said that he was unaware of that and could not, therefore, answer the question—could update the Parliament on his response to that and, indeed, answer the question.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Duncan-Glancy. You will be aware that that is not a point of order or a matter for the chair. You have your point on the record. The minister will have heard what you said and will, I am sure, respond accordingly.

Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill: Stage 3

14:55

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-12944, in the name of Natalie Don, on the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill at stage 3.

As members will be aware, the Presiding Officer is required under standing orders to decide whether, in her view, any provision of a bill relates to a protected subject matter—that is, whether it modifies the electoral system and franchise for Scottish parliamentary elections. In the Presiding Officer’s view, no provision of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill relates to a protected subject matter. Therefore, the bill does not require a supermajority in order to be passed at stage 3.

We will move to the debate. I invite members who wish to speak to press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:56

The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise (Natalie Don): Should the Parliament agree to the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill, Scotland will be taking a significant step forward in embedding the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and keeping the Promise. The bill that is before us will ensure that children in Scotland are kept out of young offenders institutions and it will support safe, proven, care-based alternatives. The bill will enable children of all ages to be referred to the principal reporter so that they can access the protective framework of the hearings system.

Despite a youth justice emphasis dominating our discussions on the bill, we must emphasise that most children who need compulsory care do so due to welfare reasons, rather than as a result of offending. The bill also provides a robust package of support for victims and their families, which was strengthened at stage 2 and at stage 3. The bill will also make improvements for children who are involved in the criminal justice system, provide a better remittal framework between courts and hearings, strengthen measures around secure and residential care, including secure transport, and allow us to further regulate cross-border placements.

Those who have followed the bill’s progress will know that it received a lot of attention at stage 2. More than 220 amendments were considered in detail by the Education, Children and Young

People Committee. That is not surprising; the bill is wide ranging, the reforms evoke strong reactions and the proposals are technical and intricate. I thank and commend the committee for its work, long hours and diligent consideration. I would also like to thank the stakeholders who gave evidence to the committee and shared their views to help to shape the legislation. I also thank members across all parties who have undertaken in-depth engagement and worked with me during stages 2 and 3. I believe that the bill before us demonstrates what can be achieved when there is good will.

There has been a lot of discussion on the bill's measures to support victims. The Government is committed to supporting victims, especially child victims and their families, no matter which system—the hearings system or the criminal justice system—deals with an offence case. As members know, children's hearings are about protecting and supporting children. It is not an adversarial or retributive system such as that in the criminal courts. We have opened up that system to the extent that we can, while respecting children's rights and confidentiality constraints. The bill, as strengthened at stage 3, now strikes that balance.

I was delighted to work with Willie Rennie on his amendments, as agreed at stage 3, which will introduce a new national single point of contact for support services for victims and certain members of their families. The bill also enables the principal reporter to share information for safety planning purposes, not just when compulsory measures or movement restriction conditions are in place. Overall, the bill will deliver a much improved support and information package for victims, without putting the nature of the hearings system at risk.

The children's hearings system, secure accommodation and other services already support many 16 and 17-year-olds. However, reforms to allow all under-18s access to the children's hearings system have been a long time coming. The reforms were consulted on back in 2020, and again through the committee's call for views, and it is heartening to see provisions come before members in the chamber today.

The integrated, welfare-based Kilbrandon ethos of our children's hearings system is something that Scotland can rightly take pride in. All children—whether in need, at risk or in trouble—deserve our concern and support, and the bill will help to ensure that they get it.

Parliament will be aware that the original bill timetable was extended last autumn to allow the lead committee to consider updated figures and costs. Among other issues, members raised concerns about children's panel capacity to

accommodate more children. I repeat my assurances that provisions will not be commenced until systems and services are ready. Commencement plans will be co-produced with partners. An implementation and resourcing group, comprising delivery agencies and a wide range of stakeholders, continues to meet, and is already undertaking preparatory work in anticipation of this legislation.

Scotland should not be imprisoning children. That position is firmly rooted in the UNCRC, it is a key precept of keeping the Promise, and it is a principle endorsed at stage 1 in the lead committee's report and by this Parliament. It is also a principle on which we are delivering. The number of children in young offenders institutions has dropped from 16 in 2021-22 to seven in the latest figures. Indeed, at the turn of the year, the figure was as low as one child.

The bill now ensures that no children will go to young offenders institutions. In line with our commitment to keep the Promise, our intention is to commence those particular provisions later this year. That will require secure accommodation capacity in more cases. I have listened carefully to views and concerns throughout the parliamentary scrutiny. Members can be reassured that providers, inspectors, local authorities and researchers have faith that Scotland's highly rated secure accommodation services can care safely for all our under-18s who need that specialist support. Secure accommodation services confirmed to committee their track records in caring for Scotland's young people most in need or at risk, and their readiness to accommodate this change.

There was a spirited and well-intentioned debate on legal aid yesterday. I reiterate to Ms Duncan-Glancy that, for jointly reported cases, legislation is not required through this bill. Regulations are under active consideration, and I am more than happy to continue to engage with her on that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): During the discussions between stage 2 and stage 3, the minister did not just say that regulations were under consideration, instead she assured me that regulations would be brought forward. Such an assurance is necessary to bring the bill in line with article 40 of the UNCRC. Will the Government take the opportunity now to put on the record that that will be the case, and to explain why it was not prepared to put such a provision in the bill yesterday?

