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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 4 September 2024

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

Portfolio Question Time

Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business today is portfolio questions, and the first portfolio this afternoon is Deputy First Minister responsibilities, economy and Gaelic.

I remind members that questions 1 and 7 are grouped together and that I will take any supplementaries on those questions after both have been answered. Otherwise, members who wish to request a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question.

Fornethy House Survivors

1. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government whether its decision not to make survivors of abuse at Fornethy house eligible for Scotland's redress scheme was due to budgetary pressures. (S6O-03653)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): No, and I want to push back very robustly on any suggestion that it was. The decision was not made lightly.

The existing eligibility criteria reflect the core purpose of Scotland's redress scheme, as approved by Parliament, which was designed primarily for those vulnerable children who were in long-term care, who were often isolated and who had limited or no contact with their families. Inquiries conducted by an independent researcher indicate that that was not the position of Fornethy survivors, although that in no way diminishes the abhorrent experiences of those survivors. I will meet members of the Fornethy survivors group next week to discuss their concerns directly.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The abuse that the Fornethy women endured as children is utterly appalling. Anyone who has met them cannot help but feel a sense of fury at what they suffered and admiration for their brave fight for justice. They now face the further injustice of being excluded from a scheme that exists to compensate people like them who were abused in care as children.

Why? Fundamentally, they face that further injustice because they were not abused for long enough.

Last year, John Swinney said that he believed that it was

"possible for Fornethy survivors to be successful in applying under the scheme."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 12 January 2023; c 14.]

It is clear that that position has changed. Does the Deputy First Minister recognise that, by excluding the Fornethy women from the redress scheme, she has denied them not just access to compensation but official recognition by the state and, ultimately, their quest for justice?

Kate Forbes: I completely refute that characterisation of the decision. I am deeply sorry to hear what Fornethy survivors had to endure as children, the impact that that abuse has had on their lives and the abhorrent experiences that they had, and I commend their courage in sharing those experiences.

These are extremely weighty and difficult matters that we have tried to balance carefully. As I have already said to members, I will meet the Fornethy survivors group, and we will work to see what else can be done to support those survivors.

Fornethy House Survivors (Redress Scheme)

7. **Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government for what reason it decided that survivors of abuse at Fornethy house should not be eligible to access Scotland's redress scheme. (S6O-03659)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): I determined not to amend the eligibility criteria for Scotland's redress scheme after deep and careful consideration because I believe that it continues to reflect the core purpose, as approved by Parliament following a public consultation and the taking on board of the views of survivors, which is paramount. That core purpose was to provide redress for vulnerable children who were in long-term care, who were often isolated and who had limited or no contact with their families.

Decisions on individual applications are rightfully a matter for Redress Scotland.

Sue Webber: Fornethy house survivors say that they are shocked, disgusted and angry. The unanimous view of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee was that the Fornethy survivors should be included in the scheme.

On 12 January 2023, the then Deputy First Minister John Swinney told my committee:

"I do not believe that, as things stand, there is an inherent impediment to applications to the redress scheme coming forward from people who spent time at Fornethy ... To put it slightly more bluntly, I reject the idea that the scheme is not for Fornethy survivors; I think that it is possible for Fornethy survivors to be successful in applying under the scheme."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 12 January 2023; c 14.]

What has changed? What will the Deputy First Minister say to the women—who are now starting a billboard campaign in their fight for compensation—when she meets them next week?

Kate Forbes: What I will say to them is, quite rightly, to be said to them first, because they are the ones who have come forward, in courage, have shared their experiences and have had to endure abhorrent abuse.

As the member will know, the previous Deputy First Minister met representatives of the Fornethy survivors group to discuss the findings of the independent research report that was commissioned to consider those matters quite directly. Although it in no way diminishes the experiences of those survivors, it was recognised during the passage of the original legislation that eligibility was to reflect those people in long-term care with limited or no contact with their families.

As I have said, I will meet the Fornethy survivors group, and I look forward to engaging directly with it.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): The Deputy First Minister will know of the particular interest of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee in this matter. We have taken extensive evidence—over many years, in fact—from the Fornethy survivors.

We have received the Deputy First Minister's letter, and we will still have an opportunity to consider it formally. However, I can say, informally, that the committee is unanimously still of the view, as we expressed it, that those women are entitled to compensation. We are therefore bitterly disappointed, and I serve notice to the Deputy First Minister that the committee will seek debating time to give the chamber the opportunity to express its view as to whether the Government should change its position.

Kate Forbes: I commend the petitions committee for the way in which it has taken evidence on the matter in a compassionate, caring but robust manner, which is totally in keeping with the weighty matters that are under discussion. I am obviously willing to engage with the committee as appropriate, and to engage with Parliament, if it comes to that.

These are not matters that I have concluded lightly. I have engaged extensively with survivors involved with the redress scheme, as I know that

the convener will have, and I will, of course, engage directly with the survivors in the coming days.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Those were wee girls—hundreds, maybe even thousands—who were sent to Fornethy by the state and abused at its hands physically, mentally and, in some cases, sexually. Yet the state—the Government and Glasgow City Council—is utterly failing to take any responsibility. If the Deputy First Minister does not believe that extending the redress scheme is the way for the state to take responsibility, what does she think is the way?

When I and the Fornethy survivors meet the Deputy First Minister next week, some of the women will not be there, because they have died since they were abused. How much longer do these survivors have to wait?

Kate Forbes: I say up front that, having read and listened carefully to some of the experiences that have been shared, I am in absolutely no doubt about the appalling, disgraceful and disgusting abuse that those individuals have suffered. That is why it is so important that we get this right and that we navigate the issues, recognising the debate when the legislation was first passed and the views of survivors then.

I look forward to meeting Colin Smyth and the survivors next week. The decision that the Government has come to does not in any way diminish the experiences that the women at Fornethy suffered.

Shared Prosperity and Levelling Up Funds

2. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with United Kingdom Government counterparts regarding future plans for the shared prosperity and levelling up funds. (S6O-03654)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): We are in regular contact with the UK Government on a range of issues, including the shared prosperity and levelling up funds. We continue to seek clarity on the future of those programmes, which I do not have as yet.

Willie Coffey: Let us remember that the funds emerged as a replacement for European funding, which we had full engagement with and scrutiny of. With these funds, there is none of that and no attempt to even engage with our local councils on whether they share the priorities that were set for them by the previous UK Government.

Is there any hope that the Labour Government will reverse that nonsense and refocus the policy intention of the funds so that what is ultimately

delivered for local people reflects local needs and priorities, and that the Scottish Parliament will have a role in scrutinising the effectiveness of how that public money is spent?

Kate Forbes: I am encouraged by the Labour Party's manifesto commitment to

"restore decision-making over the allocation of structural funds"

to the devolved nations. Taking it at its word, I therefore expect to work with the UK Government on the design and implementation of any future funds, and I only await the invitation to do so.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Can I say how much I welcome the new-found enthusiasm on the Scottish National Party benches for the shared prosperity and levelling up funds? I do not remember hearing that in the recent past, but it is good to know that the funds are welcome. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that many communities across Scotland have benefited from those funds and that we all want to see them continue?

Kate Forbes: We certainly used to benefit from all the funds that we got from the European Union, which we had more power over, control over and say in the allocation of. My new-found enthusiasm is in the hope that the decisions might be less politicised than they were under the regime that was operated by Murdo Fraser's colleagues.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): There has been deep frustration in Glasgow in recent months due to the closure of the regeneration capital grant fund at Scottish Government level and the suspension of funds such as the community ownership fund at UK Government level. Will the Deputy First Minister look to engage rapidly with the Treasury and her colleagues in Government to ensure that, with the budget forthcoming in October, we can rapidly reopen those funds if capital funding is unlocked?

Kate Forbes: The member can rest assured that my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government is engaging extensively with the UK Government to ensure that there is adequate capital to reopen those funds.

Unfortunately, we are not feeling overly optimistic, considering the words of the Prime Minister about things getting worse before they get better and the Chancellor of the Exchequer's comments that this might be the hardest budget. Therefore, we will keep up our engagement, but it would be great if all members in the chamber recognised the fact that if there is more capital at source, we can do more.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I recently met STEP Scotland in my constituency, and it raised

the issue of a lack of clarity on the future of the shared prosperity fund and its impact on investment. Does the Deputy First Minister share those concerns?

Kate Forbes: I completely recognise the uncertainty that organisations such as STEP face regarding the future of the shared prosperity fund. We need clarity from the UK Government on its plans so that organisations can indeed plan ahead. My officials and Shona Robison's officials will continue to press for more financial clarity.

Wood-burning Stoves

3. **Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the economy secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding support for any businesses impacted by the ban on wood-burning stoves in new-build homes. (S6O-03655)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): Although the Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic has had no meetings with colleagues on the topic, I want to make it clear that there is no ban on wood-burning stoves. Under the new build heat standard, wood-burning stoves can continue to be installed as emergency heating in new buildings.

However, we acknowledge that stoves are often installed for more frequent use, and we are currently undertaking a review of the standard. That has involved both official and ministerial engagement with stove industry stakeholders. The Acting Minister for Climate Action is overseeing the review and will update Parliament when it reaches its conclusions shortly.

Fergus Ewing: As it happens, some years ago, I purchased a wood stove from an excellent small business in Inverness, which is called Bonk & Co. Does the minister agree that the failure to lift the ban on companies such as Bonk & Co selling their stoves for new homes is utterly—wait for it—bonkers? Is it also a hangover from the Green deal, which, like the contents of a wood stove, should surely now be no more than smouldering ashes?

Tom Arthur: I commend Fergus Ewing for assiduously representing local businesses in his constituency. I suggest that new members who are elected in 2026 and who are looking for some instruction on how to represent businesses in their constituencies have no finer example to turn to than Mr Ewing.

The points that he raised are why we are undertaking the review. As I said, the Minister for Climate Action is overseeing that work and leading on it, and he will report to Parliament to provide an update. As a minister whose work is within the economy portfolio, I stand ready and willing to

engage with any member of the Parliament on any concerns that they have about how Government regulation impacts on businesses in their constituency.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In the consultation for its new heat in buildings bill, the Scottish Government proposes

“to introduce a new law which will: Require those purchasing a property to comply with the prohibition on polluting heating within a specified amount of time following completion of the sale.”

I understand that Fergus Ewing’s question related to the impact of the new build heat standard and the ban on wood burners in new-build properties. Can the minister assure me that his Government is not about to get itself into another mess by trying to ban wood burners and other forms of direct heating from homes? If it is, what analysis has it undertaken of the further economic impact that that will have on businesses?

Tom Arthur: I assure the member that, as with all legislation and regulation, the Government will closely engage with business and will engage in close analysis of all of the particular economic impacts that could arise locally or nationally. I hope that that provides some reassurance for the member. I am more than happy to engage with him further if he wishes to discuss more.

Trade Links with Russia

4. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to implement the policy announced in March 2022 in regard to companies maintaining trade links with Russia following the invasion of Ukraine. (S6O-03656)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): In March 2022, we called on businesses in Scotland to sever their links with Russia. That policy reflects the specific circumstances of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and is additional to the United Kingdom Government’s regime of sanctions against Russia. We subsequently issued guidance for the Scottish Government and our economic agencies when entering into a significant relationship with companies. That sets out checks to undertake on companies to identify links with Russia and steps that they have taken to withdraw from them, while recognising that severing links may not always be feasible in exceptional circumstances.

Patrick Harvie: The Deputy First Minister may be aware of the Glasgow-based company Seapeak, which has been the subject of reports by investigative journalists and has continued to run vessels trading in Russian liquefied natural gas.

The fact that a firm based in Glasgow is continuing to prop up the Putin regime by trading in fossil fuels regardless of either the invasion of Ukraine or the climate emergency will shock and disgust many people. However, no action is currently being taken to shut down that extraordinarily unethical business.

Will the Deputy First Minister write to the new Foreign Secretary highlighting this scandal and urging the UK Government to ensure that firms that are profiteering from a business that fuels climate change and helps to fund Putin’s illegal war are shut down?

Kate Forbes: As Patrick Harvie suggested, sanctions are a reserved matter. We have made very clear what our views are in relation to Russia, and we expect businesses and organisations that are operating in Scotland to reflect that. We have called on the UK Government to put in place the strongest possible sanctions regime against Russia. I will write to the Foreign Secretary to make our position on those matters clear and to encourage the UK Government to continue to increase pressure on the Russian regime.

House Building

5. **Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the contribution that house building makes to the Scottish economy. (S6O-03657)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Our statistics estimate that, in 2023, investment in dwellings—house building and repairs and maintenance—totalled around £6.9 billion, directly contributing 3.5 per cent of gross domestic product. As our long-term strategy “Housing to 2040” sets out, housing makes a crucial contribution to our vision of an economy that delivers sustainable and inclusive growth for the people of Scotland.

Ruth Maguire: As well as providing benefits to the wider economy, housing plays a critical role in relation to economic opportunity for individuals and their families, and the impact that quality housing has on health and education is also well understood. With that in mind, will the Deputy First Minister provide an update on the work of the housing investment task force and the actions that are being taken to unlock housing investment that will bring economic and social benefit to our communities?

Kate Forbes: I met the housing minister a matter of hours ago to discuss progress on the housing investment task force and to consider how we can work together to ensure that there is a flow of investment and that homes are being built.