Natalie Don: As I said during stage 2 and stage 3, I do not feel that including it in the bill is required. I said that the regulations were under way, and I have emphasised throughout the process that I am more than happy to work with

the member on that issue, as I see its importance to the bill.

The bill provides improvements in many other significant areas. Time precludes my covering them all here, but they include measures on secure transport, improvements to court procedures involving children, and powers to strengthen the regulatory framework around cross-border placements. All have the interests of children at their heart.

Should the bill be agreed to, it will make significant improvements to children's rights, experiences and outcomes. Accordingly, I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

15:04

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): My youngest daughter came to live with us when she was two years old. She was three months old when the decision was made that it was no longer safe for her to stay in the environment that she was living in, and she was moved to the first of her foster families.

When she was 18 years old, she requested her files. Those folders hold half of the information pertaining to her. The other files are still held by social services, because they contain too much information on other people, so it is impossible to provide her with a copy. There are thousands of sheets of paper in those files. Members should remember that those documents are primarily about a child who was only in care until she was two. It took a team of social workers more than a year to compile those documents for her.

Unfortunately, I could not get any files regarding my eldest daughter, because social services do not currently have the capacity to pull together those files for her. Looking at the six files that relate to my daughter who was two when she came to live with us, I can only imagine the reams of paper and documents that would need to be compiled for someone who came to live with us at the age of five—to do that would certainly be too much of a constraint on the time of our already overstretched social workers.

Social work is the first service to be blamed by society when abuse of a child goes unnoticed, but it is also the first service to be forgotten when everything is going well. Social workers look after every vulnerable person, regardless of age, in our society. They are underresourced, overutilised and stretched further than we in this Parliament accept or understand, and they are the linchpin for everything that we are trying to do.

Presiding Officer, I am sure that you are asking yourself what on earth that has to do with the bill in

front of us. It has already been agreed that the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill is primarily about adding two years—16 and 17—to the existing system of children's hearings panels. No one in the chamber disputes that premise or goal—that is why we voted for it at stage 1. No one wants to see children in jail, and any suggestion of that is a political spin of the most opportunist kind.

The issue is not about the direction of travel but about how we get to the goal and how it is resourced. The bill in its current form is predicated on the first principle, which is that everything within the current system is working—but, unfortunately, it is not. The children's hearings panel has to upscale: it needs to embark on a massive recruitment drive of volunteers. I think that the Government needs to set out in more detail how it will proceed with the proposals from the Mackie review, so that the process is as smooth as possible. That should be done before the bill becomes law.

We need hundreds more social workers. We have difficulty retaining the ones that we have, never mind recruiting more. The Government needs to look at the role of social workers and the conditions in which we are asking them to operate. The Government needs to find out why we have a retention problem and fix it, and that should be addressed before the bill becomes law.

We are in need of more foster carers. The latest Care Inspectorate report says:

"There were fewer new households approved ... than in any of the four preceding years",

and that

"402 foster care households ... deregistered."

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I acknowledge all the challenges that Roz McCall is laying out, but the bill that is in front of us today has the purpose of keeping children out of prison. I am interested—are you going to vote against the bill?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair.

Roz McCall: I am looking at how the bill will operate in reality and, because of the issues that are coming forward, I do not think that we will be able to support it.

Foster families support social work and ensure that children who need respite care are suitably homed and not reliant on residential care facilities. That should have been addressed before the bill became law.

The Education, Children and Young People Committee produced an excellent report, and I commend the committee on its hard work.

However, it must be said that the committee highlighted concerns about the sequencing of the bill. Those issues are not new and have not been properly addressed. Assurances that the issues will all be sorted out are not good enough. They should have been addressed before the bill is passed—as I am sure that it will be today. The big worry is that we might find ourselves in a position where, for all the good intentions and warm words and the support from children’s groups, the system will simply not cope and it will be children who are let down.

Where do the victims come into this? Many of them are children themselves. In the current judicial system for 16 and 17-year-olds, for all its flaws, it is at least enshrined that the rights of the victim must be upheld. From cases detailed by the advocacy, support, safety, information and services together—ASSIST—project, we know that the current system, through the children’s panel process, does not support those rights. It leaves victims of abuse open to risk, and unable to assess the risk that they find themselves in or to get the relevant information to keep themselves safe.

I want to see a Scotland where children can be properly supported. The aims of the bill are not in dispute, and I want properly funded, fully resourced and supported teams of childcare professionals. Unfortunately, as with many things that this Government brings forward, the foundation is simply not there: the risks—that the implementation of the bill will falter, the rights of victims, particularly young victims, will not be supported, and the same pattern of law will continue—are still too prevalent.

15:10

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to open the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour and, indeed, to have been involved in the passage of the bill throughout its stages.

Nothing is more important to our society than caring for the safety and wellbeing of our children and young people. I know that as a former primary school teacher and as a parent; I hope that people know that as human beings. We have an absolute obligation to support our next generation, because it is in the world that we give them that they have to grow.

The sad truth is that, in too many ways, Scotland’s young people are still being failed. The bill came with so much promise and so many good intentions. It came with a goal that—to echo the previous contribution—it is hard for anyone to disagree with. However, with the bill that is before us, shame is where we are now.

Scottish Labour supports young people, which also means that we support those professionals, adults and experts, and those charities, groups and families that stand around them. No one wants to see a young person end up losing their liberty; when that happens, it is a failing of what surrounds them. When that occurs, we need to ensure that the young person’s journey and experience is the very best that it can be, because an interaction with the judicial system or the children’s hearings system and the removal of liberty is a failure of what has gone before.

In the short time that I have, I want to pick up one element of what happened at stage 3—no doubt this will not come as a shock to the minister or, indeed, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, who is here today—which is the amendment regarding the UNCRC. We heard again in the minister’s opening speech today the powerful rhetoric about believing in children’s rights, believing in human rights and believing that the UNCRC should underpin decision making. Indeed, if we were only a few months from now, along with the statement that you made, Deputy Presiding Officer, at the start of the debate, about the Presiding Officer’s decision, potentially there would have been a statement about compliance with the UNCRC. All of that would be welcome.

When debating that amendment yesterday, I quoted the First Minister, who spoke about the dangers of lodging substantial amendments at stage 3 that would have

“a significant impact on legislation”.

That is what we saw yesterday—at very short notice, given the narrow period for lodging an amendment—with an amendment that immediately sought to alter the effect of the UNCRC, which had arisen because of Government research that highlighted a challenge and a risk with regard to prosecutions.

I do not want to be taken as undermining the importance of the discovery that the Scottish Government made. However, the UNCRC has been around for an incredibly long time, even if not in legislation, and we have had reassurances of the on-going work that is being done with regard to children and young people’s rights. Yet, it was only following stage 2—a few days prior to the stage 3 debate—that a fundamental change had to be brought forward because of a challenge and a risk of potential conflict between two human rights.

It disappoints me incredibly that the cabinet secretary said:

“The amendments recognise the uncertain and far-reaching impact of the UNCRC requirements on decisions to prosecute. They strike a fair and proportionate balance between protecting victims, serving justice in the public interest and upholding the rights of children who are involved in criminal proceedings. In doing so, they afford

the prosecutor an opportunity to remedy".—[*Official Report*, 24 April 2024; c 129.]

That is a fundamental shift in who is taking decisions with regard to human rights, and in particular, young people's rights. It should be the responsibility of the court, not the Executive, in the widest sense, to take those decisions.

I realise that time is short, so I seek your indulgence, Presiding Officer, because I want to finish with a question.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): I hear Mr Whitfield's concerns very loudly, and I put that on record. Does he recognise that, in holding up the rights of victims, who could be children, it is imperative that we have an appropriate mechanism for the court to allow prosecutors one chance at a remedy to prevent cases from being deserted, which would not be in the public interest?

Martin Whitfield: Of course, we are always challenged by the conflict between individual human rights, be it in relation to housing, healthcare, education or justice. We have a method of dealing with that, which has been used successfully for more than 20 years.

To finish, I ask a question that I think goes to the heart of the challenges that I find with the bill. We talk about the importance of care experience. We talk about the importance of children being around the table and being part of the discussions about the crucial issues. I ask the Government: how many children were involved in the consultation regarding taking away one of their rights?

15:16

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): We will vote for the bill at stage 3 at decision time. We have reservations, some of which Martin Whitfield has eloquently set out, but I want to first talk about the experiences that drive me in relation to the bill. One was my visit to Polmont young offenders institution. It is basically a prison. The smell is overpowering, the doors are big and heavy with big locks and the guards have uniforms. It is no place for a child. I know that there are only small numbers of children there now, but we should end the placing of children there as quickly as possible. The experience was quite striking.

The second experience was just a few weeks ago, when I, along with the Education, Children and Young People Committee, met care-experienced children. They are frustrated and angry, and they feel that not much has changed. They want the Promise delivered, and they want it delivered yesterday.

The urgency of my commitment when I was party leader to abide by the Promise is my third

experience in the area. That is why I am going to vote for the bill at decision time. We should have care, not prison. We should have hearings, not courts. We should be treating children as children.

The reservations are clear. Martin Whitfield set out the process for getting there. I would rather have tested other legal opinion about what Martin Whitfield expressed. I am grateful that the cabinet secretary took time out to make contributions yesterday to give us some reassurance. I am unhappy about the change, and I think that she knows that we are all unhappy about that, which is why I voted against those amendments yesterday.

I am also concerned about the shortage of money throughout the system, which is already under pressure. The minister was initially heavily criticised for the financial memorandum, and it was improved later on. However, we are also short of social workers, as Roz McCall set out. The system is under strain, and we need to ensure that we have some resolution to that before we have effective implementation.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: I have only four minutes, so I cannot take John Swinney's intervention, if he does not mind.

My amendments are an important part of my contribution to the bill. The single point of contact for victim information to allow for information to be shared and for safety planning purposes is very important to ensuring that the provisions that are available in the children's hearings system are broadly the same as those in the adult criminal justice system. Because that extends to all children in the children's hearings system, it goes beyond the cohort of 16 and 17-year-olds. It goes beyond compulsory supervision orders and movement restriction conditions.