We recognise that housing is one of the most pressing economic issues of our day, but it is also one of the biggest opportunities if we can support people to live in warm, secure and affordable homes. In the programme for government that will be announced later today, Parliament will see the actions that we are taking that take account of some of the early outputs from the task force. The task force is due to report by the end of March 2025.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): During the summer, I met a number of developers who have highlighted the total collapse in the mid-market rent sector in Scotland following its inclusion in the Scottish National Party-Green rent controls policy. I am sorry to say that those developers are saying that Scotland is not open for business and we are seeing those developments and investments going to the north of England. Will the Scottish Government now agree to remove mid-market rent developments from the rent controls so that we can make sure that those homes are actually built?

Kate Forbes: I will briefly set the context. Since 2007, we have supported the delivery of more than 131,000 affordable homes, with more than 93,000 of those being for social rent. We will continue to build on that record with almost £600 million of investment in the affordable housing supply programme this year.

We are focused on delivering 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, and we have brought forward to 2024 the review that was scheduled for 2026 in order to concentrate on deliverability. I see an opportunity here to ensure that the regulatory framework allows us to deliver investment, to build homes and to ensure that everyone has access to secure and affordable housing. We will work with investors as well as representatives of the housing market and, critically, tenants in order to get it right.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): During the summer, I met a number of workers in the house-building industry, such as roofers, joiners and other trades workers. Young people and industry experts told me about the challenges that they face in finding training places and skilled workers and recruiting into the industry. I met a young apprentice who required to travel to London to gain a qualification to allow him to work in his chosen trade, and that is not unusual.

Given how important house building and, indeed, home improvement are to the Scottish economy, will the Deputy First Minister agree to encourage better cross-portfolio working to ensure that the sector can bridge that gap in locally accessible training places? Also, will she consider meeting industry experts, who have some solutions to help with those skills gaps?

Kate Forbes: In short, I am happy to meet and work with businesses, organisations and workers that are helping to deliver our pipeline of housing. The skills that the member references are relevant not only to housing but to the wider construction industry. We know how critical construction is to our overall economic performance, as well as to supporting some of the perhaps more deprived communities in Scotland. Through investment in infrastructure, we can regenerate different parts of Scotland, so there is a big opportunity here. That is a long way of saying that I am very happy to work with those groups.

Harland & Wolff

6. **David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with Harland & Wolff regarding any potential job losses at its yards in Methil in the Kirkcaldy constituency and Arnish on the Isle of Lewis. (S6O-03658)

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): The Scottish Government has held regular discussions with the management team and unions at Harland & Wolff. The Deputy First Minister spoke to the executive chairman on Monday 2 September and I visited the Methil site in July, when I was able to confirm our commitment to working with the company to secure the future for the vitally important jobs that it provides at both sites.

David Torrance: The workforce at both yards is passionate, dedicated and highly skilled. In recent years, the Methil site has seen a resurgence in shipbuilding. In addition, it has continued its presence in the renewables sector. Does the minister share my view that every avenue must be explored in order to safeguard the future of the site and ensure that jobs and apprenticeship opportunities exist for future generations for many years to come?

Tom Arthur: I do. I assure David Torrance that the Scottish Government is engaging with the United Kingdom Government and the business at a senior level and a local level. Ultimately, it is up to the management teams and investors in the business to work through the commercial options to provide a sustainable future for the organisation and the workforce. The business is fully aware of the interest from both Governments, and the management team is working closely with the UK and Scottish Governments.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): As Mr Torrance has recognised, the site at Methil has a highly skilled and committed workforce who are keen to contribute to a just transition. I understand that the Methil and Arnish sites have progressed to phase 2 of the Scottish offshore wind energy council's strategic investment model,

which is an important fund that supports businesses that will help us to realise a just transition.

When will a decision on investment be made? Does the minister recognise the importance of there being a swift decision in order to protect jobs in Methil and support the yard to secure contracts?

Tom Arthur: I am not in a position to confirm when a decision will be made, but I recognise the points that the member has raised.

Green Industrial Strategy

8. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the development of its green industrial strategy and its commitment to leverage up to £500 million over the next five years for Scotland's offshore wind supply chain. (S6O-03660)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The Scottish Government will publish its green industrial strategy shortly. We are kick-starting our commitment to invest up to £500 million to anchor our offshore wind supply chain in Scotland with an investment of £67 million in the sector in this financial year. That will support market certainty and help to create a highly productive, competitive offshore wind sector that provides thousands of new jobs, embeds innovation and boosts skills. We are working across the public sector to ensure that funding is delivered to projects as quickly as possible, subject to rigorous due diligence and value for money assurance processes.

Liam McArthur: Last year, the floating offshore wind task force made it clear that a minimum of three to five Scottish ports needed to be urgently transformed into new industrial hubs in order to enable the required roll-out of floating offshore wind. Without major downstream infrastructure investment in our offshore wind sector, there is little prospect of Scotland meeting our net zero goals or realising our energy potential.

Given the Cabinet Secretary for Finance's confirmation yesterday that ScotWind's revenues will be diverted away from tackling the climate and biodiversity crises, can the Deputy First Minister provide a cast-iron assurance that the Government remains committed to leveraging in the £500 million over the next five years for the offshore wind sector alongside a 10-year, £500 million just transition fund?

Kate Forbes: The fact that we have already spent £67 million as part of that £500 million illustrates that we are serious about delivering the investment. We are taking a commercial-first approach to investment to leverage private funding

in the infrastructure and manufacturing facilities that are critical to our world-leading offshore wind sector. Although investments are likely to have a specific geographical focus—perhaps even Orkney—the wider economic value will benefit all of Scotland in the process.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on Deputy First Minister responsibilities, economy and Gaelic. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next portfolio to allow members to change positions should they so wish. It would be helpful if members could do that quickly.

Finance and Local Government

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is finance and local government. Again, if a member wishes to ask a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

North Lanarkshire Council (Meetings)

1. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met North Lanarkshire Council and what was discussed. (S6O-03661)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Scottish ministers and Scottish Government officials regularly meet representatives from all local authorities to discuss a range of issues of mutual interest.

Clare Adamson: Pupils in primary 1 to 5 receive free school meals thanks to Scottish Government investment. Labour-run North Lanarkshire Council reportedly charges primary 6 and 7 pupils some of the highest prices for school meals in the country, and we know the extent of in-work poverty in that area. A family in my Motherwell and Wishaw constituency could be paying £170 a month, or £1,615 a year. What action can be taken to ensure that my constituents are able to access affordable school meals amid rising bills?

Shona Robison: The Scottish Government has made clear its commitment to supporting families and eradicating child poverty. We have the most extensive provision of free school meals in the United Kingdom, and our free school meals programme is a key element in meeting those aims. We continue to expand our programme, with the next phase covering families in receipt of the Scottish child payment with children in primary 6 or 7.

I note that, as of 31 March 2023, North Lanarkshire Council had general fund reserves of £250 million, which is the latest available audited

figure, but I think that that will have increased in the provisional outturn figures. General fund reserves need to be taken into account when local authorities make their decisions.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): North Lanarkshire Council has recently increased the distance at which secondary school pupils are eligible for school buses, with the roll-out to primary schools proposed for next year. As we head into winter, many parents are concerned about the proposed walking routes, because many are poorly lit. The alternative that has been given to parents is public service buses, but my office has heard several stories of such buses driving past groups of schoolchildren or being too crowded to allow any more on. The local authority cites budget issues as one of the reasons for cutting the routes. Will the cabinet secretary meet me to find a solution and ensure that financial decisions are not put ahead of the wellbeing of children in North Lanarkshire?

Shona Robison: I would, of course, be more than happy to meet Gillian Mackay. Such decisions are for local authorities to make but, further to the information that I gave to Clare Adamson, I note that North Lanarkshire Council's figure for general fund reserves per head of population has now risen to the fourth highest in the country, as of 31 March this year, with a provisional outturn of £747 of reserves per person. As I said, reserves need to be considered when each local authority sets its budget and makes decisions about local priorities.

Local Authority Housing Stock (Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete)

2. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how much funding it has allocated to local authorities whose housing stock and former housing stock requires demolition and rebuilding due to the presence of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. (S6O-03662)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): It is the responsibility of building owners to maintain their properties, and it is for each local authority to decide the appropriate action when RAAC is identified, which is primarily a building maintenance concern. Although no new funding is available to address the issue, when a local authority has decided that demolition is the best solution, we will work with it to explore flexibilities in current funding for it to consider. Local authorities manage their own budgets, but we are committed to working alongside them to ensure that they and any home owners who are affected are supported appropriately.

Liam Kerr: Underfunded Aberdeen City Council is pressing ahead with knocking down homes in

Torry Balnagask, at a cost of £25 million. Reports suggest that rebuilding could cost £130 million and take up to 15 years. All the while, displaced residents, who report that the situation is causing them anxiety and despair, just do not believe that their homes will ever be rebuilt.

Last week, the Scottish Government informed the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee that affected households will see “engagement” in the coming weeks and months. What has the minister done to ensure that Aberdeen City Council will have sufficient funds to rebuild and that it will be able to do so sooner than in 15 years?

Ivan McKee: The first point to note is that Aberdeen City Council has had a 5.4 per cent increase in its budget—an extra £23.8 million to support day-to-day services. It is also important to recognise that the previous Conservative United Kingdom Government said that it would spend whatever it took to resolve the RAAC issue, including funds coming to Scotland. Of course, it did not deliver on any of that, which is why we are in the position in which we find ourselves.

However, as I have said, we are keen to work with any council that finds itself in this position, to explore the possibilities to work together to resolve this serious issue for the home owners concerned and to support the council to deliver on that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have received requests for supplementary questions from four members and I hope to take each of the four, but I will need members to co-operate by asking brief questions.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I have engaged with well over 100 constituents who are affected by RAAC during one of the biggest housing crises that Scotland has ever faced. As council tenants move home, private home owners, many of whom have mortgages, face continued uncertainty.

Regrettably, my repeated correspondence to the new UK Government on funding has gone unanswered. The decision that Aberdeen City Council made—to demolish and rebuild—limits private home owners' choices on how to proceed. What options does the Scottish Government have to afford the council the fiscal flexibilities to offer just and equitable funding support to affected home owners?

Ivan McKee: My colleague the Minister for Housing and his officials have held constructive discussions with Aberdeen City Council throughout their options appraisal process for homes that are impacted by poor-condition RAAC.

As I indicated in my earlier response to Liam Kerr, although there are no additional funds to

allocate to the issue, we have supported the exploration of financial flexibility options for the council to consider. Aberdeen City Council has not yet made a formal request for statutory flexibilities, but, as soon as we receive that, we will give it urgent consideration, so that the council can provide early assurance to the people who are affected.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): It is good to hear that the Scottish Government is committed to resolving some of the issues around RAAC. The Grenfell report was published today; seven years on, only two buildings have been remediated since that tragic fire. How long does the minister expect residents who are affected by RAAC to wait? Can he make a commitment that it will be less time than the seven years that many residents who are affected by combustible cladding have had to wait?

Ivan McKee: As I have indicated, my colleague the Minister for Housing, whose portfolio the issue comes under, is working with local authorities across Scotland to understand the extent of the issue and to work with them when they make formal requests for flexibilities, so that we can ensure that, together, we support householders who are affected by RAAC. I am sure that, in due course, my colleague the Minister for Housing will give an update on progress on this important issue.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): A group of residents in Tillycoultry were forced to move out of their homes more than a year ago because of deteriorating RAAC, but they still do not have access to their homes to collect personal belongings such as passports, and there are growing fears in the community that those properties will be broken into.

What guidance is the Scottish Government offering councils on residents who might need to re-enter their homes to retrieve essential items during the period in which they are unable to live there?

Ivan McKee: I recognise the issue that Mark Ruskell raises and I know that that has happened in other places, such as Glasgow, where residents have had to move out of their premises very quickly and at short notice due to safety concerns.

There is a balance to be struck between the safety of those residents who might want to enter potentially dangerous properties and their need to retrieve personal possessions and important documents. I will check with my ministerial colleagues what guidance is available on that and I will respond to the member to make sure that he is aware of the current situation and the guidance that the Government has put in place to deal with those particular situations.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): This concrete is not just in domestic dwellings—it is also in public buildings, such as hospitals, schools and libraries. It is now 18 months since I first brought the crisis to the attention of the Government in the chamber, and we are just concluding the identification stage.

First, is the Government now confident that it knows where that concrete is in every building in the public estate?

Secondly, will it extend capital funding to organisations such as NHS Scotland to make sure that our patients are safe in the hospitals where they are?

Ivan McKee: The requirement for funding will be part of on-going budget discussions with my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government at the appropriate time, once we are aware of the impact of RAAC.

As the member will be aware, surveys have been undertaken across the public estate to assess the prevalence of RAAC, the condition of the RAAC that exists and the criticality of the structural issues around that. With that information, we are proceeding to address the issue across the public estate.

Public Sector Pay Policy

3. Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government, in line with the agreed procedure, whether it will provide the Scottish Fiscal Commission with a public sector pay policy ahead of its budget for 2025-26. (S6O-03663)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): There is an established protocol between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Fiscal Commission that sets out the information sharing that is expected to take place in the lead-up to the Scottish budget. We will continue to engage and work collaboratively with the commission on matters related to public sector pay and workforce, and we will strive to provide timely information related to pay in the lead-up to future fiscal events.

Michael Marra: I would be very glad if the finance secretary would actually honour the protocol that was set out in October 2022. For the past two years, she has failed to do so. She told me in committee on 16 January that it “would not be right” to provide that policy. She might well have noted the chair of the Scottish Fiscal Commission in front of committee yesterday saying that that policy should be provided.

Given the debacle of her cuts yesterday, due partly to the incompetence around public sector pay, will the finance secretary commit now to

producing that policy to the commission ahead of the budget?