That is quite a significant step, and the minister was not in favour of it at the start. However, I am grateful for the fact that she moved and that she was persuaded by her colleagues Stephanie Callaghan, Ruth Maguire, Michelle Thomson and others. Their, I must say, careful exercise of power made sure that the minister moved and negotiated with me to come up with what I think is quite a satisfactory solution, which is supported by Victim Support Scotland and the other organisations, as well. It is consistent with the Kilbrandon principles, which I was keen to adhere to.

When it comes to information sharing just now, only 14 per cent of victims access that very limited information. We need to ramp that right up to ensure that many more people access the information that they need for safety planning purposes. I am really pleased that those

amendments were agreed to, and I think that an important piece of law will be forthcoming.

However, implementation is what it is all about. The minister knows that, and I hope that she has got the commitment from her Cabinet colleagues for financing it, because it will need time, sequencing and a lot of money. Everybody is watching. The social workers are watching, the children's hearings system is watching and, most important of all, the care-experienced people are watching. There is great expectation that it will work—and work effectively—and that is why the minister needs to ensure that it does work.

15:21

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I acknowledge the work of committee colleagues. Their willingness to work across party lines for the benefit of our young citizens was powerful and has brought about positive changes to legislation that will be meaningful to those whom we are here to serve.

As I did yesterday, I thank the minister for the distance that she travelled on the issues that the committee raised, for listening generously and for providing me and colleagues with amendments to the bill that helped to achieve the changes that we wished to see.

I give sincere thanks to all those who provided the committee with evidence, expertise and experience. In particular, I thank Victim Support Scotland, Scottish Women's Aid, the ASSIST project and others who highlighted with clarity those whom we would be letting down if we did not think of all children and young people and not just those who are involved in the system because of their harmful behaviour.

One of the voices that has stayed, and will stay, with me is that of the parents who had lost a child to murder and asked for anonymity for their child. I am sorry that the bill was not the place to get change, but I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to consult on the matter. I will not forget their voice, and I promise that I will do all that I can to further their ask that the surviving siblings of murdered children can grow up free from the significant impact of continuing traumatising press and social media coverage.

The Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill will uphold the Promise by improving outcomes for children and young people who are navigating care and justice, ensuring that children who come into contact with care and justice services or come into conflict with the law do so in an age-appropriate system and setting.

The deprivation of liberty of a child should be a last resort and should be used only for the shortest

period of time. It is true that children in secure accommodation and custody continue to be some of our most disadvantaged and excluded children in society. Many have already faced multiple adverse experiences, including abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, instability, community violence, deprivation, loss or bereavement, each of which brings associated trauma. Many such children have significant mental health, emotional or wellbeing needs, which are often undiagnosed, and they do not have the access to support that they require. Where appropriate care and support are provided, that can encourage healthy development and improve current and future outcomes and opportunities to live a fulfilling life in the community.

Although secure accommodation and young offenders institutions can both deprive children of liberty, the environments are distinctly different. Safe and trusting relationships are the cornerstone of promoting children's healthy development, but those are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to develop in a custodial environment such as a young offenders institution.

Children should not be in prison. The bill ends the imprisonment of children in Scotland. Evidence, as well as common decency, shows us that, when children come into conflict with the law, providing them with the best support to address the causes of their behaviour helps them to reintegrate, to rehabilitate and, importantly, to desist from harmful behaviour. That, in turn, prevents further harm in our communities.

I think that it is fair to say that the balance of the bill on the rights of all children has been greatly improved through the committee process. Significant improvements have been made to the information-sharing provisions for victims, and provisions have been included on the provision of support for victims in the children's hearings system, on the establishment of a single point of contact service and on reporting duties, which will ensure that there is accountability and an opportunity for scrutiny. The bill represents significant progress in realising children's rights, and I will be proud to vote for it tonight.

15:25

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Andrew was aged 14 when he was abducted and held in a disused building by four teenagers whom he did not know. The gang tied him to a chair and bound his wrists. They struck him with a stick and pressed it against his throat. Andrew, which is not his real name, was ordered to apologise for his sexuality. He was told that, in Iran, he would get his head cut off for being gay. His friend was told, "You're next," and a container of flammable liquid in the room added to Andrew's distress.

That terrifying ordeal was filmed and shared, and it ended only when the gang fled at the sound of sirens. That incident happened in the west of Scotland last June. Police Scotland, to its credit, apprehended the four suspects, and Andrew's parents were informed that they would appear in court. However, that did not happen. The Crown Office decided that they would instead be referred to the children's reporter. Nobody told Andrew and nobody told his parents. They had no say.

I wrote to the Lord Advocate, who conceded that what took place was "clearly a serious offence", only it was not treated as such. After nine months, Andrew's parents were told that none of the suspects would even be subject to a panel hearing. They are deprived of basic information that they would have received had the case gone to court.

Three months ago, Andrew was attacked again. He was beaten unconscious. The assailant fled but returned to film his handiwork. Andrew's parents have again been told that that act of sickening violence is also a matter for the children's reporter. I truly cannot imagine the trauma suffered by Andrew, or the distress, confusion, helplessness and even rage of his parents.