Shona Robison: In the letter to Michael Marra of 15 January, I said that the reason why we would have to wait to set out public sector pay policy was that there was going to be a United Kingdom spring budget, following the budget in the autumn, that would provide an update on the fiscal outlook and the UK Government's public spending policy that could impact on devolved funding envelopes.

Michael Marra has the exact problem here that Daniel Johnson—whom I have a lot of respect for—had when he got himself tied up in knots on “Good Morning Scotland” this morning. Daniel Johnson tried to distinguish the impact of Tory cuts in Wales and the Welsh Labour Government having to introduce an emergency budget from the situation in Scotland, where there is no fault on the part of the Tories whatsoever. The Tories are at fault when it comes to Wales, but the Tories are not at fault when it comes to Scottish public finances. It was excruciating to listen to, and Labour really has to come clean in its analysis of the situation.

We will continue to work with the Scottish Fiscal Commission. We will continue to make sure that pay policy is affordable and sustainable, and we will take that forward in due course.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Professor Roy said yesterday that this lack of information is a very serious matter. Does the cabinet secretary accept that, when it comes to parliamentary scrutiny, it would be far preferable for us to have that information to hand?

Shona Robison: Absolutely, but I am sure that Liz Smith will also recognise that, when a spring budget emerges straight after the budget that we have just set, and not knowing what the funding envelope for pay will be, I need to wait to see what that funding envelope is. That is absolutely critical—we can only set a pay policy that we can afford.

I have set out in great detail why the pay policy was set as it was. As I said at the time, anything beyond the pay policy would need to be funded either by more UK Government funding or through cuts. That is the simple reality of the situation. We will continue to work with the SFC and with the Finance and Public Administration Committee, but let us be absolutely clear that the Scottish Government's finances will be dictated in large part by what comes at the budget on 30 October.

Scottish Government Expenditure and Revenue

4. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recently published Government

expenditure and revenue figures, which reportedly show a £2,400 dividend in the last year for every person in Scotland as a result of its continued membership of the United Kingdom. (S6O-03664)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): First, we know that 90 per cent of the “Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland” deficit is due to UK Government choices. Secondly, we know that the UK Government retains control of 40 per cent of expenditure and more than 70 per cent of revenues in Scotland. That is set out in the GERS report. As an example, a significant portion of the spending that is allocated to Scotland relates to servicing UK Government debt, which is paid at a higher rate than is paid by our European neighbours.

The Scottish Government is required to balance its budget each year—and it does so; it has always presented a balanced budget to Parliament. In doing so, we have taken difficult decisions on revenue and expenditure in order to target the support to those in greatest need, such as through the Scottish child payment.

Murdo Fraser: Yesterday, when the cabinet secretary was announcing the savage cuts that she is making to public spending across Scotland, thanks to Scottish National Party financial mismanagement, incredibly, she claimed that separation would make things better. Given that her own Government's figures show the complete opposite—that there would be a massive fiscal deficit of nearly £23 billion—how could she do that with a straight face?

Shona Robison: As the Treasury has pointed out in the past few weeks—I assume that Murdo Fraser will accept this figure—the deficit is on the then UK Tory Government not resetting budgets due to inflationary pressures. His UK Government took £15 billion out of public funding. We will take no lectures from the Tories about financial management when they took £15 billion out of public services by not resetting budgets for inflation.

Of course, the UK Labour Government chancellor has outlined a £22 billion black hole in public finances, which will impact Scotland if that Government continues to follow the previous Tory Government's fiscal rules. Members from those two parties are quite chummy today, so I am sure that, unfortunately, that is what Scotland will experience.

Local Government Pay Increases

5. Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to fund any pay increases for local government employees. (S6O-03665)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government has taken extraordinary decisions to provide £77.5 million to support a fair pay offer for local government workers. That offer is better than the one made in the rest of the United Kingdom, and most will see a rise of more than 4 per cent. That is at the absolute limit of affordability, and, as I set out to Parliament yesterday, we are taking action across all portfolios to balance our budget. That is made more difficult by the chancellor's decision not to fully fund pay deals and a lack of clarity on funding ahead of the United Kingdom budget.

Maurice Golden: Last week, we learned that the Scottish National Party was diverting £5 million from nature restoration to fund pay awards. Earlier this week, Unison members voted to reject the latest offer from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Given that the cabinet secretary has also now slashed £23.4 million from the net zero and energy budget, will she rule out diverting any more funds from climate and nature projects?

Shona Robison: We did not want to make any of the decisions that we have had to make, but, in order to resolve some of the pay disputes and to support public expenditure on pay, we have had to make some of those very difficult decisions.

We have committed to restoring the nature restoration budget that Maurice Golden referred to in 2025-26. I am sure that he will want to welcome the fact that the GMB has accepted the pay deal. We will hear what Unite the union has to say tomorrow. The Educational Institute of Scotland has accepted the position for teachers, which, again, is to be welcomed.

We urge COSLA to continue to discuss the position with Unison, because, at the end of the day, the local authorities are the employers. We do not want to see further damaging industrial action, and that is why we have gone above and beyond to help with the funding envelope that COSLA could offer the local government workforce.

It is also worth bearing in mind that no additional funding is coming from the UK Government for the local government workforce, apart from teachers, and that is regrettable.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): David Torrance has a brief supplementary question.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary, like me, welcome the fact that GMB members have agreed overwhelmingly to support the fair pay offer, and does she share my disappointment that Unison members have voted to reject it?

I hope that Unite members will vote to accept the offer and that an agreement can be reached with Unison. Can she advise how the pay offer and levels for Scottish local government employees compare with those in other parts of the UK?

Shona Robison: I am pleased that more than three quarters of GMB Scotland members agreed that it is a fair pay offer and voted to accept it. As I said earlier, the pay award that is offered in Scotland is better than the offer that has been made to local government workers across the rest of the UK. More than 60 per cent of workers would receive an increase of more than 4 per cent. Importantly, the lowest-paid workers, including Unison members, would receive an increase of 5.63 per cent. That is a fair offer for all.

The Scottish Government will continue to work constructively with COSLA as efforts continue to secure a deal and divert industrial action, which, as I have said, is in no one's interest.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question number 6 was not lodged.

Public Spending (Budget)

7. Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions the finance secretary has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding public spending, in light of the Prime Minister's remarks that the Labour Administration's first budget is "going to be painful". (S6O-03667)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The First Minister and I met the Chancellor of the Exchequer last week. We discussed collaboration between the Scottish and UK Governments, but we also pressed the chancellor on the need for public investment across the UK to protect public services, to tackle poverty and to grow the economy.

The Prime Minister's remarks about the next UK budget are deeply concerning. As I said earlier, that will have a direct impact on our funding. I set out yesterday the difficult decisions that we are already taking on the challenges that the Scottish budget faces. As the chancellor looks to her first budget, it is vital that public services and vulnerable people are protected and that we do not have further austerity impacting on public services in Scotland.

Collette Stevenson: After 14 years of Tory austerity, the Labour Party in Westminster is intensifying the worst of what we saw under the likes of David Torrance—sorry, David Cameron [*Laughter.*] and Boris Johnson. Labour's pledge to keep Tory fiscal rules is a huge factor in the £22 billion of cuts that it is now choosing to make.

Labour promised change, but it is delivering the same old failed Westminster economic agenda. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the UK Labour Government must see sense, invest in public services, reverse the cuts to Scotland's capital budget—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Stevenson. I call the cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: The chancellor has a choice to make in her forthcoming budget. She can continue with Tory fiscal rules and Tory austerity or she can change course and invest in public services. Increased funding for infrastructure and public services will—absolutely—be required if we want to take action to lift children out of poverty. There are things that the Labour chancellor could also do to help with that, such as ending the damaging two-child benefit cap.

There is a political choice here. Labour in this Parliament cannot escape the reality that Labour austerity looks and feels to public services exactly the same as Tory austerity does. It is a political choice, and Labour will be held to account for whatever choice it makes.

Nature Restoration Fund

8. Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of its reported decision to instruct local authorities to divert money from the nature restoration fund towards local government pay settlements, what discussions the finance secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding action that can be taken to mitigate any impact of this decision on projects aimed at reversing nature loss. (S6O-03668)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): Within an extremely challenging financial context, the Scottish Government has made difficult decisions in order to deliver fair pay deals and to avoid industrial action across the public sector.

Protecting and restoring our natural environment is key to addressing the twin crises of nature loss and climate change. More than £50 million has already been distributed through the nature restoration fund since 2021. Although capital funding of £5 million from this year's nature restoration fund has been redirected within local authorities to fund the pay offer, it has been agreed between ministers, as I said earlier, that it will be replaced in 2025-26.

Ariane Burgess: The nature restoration fund has created jobs right across Scotland and has brought benefits to local communities and their economies and environments. The Greens are fully in favour of fair deals for council workers, but, instead of dipping into funding that benefits

communities, the Scottish Government could cut back on subsidies and tax cuts to big businesses such as Shell, Ineos and the Acorn partners, which continue to receive millions in public funds while raking in record profits for climate-wrecking fossil fuels. Will the Scottish Government reconsider, retain nature funding and accelerate reform of Scotland's outdated council funding so that councils can deliver for nature and for workers?

Shona Robison: On that last point, we want to make progress on council funding and the way that local taxation works. I chair the joint group with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that aims to do just that, and progress has been made on things such as second homes and empty homes. However, the point about the fair pay deal and the nature restoration fund is that we had to use funding that was available now, in-year. The ideas and issues that Ariane Burgess raised would not release that funding in-year to support the pay deal in the here and now, and that had to be done.

Those choices were difficult, but they were the only ones available in order to make the pay envelope bigger to enable the offer to be made. As I say, the nature restoration money will be restored in 2025-26, because we recognise its importance, and I hope that Ariane Burgess will support that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on finance and local government. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Programme for Government

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on the programme for government 2024-25. The statement will then be debated, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:57

The First Minister (John Swinney): This year, Parliament marks the 25th anniversary of its opening, and I have witnessed every previous programme for government being announced, albeit from different places across the parliamentary chamber. Today, however, is the first time that I present a programme for government. It is an extraordinary privilege to do so and to have the opportunity to further shape the direction of our country.

I do so in a spirit that recognises that we all come from different political traditions. I believe that Scotland would best be able to progress as an independent country, where the issues that we address in this programme can be more effectively resolved. Others take the opposite view. We have a range of priorities and perspectives, but fundamentally we are all here to contribute to creating the best future that we can for Scotland.

My Government does not command a majority in this Parliament: we have to work with others to make progress on our agenda. I therefore set out this programme for government with a commitment to work across the chamber to seek common ground with others. I extend the invitation to colleagues to work together to find that common ground.

A quarter of a century after its creation, the Parliament faces some of its toughest tests. We are all aware of the problems and difficulties that have been caused by 14 years of austerity, driven by the United Kingdom Government. We are all aware of the acute challenges that are faced due to the impact of sky-high inflation and the failure of the United Kingdom Government to adequately address increases in the budget to deal with that fact. We know that that is the case, because we can all see the pressure on our public services and because the Chancellor of the Exchequer has made that very point clear to the House of Commons.

The Scottish Government has set out to Parliament the difficult decisions that we have to take to address those circumstances. Today, I set out how, within that challenging situation, my Government will deliver for the people of Scotland.

This programme for government sets out, simply and clearly, our intentions for the next 12 months.

Its purpose is to ensure that Government spends every day delivering for the people of Scotland. The commitments in it are practical, not partisan. They are affordable, impactful and deliverable. Together, they reflect my optimism that, even though we face an incredibly challenging set of circumstances at this moment, the inherent strengths of Scotland, our people and our communities can create great possibilities for our country.

When I became the First Minister, I made it clear that my Government would focus on four priorities: eradicating child poverty, building prosperity, improving our public services and protecting the planet. Child poverty is first and foremost in those priorities. No child should have their opportunities, development, health and wellbeing and future curtailed by the material wealth of their family—not ever, and certainly not today, in a modern and prosperous society such as Scotland. That is not only the moral compass of my Government; it is the greatest investment in our country's future that we can possibly make. It is the route to enabling greater participation in our economy and society and to enabling more people to fulfil their potential and be contributors to our country.

We have dedicated roughly £3 billion a year to eradicating poverty and mitigating the impacts of the cost of living crisis. We have established and increased our widely praised Scottish child payment, expanded funded early learning and childcare, and committed around £1.2 billion to mitigate the impacts of 14 years of UK welfare policy. Those measures, which are key to increasing family incomes and enabling greater levels of participation in our economy, are central to our programme for government.

The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that low-income families in Scotland will be around £28,000 better off by the time their child turns 18, when compared with families across the UK. Analysis by the Scottish Government estimates that around 100,000 children will be kept out of relative poverty this year. Those achievements are significant and show the difference that we are making, but our goal is not only to keep some children out of poverty, or only to make child poverty less acute; our goal is to lift every child in Scotland who is in poverty out of it, so we must do more.

We know that we cannot address child poverty without addressing family poverty. We know that families thrive when they are supported by co-ordinated holistic services that meet their needs and are easy to access. Many amazing and dedicated practitioners are already working tirelessly to connect services and adapt them to the needs of the families whom they support. We

must create a system of whole-family support that is available across the country. We must ensure that the system is easy to access, well connected and responsive to families' needs.

Over the coming year, we will work with partners to enable greater local flexibility so that services can be more easily tailored to the needs of the families whom they support. We will look at what budgets can be pooled and what reporting can be streamlined. That will involve working closely with our local authority partners, other public services and the third sector to align services and ensure that there is a focus across our public services on meeting the needs and supporting the resilience of families.

We will consider where greater investment is needed, and we will use the learning from what is already working in our pilot areas. Some of that evidence comes from, for example, the early adopter community project in Dundee. In that project, key workers have been engaging with members of the public who face obstacles to entering the labour market. Through provision of focused childcare support, advice on eligibility for benefit provision and employability support, individuals are being supported into the labour market. Those individuals are sustaining employment and experiencing a number of benefits to their financial and mental wellbeing.

The key objective of the approach that we will take will be to deliver significant reform of the work of public services to deliver whole-family support extensively across the country. That will create the conditions that support more parents into employment and reinforce our work to eradicate child poverty. Key to the work on whole-family support will be a focus on prevention and early intervention—the small supports early on that can pay big dividends down the line. That includes during pregnancy and the first years of a child's life.

Addressing risks and problems at this stage can have positive impacts that last through to adulthood. It can support healthy development, prevent illness and ease future pressures on services, thereby making the entire system more sustainable. Therefore, in the coming year, we will ensure that more women get to know, and receive care and support from, the same midwifery team from pregnancy through to birth.

We will invest nearly £1 billion a year in affordable, high-quality and funded early learning and childcare, and we commit to supporting early development and reducing developmental concerns at 27 to 30 months by a quarter by 2030.

We will support schools to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap across every local authority area each year between now and 2026. We will

ensure that, when young people are ready to enter the workplace, they have the learning, skills and opportunities to succeed. We will invest in community-based youth work and improve careers support so that there is better information on career choices.

For households that are struggling now, boosting financial security and cutting costs is one of the most direct things that we can do to support them out of poverty. Therefore, we will expand advice in accessible settings, including community centres and hospitals. That will expand a programme that, in its first year, helped more than 5,500 people to access financial gains of more than £7.5 million to support their families.

We will also complete the national roll-out of our carer support payment, which will support more than 100,000 carers this financial year, including, for the first time ever, some who are in full-time education. The effect of that provision will be to enable much greater participation in education for those with caring responsibilities, which will greatly increase the opportunities for those individuals to make an economic contribution to our society. That effort to stimulate greater economic participation lies at the heart of the measures in this programme for government.

Another key aspect of our programme to support families is to ensure that we take effective action to enable people to have a safe and secure place to call their home. The tragic Grenfell tower fire emphasised how important building and fire safety is. Keeping residents and home owners safe is our priority, and we are taking action to protect lives by ensuring that the assessment and remediation of buildings with potentially unsafe cladding is carried out.

We will also carefully consider all the recommendations in the Grenfell tower inquiry's report. This year, we will invest nearly £600 million in affordable housing, including an additional £40 million to bring existing homes into affordable use. There will be a strong focus on working with partners to enable existing accommodation that is not in use to be made available as swiftly as possible to meet the need for housing, thereby ensuring that we take every step that we can to boost the availability of housing as quickly as we can.

We will provide a further £100 million to support the construction of around 2,800 mid-market rent homes. In progressing our proposals for rent controls, we will introduce amendments at stage 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill to ensure that tenants have the protection that they need, and that Scotland is able to attract more investment to supplement the investment that we are making through the public finances. Those commitments are central to our efforts to tackle poverty, but they

are also inextricably linked to our efforts to increase national prosperity with a strong, green wellbeing economy.

It takes thriving businesses, large and small, to sustain our families and our communities. We are already making significant progress in that area. Since 2007, gross domestic product per person in Scotland has grown by 11 per cent, compared with the UK's 6 per cent. Productivity has grown at an average rate that is more than double that of the United Kingdom. Last year, earnings in Scotland grew more quickly than they did in any other part of the UK, including London and the south-east.

However, again, we must go further. It is not enough to simply have a strong economy. True prosperity goes beyond pounds and pence. It means an economy that is inclusive, supports people into work, attracts investment, promotes entrepreneurs and innovators and furthers our work on our path to net zero. Key to that will be increasing the levels of infrastructure investment and creating the right conditions for business investment.

For the past nine years, we have been the UK's top destination outside of London for foreign direct investment. This Government will be focused on delivering investment-friendly policies and support, such as the Scottish National Investment Bank, which will help to build on the strong performance that we have built to date.

Last year, the bank supported 1,850 jobs by investing in companies with more than £92 million of supply chain spend in Scotland. Its £60 million investment in the Thriving Investments mid-market rent fund will help to deliver affordable, quality rental homes. Put simply, that means that tenants who benefit from the scheme will pay lower rents, but the economy will be boosted by the development activity involved.

To ensure that Scotland remains a premier location for investment, we will align Government and public bodies behind a co-ordinated programme to attract investment in priority areas such as net zero, housing and infrastructure. We will build on recent successes such as the Sumitomo and Ardersier projects to promote our national project pipeline of investment opportunities. We will develop two green freeports and establish two new investment zones, and, through our commitment of up to £500 million of investment, we will seek to generate at least £1.5 billion in private investment to support the offshore wind sector.

A critical element of ensuring that Scotland is attractive to investors is intensifying the provision of support to Scotland's innovators and entrepreneurs as part of our work to become a start-up and scale-up nation. So, this year, we will

maximise the impact of our national network of start-up support—our Techscaler programme, which has already supported start-ups to raise £70 million in investment. We will also work with organisations such as Scottish Enterprise, the National Manufacturing Institute Scotland and the National Robotarium to create new opportunities for our most promising deep-tech companies.

We will ensure that our universities can contribute to internationally leading research and economic growth and support the development of business clusters in areas such as digital and artificial intelligence, life sciences and the energy transition.

Small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of our economy, so we will deliver the commitments that are set out in the new deal for business, and we will empower decision making through regional economic partnerships and will sign the Falkirk and Grangemouth and Argyll and Bute regional growth deals.

We will tackle economic inactivity and skills shortages in our workforce and remove barriers to employment. That will include leading a new, national approach to skills planning and introducing the post-school education reform bill to simplify the post-school funding body landscape.

Specialist support for disabled people will be enhanced across all local authorities by the summer of 2025.

We will expand Scotland's migration service and will continue to make the case for tailored migration routes, including through a rural visa pilot to support rural employers to recruit the people they need.

We will support Scotland's culture sector and creative industries, which are key to our economy, our culture and our national identity, and we recognise the need for the artistic and creative community to be well supported for the future. A review of Creative Scotland will be undertaken to ensure that the appropriate approach is in place to meet the needs of the sector, and I am pleased to confirm to the Parliament that the resources that are required to enable Creative Scotland to continue the work of the open fund are now available for it to distribute.

We will continue to invest in our national infrastructure—the transport and digital networks that enable our economy to thrive. This year, more than 20,000 premises will be connected to gigabit-capable broadband across Scotland in areas of market failure.

We will progress the dualling of the A9; construction is expected to start on the Tomatin to Moy stretch before the end of the year, and the

procurement process for the Tay crossing to Ballinluig stretch is already under way.

We will deliver three of the six major new ferries that are presently under construction, and we will progress the procurement of seven new electric ferries as part of the small vessel programme.

We will also continue to invest in our rail network and will upgrade and reconfigure power supplies to support further electrification of our railways.

All of that will improve access to and from our rural and island communities; improve transportation safety, journey times and reliability; and generate economic growth. It will also enable delivery of our valuable public services and will ensure that people in every corner of Scotland have access to the high-quality services that they need, when they need them.

Public services touch every aspect of our day-to-day lives; they support our families and enable our economy to grow and thrive. Key to public services is ensuring that everyone has access to high-quality services that are right for them. Those services must be easy to access and navigate.

Nowhere is that more notable than with our national health service. We have seen terrific successes in our NHS, including the best performing core accident and emergency departments anywhere in the United Kingdom.

We need to ensure that our NHS has the resources that it needs, both for today and for years to come. We will increase boards' baseline funding to reduce waiting list backlogs, deliver around 20,000 more orthopaedic, ophthalmology and general surgery procedures each year in our new national treatment centres, and free up 210,000 planned-care outpatient appointments through our centre for sustainable delivery programmes, thus eliminating unnecessary hospital attendances.

We will reform primary care, increasing capacity and access to general practice, community pharmacy, dental and community eyecare services by the end of 2026. Backed by £120 million of additional funding for NHS boards, we will support continued improvements across a range of mental health services and treatments, which include meeting the child and adolescent mental health services waiting times standard nationally and clearing backlogs by December 2025.

We will intensify our work to tackle delayed discharge. No one should remain in hospital any longer than they need to, so we will standardise best practice and an integrated approach, from the time a person enters hospital through to their timely discharge. That will ensure that everyone

can recover in the least intensive and best setting for them, while making room in hospital for those people who need it.

However, in this challenging fiscal environment, we cannot deliver public services as we did in years past. We must change the model of service delivery to promote positive outcomes, prioritise prevention and reduce demand for future services.

Once again, intelligent investment and innovation will be key. For example, the Scottish Government invested £4 million to pilot rapid cancer diagnostic services across five NHS boards. That service works through primary care to provide a quicker diagnosis to people who are experiencing non-specific symptoms. Impressively, an evaluation of the pilot in NHS Fife and NHS Dumfries and Galloway found that the estimated time to diagnosis was roughly 65 days faster than via the more usual route of a general surgery clinic. Earlier diagnosis means better outcomes, less intensive treatment and less strain on the system. It means that Scotland, as a whole, is healthier.

We have similar ambitions for all our public services as part of our 10-year public service reform programme, which will guide our approach. Every area of the Government is committed to delivering reform consistent with its principles.

As part of that ambitious programme, we will work with local authorities to boost school standards, with a focus on attendance, behaviour and the curriculum. We will implement the curriculum improvement cycle and progress with qualifications reform. We will reform our national education bodies to drive improvement, raise standards and ensure that the needs of learners are always at the forefront of our work.

We attach the greatest significance to the safety of our communities, so we will work with Police Scotland to ensure that our communities remain safe.

Our public services are only as strong as the people who deliver them, so we will continue to award fair pay settlements, reduce workloads and improve conditions for our public service employees. We will review and reform the junior doctor and dentist contract, progress towards a 36-hour working week for agenda for change staff and provide local authorities with £145 million to protect teacher numbers.

However, every one of those important actions—indeed, everything that I have mentioned so far—will be rendered ineffective if we do not also address the greatest existential threat of our times. We must take effective action to tackle the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. It is absolutely essential that we protect our planet by reducing emissions, restoring our natural

environment and investing in adaptations that will protect us from the impacts of climate change.

Although we are decarbonising at a faster rate than the rest of the UK, the most difficult part of the journey lies ahead. The world's global temperature has now pushed past the internationally agreed 1.5°C. Ten of our hottest years have come in the past 20 years, and the increased frequency of storms and floods is already having a real impact on communities and key sectors. In addition, the 2023 "State of Nature Scotland" report found that monitored species have declined by 15 per cent over the past 30 years.

We are already making real progress on protecting our environment and helping it to recover. Seventy-five per cent of all new UK woodlands are here in Scotland, but we must adapt to the changes in our environment. That is why we will take forward our national adaptation plan. We will work with Scottish Water to improve the resilience of our water and sewage systems to intense rainfall and drought, and we will restore at least 10,000 hectares of degraded peatland and create at least 10,000 acres of woodlands.

We will also bring forward a natural environment bill to support delivery of our net zero and biodiversity goals. Climate change legislation that will enable five-year carbon budgets to be set and delivered will be introduced. That, along with our climate change plan and our sectoral just transition plans, will chart the course to net zero by 2045.

The climate emergency is not only a danger that must be recognised and managed, but an imperative that should motivate us to change. Scotland is a land of remarkable innovation and abundant natural resources. We can tackle climate change while growing our economy; indeed, we have been doing that for decades.

Between 1990 and 2022, Scotland's economy grew by 67 per cent in real terms. In that same time, we cut our greenhouse gas emissions in half. Last year, the Scottish National Investment Bank, in the course of investing in businesses and projects that support our economy, avoided, reduced or removed more than 52,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent across its portfolio.

In 2022, renewable technologies generated the equivalent of 113 per cent of Scotland's overall electricity consumption. In 2024, our capacity for renewable energy generation increased to 15.4GW, and with the projects that are currently in the planning pipeline, we have the potential to produce more than three times that.

We will shortly publish our energy strategy and just transition plan. By delivering the commitments in it, we will again double our ambitions for

renewable energy generation. As part of that, we are acting to speed up the planning and consenting regime for renewable energy generation in order to provide certainty to the market and to stimulate private investment.

We will invest £9 million in supporting Scotland's manufacturing industries to invest in energy efficiency and decarbonisation projects. We will work with the UK Government to deliver the infrastructure required for a net zero emissions energy system, including providing £2 million to support the Acorn carbon transport and storage project, as part of the promised support of up to £80 million for carbon capture, and securing a positive future for Grangemouth.

We need to take forward careful stewardship of our oil and gas sector to ensure that a sector that contributes significantly to the economic health of Scotland at this moment is able to make the transition effectively to net zero. The expertise of the sector will be vital to the future of the industry and to our transition to net zero. We need to keep those skills in Scotland as we move towards a green economy, because we are in the midst of a renewables revolution in Scotland.

Alongside our investment in renewables, we will support households and communities to reduce emissions. More than a third of the population already benefit from our offer of free bus travel. We have some of the most generous grants and loans in the UK to support the move to clean heating, and we are within reach of 6,000 electric vehicle charging points in 2024, two years ahead of schedule.

This year, we will conclude the review of our new-build heat standard and bring forward a heat in buildings bill. That bill will set a long-term direction of travel that is deliverable and affordable to households and businesses. It will also provide certainty to building owners and the supply chain. Through the work of Home Energy Scotland and the support available through our warmer homes Scotland scheme, we will take forward measures to ensure that we offer practical solutions to encourage energy efficiency and enable families to stay warm. The purpose of the heat in buildings bill must be to enable practical assistance to be made available to households and businesses to support energy efficiency and to improve the quality of heating systems.