Ruth Maguire: Will the member take an intervention?

Russell Findlay: I am sorry, but I have only four minutes. If I have time, I will come back to the member.

The focus of the bill is on the rights, interests and welfare of young people in the criminal justice system. No one wants to unduly criminalise young people who commit youthful misdeeds. Those who make false accusations about that do themselves a disservice. However, I ask, without apology: what about the rights, interests and welfare of victims? Like Andrew, they are often young people.

The concepts of punishment and deterrence appear to have become alien. Excuses are made, no matter how heinous the crime, and mitigation often becomes justification. Criminal justice proceedings are then rebadged as welfare hearings. Some MSPs may pat themselves on the back today and applaud when the bill is passed, but they should know that its passing will result in more cases like the one that I have just described, in which children are harmed by crime only to be further harmed by the system. The Scottish National Party Government needs to be honest with the public about that.

This morning, Andrew's mother told me:

"This has consumed us. We cannot come to terms with this happening in Scotland in 2024. Serious crime is being downgraded."

Andrew's parents wrote to the Lord Advocate and told her:

"The clear message to us, and to our son, is that people can do what they want to him because he just doesn't matter enough."

Well, Andrew does matter, and for him, for his family and for many other voiceless victims, and for the other reasons that have been set out today by my colleague Roz McCall and by Martin Whitfield, we will not vote for the bill today.

15:29

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I have had the duty and, in part, the pleasure of engaging with the bill since its outset, through the work of the Education, Children and Young People Committee and of the Finance and Public Administration Committee. Like others, I fully agree with the bill's core and founding principle that children should not be in prison. Indeed, Willie Rennie set that out well and eloquently.

I was deeply affected by the Education, Children and Young People Committee's visit to Polmont. There is no doubt that it is a prison. It was the first time I had ever been in a prison and it met all the television, film and literature stereotypes for how frankly terrifying a place like that can be.

I was also deeply affected by a visit to a secure care centre, which was also a moving experience, if a little different. Parts of the secure care sector still have many of the characteristics of imprisonment. Children arriving at that centre, some from far-flung places across the United Kingdom, find themselves in a holding cell—I can call it little else. I was moved to tears by seeing, in that cell, a child's duvet and a single teddy bear. That juxtaposition showed me the level of fear and discomfort that a young person would feel going into that place with its very small comforts.

The bill is no great transformation. I believe that it will be the right thing for children not to be in prison, but secure settings are also incredibly challenging for young people. We must recognise that those centres, as other members have said, must be well resourced and appropriately supported, but we have concerns that that has not been sufficiently addressed in the bill.

Throughout the passage of the bill, I have raised the issue of cross-border placements. I did so again yesterday when I moved my amendment, and I was disappointed that the Government saw fit to vote against it, although the minister set out some reasons for doing so. I recognise those reasons; we have engaged in correspondence; and the minister has taken time to meet me.

In a briefing ahead of stage 3, The Promise Scotland stated that the existence of cross-border placements

“skews the landscape for Scotland so that there is a lack of strategic planning for children, meaning that children can be put in inappropriate settings if demand has spiked”.

I could not identify any accompanying evidence for that claim. Indeed, the Education, Children and Young People Committee heard substantial evidence that it is precisely those cross-border placements that are ensuring the financial sustainability of the sector in Scotland. The rate paid for a child on a cross-border placement is higher than the Scotland Excel framework rate, which means that the sector in Scotland is, to a very large extent, reliant on cross-border placements to keep the lights on. In the words of one professional from the secure care sector:

“Without that income subsidy, no service for Scottish children would exist.”—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 29 March 2023; c 12.]

I think that some progress was made yesterday when the minister spoke about making judgments on a case-by-case basis, but the prevailing policy direction, as expressed by The Promise Scotland and others, indicates that there is still a drive to take the number of such placements lower. We have not had any assurance about that process, but I find it difficult to see how the sector would not be further exposed as a result.

The sector is already grappling with significant and extreme funding and resourcing challenges. A letter that was provided to me this week by the secure care sector shows that, despite a Scottish Government commitment in September 2023 to a wage of £12 an hour for workers in that sector, the Government has failed to deliver on that assurance. The sector has no ability to plan its finances for the year ahead; it has been told that it has to meet that figure, but no funding has been delivered for that and there is no clarity about when any such delivery will actually happen. It is a precarious situation and, given where I started my speech, I do not find that acceptable.

15:34

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): As a member of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the stage 3 debate on the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill. I thank the committee clerks and our witnesses for their input to the bill, and I also thank the minister for her engagement and the other committee members for keeping their focus firmly on the rights of all the children who will be impacted by the legislation. My parliamentary office backs on to the Royal Mile primary school, and hearing the pupils as they play is a lovely reminder of our duty,

which is to make Scotland the best possible place for our children to grow up in.

The bill is important. It supports children's rights in line with the principles of the UNCRC and the ethos of getting it right for every child, and it represents a step forward in the Scottish Parliament's commitment to keeping the Promise.