We will also set a clear timetable for the delivery of roughly 24,000 additional electric vehicle charge points by 2030, and we will make it easier for people to walk, wheel or cycle through our active travel infrastructure fund, the national cycle network and our people and place programme. Those commitments are good for our communities and good for our environment. Plain and simple, they are good for Scotland.

Beyond the question of my Government's priorities and the specifics of the programme, there is one further question that I want to address. My ministers are in public service. I want my Government to set the highest standard of propriety and integrity, and I want trust to be at the heart of our relationship with the people of Scotland.

That is why I intend to make changes to strengthen the Scottish ministerial code. Investigations into alleged breaches of the code will no longer happen only at the instruction of the First Minister. Independent advisers will be able to launch their own investigations whenever they feel that it is warranted. Where there has been a breach, they will be able to advise on appropriate sanctions. Those changes will significantly strengthen the role of the independent advisers, whose terms of reference will also be published. I expect to publish the new code by the end of the calendar year.

Scotland is a country of many strengths. Our economy is founded on industries of global reach in energy, financial services, food and drink, tourism, life sciences and advanced manufacturing. Our education system is high performing and includes a number of world-class universities. Our natural environment is of the highest quality and provides the basis for so many of our economic strengths. Our talented and creative population is our greatest asset, enhanced by those who choose to make their future here. Our society is bound together by a strong sense of social justice and of acting together to build the common good and ensure that everyone in our country is able to fulfil their potential.

Yes, we face challenges, but I am optimistic and confident that, if properly focused and motivated, the inherent strengths of our country will help us overcome those challenges. I believe that, with good will and a relentless focus on delivering for the people of Scotland, the resources that are available to us can be used to help us eradicate child poverty, build prosperity, improve our public services and play our part in protecting the planet. That is the focus of this programme for government, and I commend it to Parliament.

Programme for Government

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on the programme for government 2024-25. I would be grateful if members who wish to speak in the debate were to press their request-to-speak button. I call Douglas Ross, who has up to 11 minutes.

15:28

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

Today, we have seen the publication of the final report into the appalling tragedy that saw 72 people die in Grenfell tower seven years ago. The inquiry chair, Sir Martin Moor-Bick, said that the residents were

“badly let down”

by organisations that should have protected them. The report found that

“the fire at Grenfell Tower was the culmination of decades of failure by central government and other bodies in positions of responsibility”.

We all have a responsibility to learn from the lessons of that tragedy and ensure that it can never happen again. The First Minister said in his statement that he would look at the report. I hope that his Government will give members an early opportunity to debate and discuss the report and how the 58 recommendations will be implemented, should they affect us in Scotland, and to provide an update on the cladding remediation programme.

In responding to this year's programme for government, we cannot ignore the fiscal context in which the Scottish National Party Government finds itself. Yes, there are pressures brought by the new Labour Government, which—within weeks of taking office—stripped millions of pensioners of their winter fuel payment. That is a shameful decision that is being replicated by the Scottish National Party Government at Holyrood. However, the nationalists have only themselves to blame for the mess that they find themselves in.

Yesterday, the finance secretary said that

“All members of Parliament must face up to that challenge”—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2024; c 30.]

but it is SNP MSPs who should follow her advice. Even their own budget forecaster has said that

“much of the pressure comes from the Scottish Government's own decisions”.

There is no one left to blame and there is nowhere left to hide. What we got yesterday and in the programme for government today are SNP choices. What we got yesterday were SNP cuts that will have an impact on delivering the

programme for government, so let us just remember where those cuts were. Yesterday, we had a cut to the economy budget—a budget that is held by the Deputy First Minister, but she is accepting that her budget will be cut. The justice budget—cut. The rural affairs budget—cut. The transport budget—cut. The education and skills budget—cut. The health and social care budget—cut.

It seems that the only area that was protected was Angus Robertson's portfolio—the constitution. That money is being used by the SNP Government to promote independence, which is more important to it than the vital public services that the people of Scotland expect to be delivered by this Government.

For years, the SNP Government has patted itself on the back for its policies and decisions, but now the public can see that they are paying the price for those SNP choices. For years, the SNP has praised itself for running a balanced budget. Let that claim never be uttered in this chamber again. The SNP has lost control of the budget here in Scotland. It is filling the gap time after time—

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Will the member give way?

Douglas Ross: I will give way in a moment, but let us be very clear: it is decisions and choices that the SNP has made that have led to a huge black hole in the Scottish Government's budget.

Kate Forbes: Can the member confirm that the Scottish Government, by law, is not allowed to overspend its budget? Can he name one year in the past 17 years when the Scottish Government has overspent its budget?

Douglas Ross: If it had not overspent its budget, it would not be pulling in hundreds of millions of pounds from the ScotWind budget. *[Interruption.]* That money is coming in to fill the gaps that the SNP has created in its own budget. Choices made by SNP ministers, year after year, are having an impact.

The SNP also promised that if we paid more in taxes in Scotland, that would fund better public services. Instead, the Government is cutting the budget of almost every department that delivers those public services. With the SNP, people pay more and they get less.

Time and time again, the Scottish Conservatives warned against raising taxes and the impact that that would have on people and businesses across Scotland and on our economy. That warning was ignored; because of that financial mismanagement, what we are getting now is the threadbare programme for government that has been published today.

This was John Swinney's big moment: his chance to reset the SNP Government after 17 years and to boldly launch his premiership as First Minister. Has he really been waiting 25 years to deliver the speech that we have just listened to? What we got was a programme of tired old promises that should have been delivered years ago.

In so many areas, we see any suggestion of bold action being watered down or abandoned in favour of restating existing commitments. The First Minister is basically trying to make it impossible for his Government to fail by promising nothing. Under John Swinney, the SNP is admitting that it is out of ideas and out of ambition for Scotland.

Let us just look at some of the proposals that we have heard today. On eradicating child poverty, we all want to see that happen. We all want to do that. I can see that the First Minister is leaning forward and I know what he is going to ask about, but why has it taken 17 years? He has been in government for 16 of those years. Why is it only now, in 2024, that eradicating child poverty is finally a priority for this Government? *[Interruption.]* I am about to allow his intervention—will he accept that the level of child poverty has gone up since the SNP came to power in 2007?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I point out to Mr Ross that the Government of which I have been a member—although I had a year out of government—introduced the Scottish child payment, which is the boldest and biggest intervention to tackle child poverty in Europe since the 1980s. The reason why we had to do that was that child poverty was spiralling because of the austerity that Douglas Ross voted for in the House of Commons. Now, child poverty in Scotland is significantly lower than it is in the rest of the United Kingdom—

Douglas Ross: It is higher!

The First Minister: It is higher than it was when we came into office because of Tory austerity.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Briefly.

The First Minister: That is why it is higher.

Finally, what position is Douglas Ross in to lecture me about child poverty when he voted for the two-child benefit cap and is proud of it?

Douglas Ross: John Swinney speaks about legislation that he and the Governments that he was part of introduced, but what about the legislation that was introduced in 2017 that set the targets for reducing child poverty? Those targets have failed to be met. They will not be met because the SNP's governance of Scotland has seen child poverty increase rather than decrease or be eradicated.

I will turn to some other important issues in the programme for government, such as the national health service. It is crucial that we focus on our NHS, because every one of us will have cases, which are articulated weekly in the Scottish Parliament, of patient suffering. However, we did not get any proper, new information on that from the First Minister or the Government today; it will be more of the same. Those changes will be delivered despite a huge cut to the NHS budget, which was announced yesterday. I do not think that any patient or family of a patient who was watching the programme for government statement will have taken any comfort from what they heard from John Swinney.

We welcome John Swinney's proposals to change ministerial investigations. I wonder whether that is a belated recognition from him that he got it wrong in supporting his friend Michael Matheson. That shameful episode brought shame not just on John Swinney as a person, but on the office of First Minister. I wonder whether that is why he has decided to allow the independent adviser on the ministerial code of conduct to be involved. Clearly, John Swinney got it wrong by backing his friend rather than doing the right thing for the people of Scotland. *[Interruption.]*

There is an awful lot that is being chuntered from members on the front benches. In the 30 minutes of the First Minister's speech, there was not a single mention of drugs or alcohol; that did not register once. That is not a priority for John Swinney or the SNP Government, just a month after we heard that, in 2023, 1,172 people in Scotland died from drugs, which was an increase of 121 on the year before. It is going to be a priority and a defining mission of his Government to end those deaths, but they do not even get a mention. That is shameful from this SNP Government, which took its eye off the ball with drug and alcohol deaths, and it is still doing that by ignoring the situation as it is right now.

The programme for government is yet another wasted opportunity from the SNP Government—and there are not many opportunities left for it. As well as things that have been included in the programme for government, there are other things that have been excluded. There was one small reference to the A9, but where was the commitment to fully dual the A96 from Inverness to Aberdeen? The First Minister has had a lot to say, and I will take his intervention. Does his Government still support the dualling of the A96 from Inverness to Aberdeen, and when will that crucial road to be fully dualled?

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): He has nothing to say.

Douglas Ross: Nothing. He had plenty to say a minute ago.

The A96 is a crucial link between two of Scotland's biggest cities, Inverness and Aberdeen. It goes through communities that have been promised a full upgrade and a dualling of that road by the SNP for decades, yet there is not a single word on that in the programme for government, and now there is not a single word from the First Minister about it. The communities of the north-east can see that they are not a priority for this SNP First Minister.

This would have been an opportunity—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, I thought that someone wanted to intervene, but SNP members are just wondering why their First Minister had nothing to say about that. The programme for government could have been an opportunity to focus on education, health and improving public services, but instead we got more of the same.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Douglas Ross: Do I have time to take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No.

Douglas Ross: I am sorry—I am sure that we will hear from Keith Brown later.

These are the same failings, the same incompetence and the same focus on the wrong priorities. This was the time to change gear, to turn things around and to focus on the priorities of the Scottish public. Instead, we have continuity from a First Minister who is the embodiment of continuity. The SNP has already lost control of the public finances, and it will soon lose control of the Scottish Government. It has let the people of Scotland down, and it deserves to pay the price for that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we have no time in hand, so any interventions will have to be accommodated in the time allocations.

15:40

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I start by acknowledging today's powerful and important inquiry report on Grenfell tower. The fire was an absolute tragedy for all the families who lost loved ones, and we all have a duty to stand with those families—families who were ultimately failed—in their demand for justice. I hope that the Government will, at the appropriate time, give a response and set out the lessons that we can learn in Scotland.

We were promised that the programme for government was meant to be the great relaunch. We were promised a new focus, a new direction and a new plan. Instead, we have more of the

same—the same sticking-plaster approach, the same rehashed announcements and the same level of denial from the third First Minister in three years.

Scotland needed a programme for government that recognised the scale of the challenge that our country faces: stagnating growth, record-long NHS waiting lists, falling education standards, rising levels of drug deaths—the First Minister did not even mention that issue, which is supposed to be a priority for the Government—and a housing emergency. Instead, we have an SNP Government with no vision, no strategy and no plan. That is why it is getting clearer by the day that Scotland needs change.

All the signs are that the SNP is simply running down the clock on the last 18 months of this parliamentary session. Year after year, programme for government after programme for government, we see the same pattern. Long lists of pledges are made—a lot of them are well intentioned and well meaning—but, immediately after the headlines have been grabbed, things start to fall apart. Many of the promises that are made by SNP First Ministers in these speeches simply never see the light of day. For those that do, implementation is often so haphazard and incompetent that it undermines the intentions of the Parliament and what people across the country want and demand.

Kate Forbes: I am wondering about Labour's definition of change. Labour promised that energy bills would be reduced by £300, but they have gone up by 10 per cent. Is that really the kind of change that Scotland wants?

Anas Sarwar: I am glad that the Deputy First Minister, who was meant to be the change candidate but who never actually stood in the end, wants to try to blame a Government that has been in power for eight weeks rather than take responsibility for a Government that has been in power for 17 years.

Worse still, many of the Government's plans pile yet more pressure on Scotland's public services and leave working people paying more and getting less.

The First Minister: Will Mr Sarwar give way?

Anas Sarwar: I have just started my contribution.

However, we can break through that managed decline and demonstrate that we can have an effective Government in Scotland that delivers for the Scottish people. *[Interruption.]* That is why, unlike the gloom of John Swinney and Shona Robison, I am optimistic about the future of this country and believe that Scotland's best days lie ahead of it. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Sarwar, could you resume your seat? I have allowed a bit of leeway for reactions to comments, but the ongoing brouhaha—particularly, let it be said, from those on the front benches—is unacceptable. We will listen with some respect to the person who has the floor and, at the moment, that is Anas Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: The SNP said that it would learn the lessons from the verdict of the Scottish people. Clearly, it is not learning the lessons of the verdict of the Scottish people.

The First Minister: On that point, will Mr Sarwar give way?

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister had 30 minutes to speak, and I have barely had three minutes so far.

What I have said requires a Government that is honest about the scale of the challenge that it faces and that focuses on tackling those challenges. That is the test that the programme for government needed to pass, but it has failed. We need a Government that gets on with the job of reversing the damage that has been done by the SNP Government—a party that has lost its way, is incompetent in government and is bad with people's money.

The First Minister leads an Administration that raises revenue and can grow the economy and make laws here in Scotland. It has control of our NHS, schools, housing and justice, but more often than not—as we have heard again today—it would rather talk about what it cannot do than what it can do. It is always making excuses, and there is always somebody else to blame. To be frank, as the election in July showed, Scots are sick of it.