The journey to stage 3 has sometimes been challenging, but the bill represents a big step in advancing children's rights and fostering a justice system that truly serves our youth. Like others, I want to mention our committee visit to Polmont prison. It was painfully clear that such facilities are entirely unsuitable for children. These young individuals need comprehensive support for their wellbeing, not harmful environments that fail to meet their developmental and emotional needs.

I want to spend the rest of my time talking about the victims and about safeguarding their rights. It is crucial to prioritise the fulfilment of children's rights, whether they have caused harm, whether they have been harmed, or both. Achieving that delicate balance was certainly a focal point of our committee's scrutiny, and I think that the bill gets the balance right.

Access to information is vital for victims as it allows them to plan for their safety and helps them recover from traumatic experiences. I am grateful to Willie Rennie for working hard to reach agreement and for lodging his amendments, which will empower the principal reporter to share information that is so critical for victims. What is more, the changes will ensure that victims have on-going access to information without the need for repeated requests, which will provide them with the consistent support that they deserve. The establishment of a single point of contact will make it easier for children and young people to access the information that they need to safety plan. It will also enable them to exercise their right to recovery, allowing them to reclaim their agency and make informed decisions, and paving the way to healing and justice.

It is imperative that we hold ourselves accountable. I thank my colleague Ruth Maguire for her amendment that will place a duty on ministers to conduct thorough assessments of the services' effectiveness in collaboration with key agencies that are involved in the children's hearings system. By actively listening to the experiences of those who use the support services, we can genuinely ensure that we get it right for every child.

The advancement of victims' rights could not have been achieved without the tireless efforts of stakeholders such as Victim Support Scotland, Children 1st, Scottish Women's Aid and young people themselves. I am grateful for the

engagement on and unwavering advocacy for the safeguarding of victims throughout the bill's journey. Delivering for our children through the legislation will have its challenges. We have heard different views from across the chamber, but the dedication to placing children and young people at the forefront of our efforts has endured.

I whole-heartedly stand behind the bill.

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

15:38

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Scottish Labour whole-heartedly supports the intentions to improve children and young people's experiences and outcomes, to strengthen their rights, and to stop putting children in prisons. That is why we voted for the bill at stage 1. However, in considering a bill at stage 3, we must be driven not only by intentions but by the bill's detail and its ability to deliver on those intentions. It is not enough to stop locking children up; we also have to give them a fighting chance to thrive in this world, with all the scaffolding that they need to do that. The bill does not include enough measures to guarantee that, and it is on that basis that Scottish Labour cannot support it today.

Legislation drives action and resource. It provides leadership on what Parliament expects to be delivered. In this case, I believe that we all expect improved child rights and wellbeing, joined-up agency working, a focus on victims' rights, access to justice and a fully supported workforce to deliver that. When the going gets tough on the front line—in many ways, as we all know, it is tough right now—the letter of the law matters. I have seen too many good intentions, strategies and plans not being delivered. The letter of the law matters, and I make no apology for working hard to make sure that the bill included all that it needed to.

During yesterday's debates on amendments to the bill, and also in today's debate, members including Ruth Maguire and Willie Rennie and the minister have highlighted the importance of the Kilbrandon principles. They assert that the best interests of the child, their wellbeing and support for them must be central to the system. Sadly, however, attempts from MSPs across the chamber to add to the bill mechanisms to ensure that that is the case were rejected.

The failure to back amendments on training means that such training will not be there for the front-line professionals who deliver the new and nuanced support that is necessary to address the complex needs of the children whom they work with.

The bill does not go far enough to address Sheriff Mackie's recommendation that more must be done to uphold the rights of children and young people to legal support. That was another area that the Government could have addressed by supporting one of my amendments yesterday. Without changes to ensure access to legal aid for all, the bill falls short of UNCRC compliance. Anything short of automatic access is a dereliction of the duty to abide by article 40. The figures are clear that the current notification method is not working. My amendments could have addressed that. We are clear that every bill that is brought forward that relates to children and young people should have rights compliance at its heart, and such a glaring omission to address compliance issues in this piece of legislation calls into question whether the Government will deliver the UNCRC in relation to that.

Lastly, I will talk about the capacity that is needed to get this right. The whole system—social work, secure care, justice advocacy and all—must be better resourced in staff, support and training. It does not yet have the capacity to deliver on the aims of the bill, and many stakeholders have said that that could set back progress. Social Work Scotland said that, if there is not enough capacity,

“the bill will not achieve its purpose and risks placing further pressure and stress on an already stretched workforce, impacting further on recruitment and retention and capacity to meet the goals of Promise”.

Had the Government listened to pleas from committee members and stakeholders on the importance of sequencing, it would have addressed the Mackie recommendations on the importance of consistency in panel members and chairs, requiring more panel members before it brought the bill forward. In not doing so, it has allowed capacity to become a concern. I attempted to introduce a safeguard via amendments to delay the commencement of the legislation until support was in place, but those were voted down.

There were multiple opportunities yesterday for the Government to ensure that capacity in the system was addressed, but the reality is that it did not support that. It has failed to guarantee training for all staff, leaving them with new duties without the support to address those. It has failed to fully include a victim voice in hearings. It has failed to plug gaps in legal aid. It did not guarantee that there would be enough panel members. It did not put in place provisions to address recruitment concerns or support agencies to work together.

Worst of all—this is the bit that I find most difficult—the Government did not make it clear that the UNCRC is the driver, and it missed an opportunity to make provision for that in the bill through the amendments that we lodged. The

Government then lodged an amendment that, as Martin Whitfield outlined yesterday, could undermine it.

In light of those shortcomings, sadly, we cannot support a bill that fails to give the care and justice system the legislative reform and capacity that is needed to deliver properly on its principles.

I will close, Presiding Officer. As we consider what the future of Scotland's children might look like, we must remember that their voices must be heard, their needs must be met and their rights must be upheld. It is incumbent on us to champion and do the right thing for those who struggle to be heard. The promises that are outlined in the children's hearings review must not be neglected—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Duncan-Glancy, you need to conclude, please.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: They demand concrete action. We must prioritise wellbeing and children's rights.

15:43

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The principles of the bill are really important. What it seeks to do is key to delivering on the Promise and on our promises to young people. That is why my party—and the Parliament—voted for those principles at stage 1. However, as Roz McCall succinctly put it, the issue is not about the direction of travel but about the way in which we get there. As Martin Whitfield put it in an article today,

“this is yet another well-intentioned ... government bill that is incompatible with the situation on the ground.”

The Government has a concerning tendency to propose legislation that in principle is laudable yet in execution is utterly unworkable, is subject to legal challenge or has unintended consequences.

Yesterday, I raised the removal of sections 12 and 13. I shall not rehearse the arguments, but what is key is that the stage 1 report missed the issue. At stage 2, when I asked about restrictions on press freedom, the minister reassured the Education, Children and Young People Committee that she had “no concerns” at all. I asked whether she had taken legal advice, and she reassured us that she had taken legal advice on every section. However, yesterday, she removed sections 12 and 13, saying that she had been unaware of how prejudicial the original drafting was, because, basically, no one told her.

Leaving aside what the minister is suggesting about the legal advice that she was given, and the fact that surely the Government is responsible for thinking through the consequences of what it drafts, it is a fair point. The first report missed the

fact that the Government had drafted a shocking and utterly unworkable clause, which the minister had not understood sufficiently to remove at stage 2. Had it gone through, it would have likely contravened the European convention on human rights and prevented the bill from operating.

This afternoon, we have heard that huge concerns remain about the bill and its implications, because it does not exist in a silo. Roz McCall said:

“The children's hearings panel ... needs to embark on a massive recruitment drive of volunteers. ... Hundreds more social workers”

are also needed and

“We are in need of more foster carers.”

She told us, in powerful testimony, of the current capacity of social services.

Russell Findlay talked powerfully about the victim's view and picked up on Victim Support Scotland's submission that people who are harmed by 16 or 17-year-olds will have their rights to information and support removed by the bill.

We heard evidence that social workers support the principles and—like us—they want this to happen, but social work faces a huge turnover of staff. The bill will pass while providing no more money, leaving them to patch things together.

The fact is that years of Scottish National Party cuts to vital services mean that many of the changes that are proposed in the bill will not be able to be put into practice while Scotland's local authorities and social work departments struggle with cuts to services. Michael Marra called their position “precarious”, and Pam Duncan-Glancy also picked up on that point. The finances are hugely important, and I am not convinced that any of us has confidence that they will be forthcoming—but they are not even the sole concern. Pam Duncan-Glancy also has the worry, which I share, that the system simply does not have the capacity to do what the bill aims to do, and therefore it will put more stress on the workforce.

Martin Whitfield picked up a process point. He told us that substantive amendments around the UNCRC were brought forward at stage 3. That is a fundamental change that was laid before the Parliament because something—that is, something else—seems to have been missed at an earlier stage. That worries me. What else might have been missed and not been picked up by the minister?

Parliament is supportive of the principles of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill. I think that I speak for us all when I say that we want those principles to be enacted. Stephanie Callaghan rightly reminded us that we all want to

make Scotland the best place for young people to grow up in. However, member after member has warned Parliament, at the end of a very long process, that they do not have confidence that the bill is drafted in such a way that, as an act, it will achieve that. The minister assured us at the start that the bill that she proposes today shows what can be achieved with good will, but good will does not an effective and robust law make.

Stakeholders and speakers have made strong representations that effective and robust law is not what is being presented here, and that the bill will not achieve the principles that we all want. In fact, the unintended and negative consequences might well be considerable. Accordingly, I will not vote for what I think will prove to be an unworkable, flawed bill that will ultimately let down those who we all want to protect and that will fail to deliver the principles that we all want.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister to close on behalf of the Scottish Government.

15:48

Natalie Don: This has proved to be a spirited and insightful debate. I have no doubt that members across the chamber have the best interests of Scotland's children at the forefront of their minds. It is fair to say that the issues that we have debated and their effect on children's outcomes, on victims, on communities and on services elicit strong views from members.

Some opinions that have been expressed relate to big-picture fundamental principles and concepts, while others drill down into the important detail of delivery and regulatory systems. The diversity of the issues that draw that commentary reflects the scope, scale and positive potential of the bill.