We need to build an NHS that is fit for the future and is there when people need it, so that we can have a genuine catch-up plan and clear the backlog, which now sits at 864,366 Scots. That is one in six Scots on an NHS waiting list, and those numbers continue to grow.

It is the same story across the NHS—brave staff are trying to deliver services in impossible circumstances, all while the Government ignores the problem. The number of operations that are being scheduled remains at well below pre-pandemic levels. There are still more than 3,000 nursing and midwifery vacancies. Delayed discharge rates continue to rise but, despite that, nothing in the programme for government will tackle the record numbers of long waits in our NHS and get our healthcare system working for patients again.

The First Minister declared that this was a programme for government for Scotland's children, but it is clear that this incompetent

Government, yet again, has no plan for Scotland's young people.

Just yesterday, his Government cut mental health support to young people. Nearly one in six children and young people who need support with mental health are forced to wait more than four months to get help. Shamefully, one in four children who ask for help with a mental health crisis are turned away. Families are abandoned by the SNP Government, and his plan does nothing to help them.

It is the same story in education. The SNP has broken its promise on the attainment gap, with results showing its widening on John Swinney's watch. Let us not forget that this is the same man who attempted to downgrade the exam results of working-class kids during the pandemic. On his watch, Scotland is falling in the international league tables.

For all the talk of teacher numbers, more than 400 teacher posts have been cut in Glasgow alone, all while violence in our schools is on the rise. Despite that, nothing in the programme will get to grips with the crisis in Scotland's schools.

In the past 12 months, there have been record levels of drug deaths in this country, but nothing in the programme for government attempts to deal with that crisis.

Scotland's housing crisis is getting worse. Hard-working Scots, who are looking to buy their first home, are priced out of the market, and too many are struggling to make ends meet while rents rise and rise. A shocking 10,000 children are in temporary accommodation without a home to call their own.

Across Scotland, communities are left feeling unsafe because, on the Scottish Government's watch, our justice system is broken and we have a crumbling police estate and a huge court backlog. Again, there is nothing in the programme for government to address that.

The programme for government is not up to the scale of the challenges that face Scotland, but change is possible. In 2026, we can elect a Government that is optimistic and positive about the future for Scotland; a Government that is about service, not party; a Government that is about delivering for the people of Scotland, not seeing politics as a game; and a Government of decency, integrity and honesty, not defending our pals.

We have a First Minister who wants to announce a change to the ministerial code today but forgets his behaviour in the Alex Salmond inquiry or, indeed, the Michael Matheson scandal.

We can elect a Government that gets on with strengthening and reforming our institutions in Scotland, which 17 years of SNP Government

have left weaker. We can elect a Government that wants to change our country for the better and realise the hopes and aspirations of the people of Scotland; a Government of service for Scotland; and a Government that will reform our NHS and make it fit for the future.

We can elect a Government that will get our education system back on track and make it, once again, the envy of the world. We can elect a Government that will partner with business to jump start economic growth and deliver prosperity for Scotland; a Government that will take head-on the housing emergency and realise the dream of home ownership; and a Government that delivers change.

Scotland needs change. It is sick of the failing SNP Government, and Scottish Labour is ready to deliver that change.

15:49

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): I associate myself with colleagues' remarks about the tragedy of Grenfell tower.

Today's programme for government is billed as prioritising future generations, but the decisions that the Scottish Government made this week do exactly the opposite. We cannot take today's programme for government on its own without looking at the context of yesterday's fiscal update.

The slashing of public spending, particularly on our journey to net zero, is selling out the future of our young people. The suggestion that we can continue with business as usual to deliver all the same things while spending less money is, to be frank, delusional. Some clarity about what the Scottish Government will not be able to deliver would be welcome.

The Scottish Greens support the First Minister's vision to eradicate child poverty, but the shelving of plans to roll out free school meals for all primary school children, as appears to be set out in today's programme for government, will make that worse, not better. In addition to funding and programmes, ensuring our children have a future that is worth living—a future full of opportunity and hope—also requires us to make the tough decisions that are now required to prevent catastrophic climate breakdown.

We cannot grow a green economy without substantial investment, and more of that investment needs to come from the private sector. That is exactly what the ScotWind funding was. It was supposed to be our green sovereign wealth fund, to invest in solutions to the climate and nature emergencies, including community-owned renewables and training the next generation of engineers. What we saw yesterday was the

Scottish Government emptying the pot, spending the last remaining ScotWind funding while slashing net zero investment, and continuing to give handouts to big business.

On the planned climate change targets bill, the Scottish Greens have reluctantly accepted that, although the 2030 net zero target is now out of reach, that is due to 15 years during which Governments fixated on targets while failing to make the big changes needed to drive down emissions. The Scottish Greens can only support a change to climate targets if it is accompanied by a significant ramping up of action—a climate reset—where we finally stop building new roads and new fossil-fuel power stations, put climate change at the top of the political and public agenda, and significantly ramp up the decarbonisation of our homes and public buildings.

I am also deeply concerned by the failure to include in the legislative programme a bill to ban conversion practices. The proposal for a bill started out as a petition to this Parliament more than four years ago from campaigners whose lives had been impacted by the trauma of so-called conversion therapy. The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee concluded more than two years ago that Scotland-specific legislation should be introduced as soon as possible, and although the Scottish Greens would wholly welcome an eventual United Kingdom-wide ban, we in Scotland have the mandate to deliver a watertight ban now, which would end this cruel and inhumane torture that is going on behind closed doors in Scotland. The Scottish Government should confirm when it will press the button on that draft legislation, and it must ensure that we have legislation in place before the next election. Now is the time to show boldness, not to cower to the reactionary forces of the right.

This is the first programme for government in four years that the Scottish Greens did not co-design, and it shows. Continuing to hand out tax breaks to private companies while scrapping free bus travel for asylum seekers is not something that the Scottish Greens would ever have agreed to. Emptying out our green sovereign wealth fund while cutting overall funding for net zero by £23 million is a betrayal of future generations and an abandoning of our responsibility to tackle the climate emergency. Shelving vital legislation on equalities and human rights cannot be blamed on budget cuts and can be put down only to cowardice from the SNP Government.

We have 18 months left of this session of Parliament to build a fairer and greener Scotland that leaves our society—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Lorna Slater: —and our planet in a better shape for future generations. The SNP might have given up on that mission, but the Scottish Greens never will.

15:54

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The Parliament reconvenes this week for the first time since the UK general election. In many ways, the public—the people of Scotland, whom we are here to serve—used that election to render their judgment on the focus and the priorities of the SNP Scottish Government. It was a brutal night for the SNP, but it was an historic night for the Liberal Democrats. We overtook the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, we came within touching distance of the number of SNP MPs returning to Westminster and, viewed from space, we now represent more geographical territory north of the border than even the Scottish Labour Party. People place their trust in us, and we will repay that trust in full.

As we return to the chamber, we are faced with brutal spending cuts that are set to cause untold damage and pain to public services and households across Scotland, and they will define the remainder of the current session of Parliament. Some of that pain is the residual legacy of the economic damage that the previous Conservative UK Government caused, but that does not tell the whole story. Much of the pressure comes from the Scottish Government's own decisions. That is the judgment of the Scottish Fiscal Commission, and it paints a bleak picture of the Government's management of our finances.

It is not hard to see how we got here. The Scottish Government has played fast and loose with the Scottish people's money and has squandered much of our potential. There is a £1 billion ministerial takeover of social care that will strip power away from our communities. There are ferries that are millions upon millions of pounds over budget and years overdue. Scotland's precious sea bed was sold off on the cheap. There was a time when the First Minister's predecessor—of whom we seldom speak—called Scotland, given its renewables potential, the Saudi Arabia of the north. That came from a party that attacked Margaret Thatcher for decades for failing to set up a sovereign wealth fund for the oil beneath our sea bed. Yesterday, the SNP destroyed any chance of a long-term fund being established from the wind farms that are now being built on it. It is Scotland's wind, but the SNP has blown it. The Government has still not been entirely clear, but it now looks as though all that one-off revenue is fully committed. In that case, yesterday's announcement might plug half the hole that the Government has created in our

national finances, but the question remains: what on earth will plug that gap next year?

The SNP claims to be “stronger for Scotland”, but the facts do not bear that out. In the programme for government, there is no mention of drug deaths, which are still at record highs; of reducing teacher contact time; or of recruiting 3,500 teachers or assistants. There is no reassurance on culture. Most criminally, there will be a £19 million cut to mental health budgets. The First Minister has reset the target to clear down child and adolescent mental health waiting times—the new target is December 2025—because the Government missed the original one of March 2023.

The First Minister likes to talk about conducting politics in a more grown-up fashion. In grown-up politics, however, politicians must listen to what the country is telling them. The SNP was humbled at the ballot box, and people are speaking. It is now self-evident that his party is incapable of listening. The country is tired. It is tired of feeling that nothing works any more, of working harder and of falling further behind. As we debate the priorities of this Government for the parliamentary year ahead, let me spell out the messages that we have heard door to door and street by street from the people of this country.

We need to fix our health services, with fast access to GPs, dentists and mental health services. We need to deliver world-beating education and a green jobs revolution to get our economy growing again. We need to insulate homes so that the pensioners whose winter fuel payments are being removed by the Labour Government have a chance of staying warm this winter. That is what the Liberal Democrats want to do. We also want to fight for a fair deal for carers. There are thousands of people with long Covid who the Scottish Government has ignored for years. We want to support small businesses, protect local authority funding and stop sewage being dumped in our rivers.

Scottish National Party infighting has sucked focus and dedication away from the central mission of public service that should define Government of any stripe. The SNP remains divided, but Scotland has signalled that it wants to move on from that division. A house that is divided cannot stand. In 20 months’ time, there will be young people casting their votes for the first time who have only ever known SNP rule. It is well past time that they knew a Scotland that is not weighed down or held back by a Government that is so out of touch.

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

16:00

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I am sure that the First Minister wishes that we, like independent Ireland, had the issue of how to spend a surplus of around €8.6 billion. Little Ireland, disdained by the UK commentariat after some property exuberance pre-credit crunch, has come back with bigger tiger teeth. Taking the opportunity to replace the UK as a gateway to Europe and pitching well above its weight in the world, it is unique in wrestling with a surplus challenge. Meanwhile, the UK economy, which is one of the hardest hit of all the large advanced economies and the slowest to recover from the credit crunch, was economically badly prepared for the Covid pandemic and has struggled since.

No optimism can be seen coming from the new UK Labour Government. That it has adopted the Tory fiscal rules, which are made up anyway, underpins the fact that austerity is a policy choice. The Labour Government has fully embraced the idiocy of Brexit, and the only thing that we can be certain of—contrary to what we heard when Labour was last in power and told us that things could only get better—is that things will absolutely get much worse.

We should never forget that that is the backdrop against which we are required to operate in Scotland, where we must be grateful for the capital expenditure crumbs that represent a 20 per cent reduction in the moneys that are available to invest and grow our economy, and where the revenue budget has not taken account of the height of consumer prices index inflation, which reached 18.9 per cent over the past three years.

What of today’s programme for government? I am very aware that it has been drawn together in the most difficult of times. The UK budget will not come out until the end of October, and the final amount that will be available for the Scottish Government will not be known until February 2025, so I celebrate what I have heard today is in it. I am pleased that it targets key areas rather than taking the broad-brush approach that was adopted previously. I am especially pleased to see its focus on economic growth. I welcome, of course, the signing of the Falkirk growth deal, the focus on a just transition for Grangemouth and the fact that the resources will now be made available to allow Creative Scotland to open the open fund. The investment in the Techscaler programme is also very important.

However, what is most pleasing to me is the £600 million for affordable housing and the further £100 million for mid-market rent homes. I note with interest the comments on stage 2 of the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which make me optimistic as they recognise the need for developers to have a clear

line of sight on future margins and their return on investment. I really welcome that.

Returning to Ireland, I note that the intention of the Government there is not to spend its surplus—it plans to save for the future. On that note, I again gently express my concern about ScotWind funds being used for revenue. I fully accept that the finance secretary will protect as much money as she can, but I note that the imperatives of moving to net zero and of growing the economy both hinge on using that money, ideally by crowding in private investment and potentially by the Scottish Government taking a golden share to reach the £1.5 billion that is set out in the statement.

16:03

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In her statement yesterday, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance said that she felt that Opposition members should put on the table what we would do differently with the nation's finances. I agree with her on that, and I look forward to taking up that challenge in the next three months.

Before I do that, however, I will say something about what I think has happened this summer. First, there has been confirmation from independent analysts that the fiscal predicament in which the Scottish Government finds itself has resulted largely from decisions that have been taken in Holyrood. Secondly, we are nowhere near the level of public service reform that we would like to be at, and we are therefore not delivering the efficiencies and greater savings for which the Finance and Public Administration Committee has been calling for quite some time. I think that there has also been recognition in quite a few quarters that it is time to examine, with evidence, the case for some of the universal payments. I noted carefully that the cabinet secretary acknowledged that yesterday.

I know that it is difficult to take away all the constitutional debate about how to interpret the "Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland"—GERS—statistics but, if we do that, we find that the current demographic trends and the fact that we have a very high incidence of economic inactivity, which is true elsewhere, plus the fact that the Scottish economy has been seriously lagging behind the UK economy for at least a decade, mean that we are not in any way producing the growth that we desperately need to pay for an increasingly dependent population.

The First Minister: One of the issues that Liz Smith has championed in her time in the Parliament has been that of migration. She has been very open-minded about the benefits of economic migration to Scotland. I wonder whether, in her analysis of the economic situation that we

face and the importance that is attached to population growth as a driver of economic growth, she will reaffirm her support for some of the measures that I announced today, such as that on a rural visa pilot, to encourage and motivate greater migration into some parts of our country.

Liz Smith: Yes, I will. I have said that before and I will repeat it again. I have also said that about student visas. I do not want devolution of migration policy, but I think that there is a case for those proposals, so I am happy to put that back on the record.

I come back to what businesses are saying. They worry greatly about the increasing tax burden that is on them and the effect that that is having on middle to high earners, who we desperately need for some of the industries that the First Minister talked about. We have to attract them to Scotland. In financial services, energy, technology and food and drink, Scotland has latent potential, but we need to develop that and develop it fast.

I will say what I think needs to happen. First, the budget choices, as well as the rhetoric, must reflect economic growth. That did not happen last February, when, for some inexplicable reason, the Scottish National Party Government made an 8.3 per cent real-terms cut in the economy portfolio. I did not understand that at the time and I do not understand it now. Not surprisingly, that budget was met with considerable dismay across the business community.

Secondly, as the Finance and Public Administration Committee has been highlighting for quite some time, there has to be meaningful public sector reform that will make the public sector more efficient, because we are nowhere near being able to do that just now. Based on the evidence that the committee has taken and from the analysis that accompanies that, it is just not an option to go on as we are. In fact, I suggest to the First Minister that that issue should also be a considerable priority for the Scottish Government. In terms of delivery, it is all very well to pay public sector workers more, as we would obviously all like to do, but we cannot go on doing that without getting better services in return, because the public will not wear that at all.

On tax, the very last thing that we should be doing is making Scotland uncompetitive with England, but that is exactly what is happening now. Yesterday, I flagged up the fact that the Deputy First Minister and the First Minister have very different opinions about tax policy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to wind up.

Liz Smith: I will finish in a minute. This point has to be taken on board by those in Government,

because they are giving out a mixed message about what has to happen. I will finish on this point: can we please get clarity about tax policy and how it is supposed to help economic growth?

16:08

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): This programme for government is necessarily both realistic and robust, as a prolonged era of austerity imposed on Scotland by successive Labour, coalition and Tory UK Governments over the past 16 years limits Scottish Government actions and the fiscal context in which it operates. I whole-heartedly agree with the finance secretary's response to last week's Prime Ministerial speech, when she said:

"The political choices being made by the new UK Government will fundamentally damage our"—

that is, the Scottish Government's—

"ability to deliver public services in Scotland."

It is a rerun of 1997 all over again. Back then, new Labour's first budget cut public spending. As a Glasgow city councillor, I saw cuts and mass redundancies imposed, leading to demonstrations in George Square and councillors being sneaked out the back door. There are other parallels from Labour's déjà vu playbook. Despite there being no mention of the issue in Labour's 1997 manifesto, immediately after the results were in, it announced the introduction of university tuition fees, cynically calculating that that would not impact on it electorally four or five years later.

This time, it is the winter fuel payment. There was no inkling of that in the Labour manifesto and, no doubt, Labour hopes that voters will simply forget. No impact assessment was undertaken on withdrawing the payment from 10 million UK pensioners. Labour's manifesto did not mention rising energy bills, prisoner releases in England, or cuts to artificial intelligence development in Scotland, and no one believes that the chancellor did not know about the financial black hole bequeathed by the Tories. All shadow ministers routinely meet civil service heads and Treasury officials in the run-up to a UK general election, even if it had not been telegraphed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

The new UK prospectus forces Scottish ministers to make tough decisions and reallocate limited resources after years of working to offset the worst excesses of UK austerity and welfare cuts.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Does Kenneth Gibson recognise that the Office for Budget Responsibility has noted that many of the issues that were bequeathed to Labour in the budget were a massive black hole, particularly

issues around asylum seeker and refugee homelessness in the UK? It has written a letter dictating that.

Kenneth Gibson: It was a black hole that everyone knew about.

This year, the mitigation of UK welfare cuts will cost this Government £133.7 million. I believe that cuts telegraphed by the chancellor mean that those resources must be redirected into devolved areas. According to Anas Sarwar, Labour will

"put Scotland at the heart of Government".

That includes the Secretary of State for Scotland, Ian Murray, who frequently criticised SNP mitigation, stating:

"The only sure way to get the bedroom tax repealed will be to elect a Labour Government."

Labour should now scrap the bedroom tax across the UK, eliminating any need for mitigation. Indeed, if the Labour Government also mirrored the £26.70 per child per week Scottish child payment across the UK, it would free up £429 million a year for the Scottish ministers to invest in further anti-poverty measures and public services, but do not hold your breath.

For Scotland to escape the cycle of UK Government cuts and the emergency reallocation of funds mid-year, we must widen our tax base by growing our economy. Resources must increasingly focus on innovation, research and development and start-ups, and I was pleased to hear the First Minister's commitment to that.

We have the talent, skills and many facilities that are essential to becoming Europe's fastest-growing start-up economy. Scotland's £42 million Techscaler network, mentoring and incubation space for new tech businesses has already levered in £70 million of private moneys. Scottish Enterprise has drawn up levels of innovation, internationalisation and investment, working with more than 1,300 companies and partners to enable, create or safeguard 16,700 jobs, including a five-year high in new jobs from foreign direct investment, 60 per cent of which are in energy transition. My constituency will enjoy £1.4 billion of XLCC investment into Hunterston, creating 900 direct green jobs on site by 2028.

In life sciences, which are Scotland's second biggest export, securing investment outwith Cambridge, Oxford and London is not easy. The University of Dundee supports 9,400 jobs and generated £1 billion for our economy last year, not least through its drug discovery unit, which is unique in excellence, research scale and industrial partnerships with the private sector. Just £5 million proof of concept money from the Scottish ministers could, the university attests, lever in £200 million of further private investment.

Stimulating economic growth will enable public service delivery to the high standard that is expected by Scotland's people. The programme for government has noble aims and objectives, and I urge members to support it.

16:12

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I am pleased to speak on this year's programme for government, because the stakes could not be higher. For too many of my constituents in the region of Glasgow—and, indeed, for people across Scotland—NHS waiting lists are too long, the attainment gap is widening, teachers are losing their jobs, disabled people are living without the services that they need, social care is on its knees and the SNP's financial chaos means that more cuts are looming.

At a time when people needed their Government to step up, it has stepped back, grown out of touch and run out of ideas. Last week, the First Minister met Glasgow Disability Alliance, which I know will have raised concerns about reduced services such as social care. However, yesterday, the finance secretary told the Finance and Public Administration Committee that there are to be £13 million of cuts in adult social care, partly because uptake of the new independent living fund, which it delayed delivery of, was not what it should be. Those cuts will terrify disabled people. Further, the promised transition strategy does not even get a mention, despite the Government rejecting my bill on the promise that a strategy would come. That has to change.

On health, I heard nothing in today's statement that will help my constituent who has been waiting for knee surgery for two years, while promises on mental health waits ring hollow when the finance secretary slashed £18.18 million from that budget yesterday. People in Glasgow deserve better. So, too, do the people of Scotland—none more than young people. I will use the rest of my time to talk about them and education.

The programme for government says that it includes the implementation of the delayed behaviour action plan, but there is no resource behind it to help staff and schools to deliver it. Yesterday, the cabinet secretary dodged my suggestion of ditching the centre of teaching excellence that no one wants and giving that money to schools to implement the plan. I hope that the First Minister might consider that today.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I thank the member for the opportunity to clarify matters. I did not suggest that her suggestion was ditched. I said that we need to continue to invest in Scotland's teaching

profession through the centre of teaching excellence and that I think that we need additionality. The question that I put to the member—perhaps she can answer it today—is this: when am I going to receive confirmation from the Labour Government of the consequential that are allegedly coming as a result of VAT changes to the private sector and—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly.

Jenny Gilruth: —the consequential from the 6,500 extra teachers that the Labour Party was elected on? I would like confirmation of that so that I can provide—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I welcome the cabinet secretary's intervention. She knows fine well that she will hear clarity on that after the budget. [*Interruption.*]

The cabinet secretary also says that delivering excellence and equity in education is her top priority but that she cannot do that with fewer teachers. However, the Government is slashing teacher numbers—just ask people in Glasgow.

The Government is also overworking teachers and stripping resources from education and local government. How can we have the highest-quality learning for all when this Government is presiding over a 17 per cent attainment gap that goes back, I am afraid, to the First Minister's time as education secretary? The Government used to plan to close that gap, and I note today that it has revised down its ambition to simply reducing the gap.

The First Minister says that his Government will drive improvement, raise standards and ensure that the needs of learners are at the forefront of its work by implementing curriculum improvement and progressing reform of the national education bodies. However, I am afraid that a rebrand is not reform. Having no effective voice for teachers or learners is not reform, and letting the qualifications body that marked down the poorest pupils mark its own homework is not reform.

The First Minister also said much today about growth, but there was nothing there to help colleges or universities, which are essential for growth and struggling under the Government's toughest funding settlement after years of SNP mismanagement, to quote from evidence that the Education, Children and Young People Committee received.

The SNP Government's record on education is a litany of failure and broken promises on closing the attainment gap, class sizes, non-contact time, free school meals for all pupils and digital devices. It cannot go on. We need an end to broken

promises and economic and financial mismanagement. Scotland needs hope, and my colleagues and I have it, because we believe that our best days lie ahead of us. We can turn the page on economic mismanagement and return to a Scotland where everyone has the opportunity to flourish.

16:17

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the programme for government debate. So much has been mentioned that will need to be dissected in the coming weeks. This year's programme for government has set out clear actions to deliver real change for the people of Scotland, against the most challenging financial backdrop since our Parliament was reconvened.

Last week, the Prime Minister was clear that the UK budget that will be delivered in October will be painful. The reality is that the UK's finances will inevitably affect the funding that is available to us in Scotland. The SNP Scottish Government will continue to prioritise action to eradicate child poverty, grasp the opportunities of delivering net zero and grow the economy by attracting business investment and bolstering our public services. Although the Scottish Government will work with the UK Government wherever it can, it will continue to urge the UK Government to drop its impending damaging austerity agenda.

I will make only two points. The first is about Labour's shameless cut to the winter fuel payment, which will hit older people in Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders particularly hard. The second is about how the programme for government will benefit Dumfries and Galloway. Labour's plan to strictly means test the winter fuel payment in England and Wales sees the Scottish Government's funding for this newly devolved benefit suddenly reduced by £168 million. Devolving a benefit shortly after removing almost its entire budget is disrespectful to everybody who is involved in shaping the new policy in Scotland. That cut undermines the devolution settlement and ignores the importance of the payment to Scottish households, which face harsher winters and higher energy costs.

That will hit our pensioners in rural communities such as Dumfries and Galloway and the Borders particularly hard. The fact is that the cut is coming from Labour—the party that, just six weeks ago, said that it would.

“give pensioners security in retirement.”

In June, Anas Sarwar said:

“Read my lips: no austerity under Labour.”

Given that the “read my lips” soundbite came from right-wing Republican President George Bush Sr's 1988 address to the Republican convention, it is hardly surprising that Anas Sarwar is aligning himself with the right-wing Republican playbook. The fact that Labour's decision was made without any consultation with the Scottish Government has undermined Keir Starmer's commitment to establish a better working relationship. The cut to the winter fuel payment is shameful, and I call on the UK Government to reverse it.

I welcome the fact that the SNP Government has prioritised economic growth and helping businesses, including those in Dumfries and Galloway, to grow and flourish. From tourism to finance and technology to food and drink exports, the Scottish Government will work to create growth and jobs and maximise the huge economic opportunities that lie ahead.

I also welcome the fact that the First Minister has included in the programme for government items on innovation, supporting entrepreneurs, and artificial intelligence and digital technology. We know how valuable AI can be in healthcare. I remind the chamber that I am still a registered nurse.

The First Minister has made it clear that the SNP Scottish Government is a firmly pro-business Administration. Scotland is open for business. The SNP is acutely aware of the enormous pressures that face businesses across the country and is taking decisive steps to offer support, despite the fact that we have limited powers and are working within a challenging budget. That includes investing more than £5 million across the Scottish Government to grow and transform our economic landscape and using every tool at our disposal to maximise economic growth for a clear purpose.

I again welcome the programme for government, which is good for our priorities, good for our people and good for our communities.

16:21

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I welcome the First Minister's statement, but the time for empty promises is running out. Every year, the Government sets out its agenda in an attempt to improve lives across Scotland, yet when it comes to implementing that agenda, it consistently falls short of the mark. Instead of delivering for Scotland, the Scottish Government—through its own spending choices—has delivered an ever-gaping financial black hole.

It is alarming that, beyond ditching its climate change goals, the SNP would defund conservation to plug other holes that it has created through its own spending decisions. Councils and NatureScot

will be left with nothing to spend on preserving our beautiful natural environment for future generations. As Conservative members, we urge ministers to reconsider, given the damage that that will cause to at-risk species, and to properly fund councils for any deals that they have struck elsewhere. Nature should not be a trivial consideration for the SNP, as the funding decision that it has taken would suggest.

As in previous years, the programme for government is nothing more than rhetoric that is designed to conceal a lack of substance and ambition. Rural communities will again be disappointed by today's announcements. Freed from the shackles of the Green Party, the Government had the opportunity to bring forward sensible and pragmatic plans that would afford it the chance to reset, but although the Bute house agreement is over, the Government's legacy of broken promises continues.