I turn to some specific issues that have been raised this afternoon. I thank Ruth Maguire for her contribution, and I agree with her entirely that children should not be in prison. Many members have talked about their difficult experiences when visiting Polmont. I know that concerns have been expressed about raising the age of referral, but I want to take a moment to emphasise how important I believe that step is.

When a child offends, we want to do everything that we can do to ensure that such behaviour is not repeated. Rehabilitation is absolutely key, but we need also to remember that there are welfare concerns about most children who commit offences. Allowing all children access to the hearings system and, equally, to secure care rather than young offenders institutions, will give our young people the most appropriate support to aid their rehabilitation, reintegration and

assistance, which should prevent future harmful behaviour.

I thank Roz McCall for her personal reflections; I agree with some of her sentiments about social work. If I might, I will give a reflection of my own. I had a social worker from when I was 13 until I was about 16. She was fantastic, and she helped me when I needed it most. As proof of how much she cared, on the day after the Scottish Parliament election in 2021 I received a message of congratulation from her, nearly 17 years after I had lost contact with her. I absolutely understand, value and respect the work of social workers to the highest extent.

The Scottish Government is taking action to improve recruitment and retention of social workers and to improve their experiences. We have developed a joint workforce improvement plan, which is informed by the voices of social workers and others. We have formed a joint social care and social work services task force to deliver improvements. For rural areas, a rural workforce recruitment strategy advisory group has been set up to examine the challenges in remote and rural areas. Other work is on-going.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I put on record my thanks to the minister for sharing her personal experience, which is important for all of us to have heard. Will she also set out when she will publish the plan for the social work workforce?

Natalie Don: I do not have that detail to hand, but I will be happy to get back to Ms Duncan-Glancy when I do.

As I advised in my opening speech, the finances have been updated in conjunction with our delivery partners. That aspect will continue to be monitored as we look towards implementation. Costs will be factored into Government budget profiling in the normal manner for any piece of legislation.

I am so sorry to hear about the specific case that Russell Findlay mentioned in his contribution. He asked about the rights of victims. I re-emphasise that the changes in the bill will strengthen such rights. I have heard loud and clear the concerns of stakeholders and committee members on victim support and victims' rights. I emphasise again that the Government is committed to supporting victims, no matter which system deals with an offence case. Establishing the single point of contact and the other actions that we have taken during the bill's progress will help with that.

Ruth Maguire mentioned anonymity. I want to make it clear that I have every sympathy with the suffering of families who have experienced the loss of a child. Following a round-table meeting with MSPs and stakeholders, and having met bereaved families, the cabinet secretary is now

considering how a consultation could be framed and the timescale for its publication this year. As Ms Maguire noted, the bill is not the place for that, but I assure members that work is on-going in that space.

Another issue that members have raised is capacity building, which, along with system readiness, is absolutely key. We have convened a resourcing and implementation group with more than 30 delivery agencies. That group met three times in 2023 and met again in February. Its work, and that which is happening through other engagement opportunities, will help us to continue to assess the most current cost forecasts and to factor those into Scottish Government budget profiles for the coming years.

Although the bill is likely to lead to more hearings being held, the number of hearings is currently significantly lower than it was at its peak. The reforms will not take hearing numbers anywhere near the previous levels.

On panel numbers, which I touched on yesterday, we cannot rely on overall numbers to assess system readiness. They offer no useful guide to Parliament. In certain areas, some volunteers are able to dedicate more time than others are. I have trust in our implementation group, which is working on capacity building and system readiness to take the legislation forward.

I am really disappointed to hear that the Conservatives and Labour will not be voting for the bill, which really makes me question those parties' commitment to the Promise.

Martin Whitfield *rose*—

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The minister must conclude.

Natalie Don: In closing, I again thank Parliament for the diligent scrutiny that the bill has undergone. I thank members of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, the Criminal Justice Committee and the Education, Children and Young People Committee. The diligent scrutiny of the bill by committee members and others has helped to shape the final form of the bill—as it should.

I thank the committee clerks, who have worked so hard to support the work of the committees, and I thank those who have supported members in scrutinising and improving the bill.

Finally, I thank my excellent officials for working so hard on what has been a demanding and challenging piece of legislation, and for introducing it to someone who was, at the time, a new minister who had little experience of some of the areas covered.

The Scottish Government is clear that the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill makes significant and necessary improvements to further embed the UNCRC and to keep the Promise. I commend the bill to Parliament and encourage members across the chamber to support it.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill at stage 3.

Decision Time

15:56

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S6M-12944, in the name of Natalie Don, on the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. As this is a motion to pass a bill at stage 3, the question must be decided by division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

15:56

Meeting suspended.

15:58

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on motion S6M-12944, in the name of Natalie Don. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My screen has gone blank. I want to check that my vote has been accurately recorded.

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

I call Foysol Choudhury for a point of order. [*Interruption.*] I can confirm that your vote has been recorded, Mr Choudhury.

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Thank you very much.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sorry, but I was not able to access the system. I would have voted yes.

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

For

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

Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, 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)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)

Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (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)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire)
 (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 16:01.

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 71, Against 49, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill be passed.

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

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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