Rural issues were scarcely mentioned in the First Minister's statement or in the programme for government, and farmers are still out of pocket to the tune of £46 million of ring-fenced funding. That funding was taken from the agriculture budget, leaving those who rely on that money facing uncertainty and feeling let down.

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Does the member recall the time that Jonnie Hall told the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee that not a single penny of the funding that was being delivered to the agricultural community had not been spent? It was not the Scottish Government but the Treasury that confirmed that.

Rachael Hamilton: Jim Fairlie will remember all the to-and-fro in the chamber with the finance secretary, who promised to return that £46 million. The SNP Government's own finance secretary has acknowledged that that money has been removed, and so has the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, Mairi Gougeon. Jim Fairlie is confusing his recollection with his Cabinet's account.

I welcome the First Minister's acknowledgement that we need to build more homes. However, with only 10 per cent of new affordable homes being built in rural areas, which account for 17 per cent of the population, it is clear that the Government's actions to date have failed to address that urgent issue, exacerbating depopulation and driving young people out of their own areas.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Does the member think it unfortunate that Tory-led Scottish Borders Council handed back £8 million to the Scottish Government because it failed to spend it timeously on building houses?

Rachael Hamilton: The housing budget needs to sort out depopulation across Scotland but it is not doing so, because it is driving young people out of Scotland—moreover, so is the taxation policy.

Significant inequalities in mental health care for adults and young people continue to hit rural communities. Young people in the Borders are being let down today by the Government, as they were let down yesterday, last month and last year, as only 40 per cent of those referred to child and adolescent mental health services are starting treatment within the 18-week target. I am contacted daily by constituents who struggle to access mental health support. It is simply unacceptable that my and our constituents and residents across Scotland must wait until 2025 for the Government to fix its own problems.

I will conclude. I could say so much more, but let me just say that there was fantastic potential for rural communities and for the Government to deliver for them, but it has let them down.

16:26

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): This debate started off as a rather sleepy affair by the Scottish Government, which is a fair reflection of a Government that has lost touch with the public after years of scandal and incompetence. It has lost its way and, as we heard yesterday, it simply cannot be trusted with the public's money.

It is also difficult to see in the document before us, and in the First Minister's speech, what is actually new. We should perhaps look at some of last year's commitments. The Government failed to reduce NHS waiting lists as it promised last year, which are now at a record high, with almost one in six Scots facing those waits; it failed to improve the cancer outcomes as it promised last year, with targets that continue to be missed; it failed to close the attainment gap as it promised not just last year but many years previously, with attainment in schools dropping in the latest results; it failed to produce key strategies for industry, the energy sector and our environment; and it failed to deal with the court backlog in our justice system. It is little wonder that people are sceptical when they hear some of the promises and assurances that the First Minister and some of his colleagues have given.

I hope that the First Minister will look carefully at the example of our artistic sector and Creative Scotland funding and recognise the real concern and anger among that community about the livelihoods of people who often earn very low wages pursuing occupations that they love and who add very much not just to our economy but to our society and culture. I hope that he would

recognise the great fear that the community has lived in in recent weeks; the Government's chaotic approach to its finances and agencies has put that community in fear for their livelihoods. It is right—and it is no surprise—that protests will take place here this week by members of that sector, who very much doubt some of the assurances that the First Minister has given them today. Cuts have been made previously; the money was put back in, and then taken out and then put back in again. That is just one example of his Government's chaotic approach.

Meanwhile, a UK Labour Government is getting on with fixing the foundations of our economy. That is the start of a long job of rebuilding our public finances and putting politics back firmly in the service of working people. I will tell members what we are doing to start that process: we have introduced legislation to establish GB energy, which will be a publicly owned energy company that will bring down energy bills; Labour's new deal for working people is banning exploitative zero-hours contracts and other practices across our economy; and we have commissioned a task force to take a deep dive and address the root causes of child poverty.

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

Michael Marra: No, thank you.

We are closing loopholes in the non-dom status so that we can put more money into our public services. We are fixing those public spending issues, which is absolutely critical.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: No, thank you.

If only someone had thought of the idea of looking at the resources—

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir—again.

If only someone had come up with the idea of looking at the resources and the spending and perhaps having a review. They might have called it the resource spending review. Perhaps the Deputy First Minister will recognise her words about having to set out a

“realistic public spending framework for the years ahead”

that

“does not ignore the realities of our financial position”.

If only—that is exactly what her colleagues went on to do.

On 13 June 2023, Shona Robison told the Finance and Public Administration Committee that the resource spending review was

“a bit of a blunt tool”

and that

“the policy needed to be more nuanced than that.”—
[*Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee*, 13 June 2023; c 27-28.]

Instead, we have had three emergency budgets of financial chaos and cuts, presided over by the finance secretary and this Cabinet.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to wind up.

Michael Marra: Little wonder the mess that has been made, and little wonder the lack of faith that people will have in the statement that has been made today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the final speaker in the open debate, Stuart McMillan.

16:30

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): We have been presented with a programme for government that will prioritise action to eradicate child poverty, regardless of the mounting financial challenge that the SNP Government faces.

The SNP Government already has a strong track record of improving lives in challenging circumstances, but the SNP wants to go further. That is why the First Minister has made eradicating child poverty his central mission, alongside working with business and industry to grow the economy, investing in net zero and delivering stronger public services.

In Scotland, we already have significantly lower child poverty levels than in England and Wales, but that should be no cause for celebration. We can and must do more. This year, Scottish Government policies such as the Scottish child payment are keeping an estimated 100,000 children out of relative poverty. A further 40,000 children could have been lifted out of poverty if the new Labour Westminster Government had voted with the SNP to scrap the two-child benefit cap. In my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency, more than 1,000 children are estimated to be missing out on receiving vital financial support due to that abhorrent policy.

No matter whether it is Labour or the Tories, the SNP Government's efforts to eradicate child poverty are being undermined by Westminster at every step. However, as the First Minister emphasised today, even when faced with unprecedented budgetary controls due to the constitutional constraints, the Scottish

Government's aim will be to improve people's lives by focusing on clear priorities that make the biggest difference.

I will touch on a few of the First Minister's announcements. I welcome the announcement of the special support for disabled people being enhanced across all local authorities by the summer of 2025; the reform of primary care to increase capacity and access to general practice, community pharmacy, dental and community eye care services by the end of 2026; and the additional £120 million for health boards to support continued improvements across a range of mental health services and treatments.

All those things will be welcomed by my Greenock and Inverclyde constituents. They have been lobbying me for those things, and I have lobbied the Scottish Government for them, so I welcome them.

The introduction of the new post-school education reform bill is aimed at tackling economic inactivity and skills shortages in the workforce and removing barriers to employment, which was one of the areas that were highlighted to the Scottish Government by the Inverclyde socioeconomic task force. I am sure that it will welcome the new bill.

Reviewing Creative Scotland will be welcomed widely. As a former member of the parliamentary committee that engaged with the body, I am sure that I will not be alone in the chamber in hoping that the review considers how the body can ensure that it is embedded in towns and villages across the country and not just in the cities.

This programme for government will assist many of my constituents, and individuals across the country, so I support it. Despite more than 14 years of austerity under the Tories and austerity 2.0, which is now under way by Labour, I was shocked by Anas Sarwar's admission earlier that he was "optimistic about the future." His statement:

"Read my lips: no austerity under Labour"

defies comprehension when his London boss is telling everyone that the upcoming Labour budget will be painful and that things will only get worse.

When I talk to my constituents, when folk are going to local food banks on collection days or when pensioners are struggling to heat their homes, I will ensure that I let them know that Mr Sarwar is optimistic about their future.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We move to winding-up speeches. I call Patrick Harvie to speak for up to five minutes.

16:34

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): We have heard a few familiar tunes this afternoon. From the Conservatives, the familiar tune that we need to be spending much more on everything but raising much less tax was no great surprise.

The Labour Party used to recognise the context of austerity being imposed by a Tory UK Government, but now that a Labour UK Government is imposing Tory fiscal rules, that context seems to be a bit less relevant somehow. Its tune might be changing a little, but not necessarily for the better.

As for the SNP, the First Minister told us that he wants to govern harder and stronger. I am not quite sure what that means, but it certainly should not mean abandoning the most marginalised people in our society. I am afraid that an element of that has started to creep into the programme for government—and not only in some of its recent decisions, such as the cutting of provision of free bus travel for asylum seekers. That policy costs such a small amount of money, but it has a massive benefit for the individuals who are affected by it.

It is also now entirely unclear what the Government's position on free school meals will be. It would be helpful if the Government could respond on that, in closing.

It now appears that there are threats to water down rent controls. I am quite sure that the landlord lobby is working overtime to ensure that profiteering in the private rented sector can continue, but it is essential that the Government and the Parliament stand up for tenants' rights if amendments seek to water down the provision.

I am pleased that the Creative Scotland cuts have been reversed, but the huge anxiety that was created during that period was entirely avoidable.

On the decision to abandon the commitment to legislate in Scotland on conversion practices—to which my colleague referred—I see that the Equality Network has already responded. It said:

"These benefits do not make up for the downsides of waiting for a Westminster Bill—namely, ScotGov losing control of the Bill's content and timeline for progress."

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I hope that I am able to reassure Patrick Harvie that the Scottish Government continues to work on a Scottish bill on ending conversion practices. We hope to proceed with a four-nations approach, but if that is not possible, the work is continuing and the pace has not changed. We will continue that work, and I look forward to working with Green colleagues on it.

Patrick Harvie: As an individual, the cabinet secretary is fully committed to the principle, but the

Government needs to be fully committed to the principle and to the reality of introducing the bill to the Scottish Parliament and letting us legislate on it.

I will move on and talk about some of the other things that are not in the programme for government. A human rights bill is not in there, and that has also been criticised by some people outside the chamber. It causes us to lose the opportunity to legislate for the right to a healthy environment. Perhaps the Government decided that legislating for the right to a healthy environment at the same time as raiding the nature restoration fund would have lacked credibility. I remind Rachael Hamilton, who is such a fan of it, that the nature restoration fund was created by the Greens as a result of the Bute house agreement, which she is also obsessed with.

As for the climate change bill, we know that a new one will be necessary. There needs to be a moment of radical honesty of Scotland acknowledging that we are years behind where we should be on emissions reduction because there has not been the political will to change transport policy, the way that we heat our buildings, the way that we use land or the kind of agriculture that we subsidise. If a new bill is going to be tolerable and supportable, it will have to be in the context that there will be an acceleration of immediate action and not waiting until after carbon budgets are set after advice is taken and after a new climate plan is produced. That would leave paralysis for most of the rest of this parliamentary session, if not longer. If a new climate change bill is to seek political support from this part of the chamber, it will need to be in the context of a radical acceleration of climate action in the short term.

Let me just say that there have, since the SNP moved, by choice, into minority Government, been warning signs that it seems to be determined to abandon the trust of the Scots who wanted a progressive and equal Scotland—a Scotland that is willing to redistribute wealth in order to tackle austerity and that is willing to invest in bold and urgent climate action. As my colleague Lorna Slater said, there are still 18 months in which to prove those fears wrong and to commit to the bold action that is necessary. Even if the SNP abandons that project, the Greens certainly will not.

16:40

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Presiding Officer, it is safe to say that it has been a long summer—one that should occasion a period of reflection for the SNP. We would, of course, expect to see recognition of that in the programme for government. The SNP went from 48 members

in the UK Parliament to now having only nine MPs. That is what happens when voters think that a party has nothing to offer them. Whether it is about the disappointment for some of its members that, after 17 years, the SNP is no closer to delivering independence, or about its more recent problems with Police Scotland, or about the very real anger at the lack of competence in government, voters are angry at the failure to deliver even the most basic of services, and that anger is focused on the SNP's record of government in Holyrood.

The lack of progress in tackling NHS waiting lists, the continuing attainment gap, the housing emergency and increasing numbers of people sleeping rough on our streets are all failures that are the responsibility of this SNP Government. People in communities across the country are being offered no hope, no vision and no ideas for making their lives better for the future. That is so depressing when Scotland and its people have so much potential. Scotland's best days do lie ahead of it, but they will not be realised with this depressing and incompetent Government.

Let us look at the charge sheet, starting with the financial position. Yesterday, the finance secretary went through contortions to tell us that she was not to blame for any of the problems with the almost £1 billion shortfall in her budget. It is all Westminster's fault. It is the fault of a UK Labour Government that has been in office for eight weeks. Eight weeks! It is nothing to do with decisions that she or her predecessors made. "Go and look somewhere else to lay the blame," she said. It is a shame that she ignored what the Scottish Fiscal Commission, the Fraser of Allander Institute, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and Audit Scotland all said, which was that they are decisions that she and her Government made that are coming home to roost. Michael Marra was right to call her out yesterday for diverting the £460 million of ScotWind money, because it is a one-off payment that will need to be found again in the new financial year, which will have an effect on the delivery of the programme for government.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Will the member give way?

Jackie Baillie: I say as gently as I can to the health secretary that he should spend more time listening and reflecting than on trying to interrupt me. [*Interruption.*]

Pam Duncan-Glancy highlighted the paucity of thinking by the SNP on education—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Members! Quiet, please.

Jackie Baillie: —and on everything from the failure to close the attainment gap to the removal of hundreds of teachers from classrooms.

The First Minister also told us about changes that he is making to the ministerial code in the context of the secrecy and lack of transparency that he was responsible for during the Salmond inquiry. That is just beyond funny. What about the recommendation from James Hamilton KC that special advisers should be subject to elements of the ministerial code? Oh, no—there was nothing there at all from John Swinney.

Let me turn to health, where the SNP's failures are the most stark—[*Interruption.*]—and Neil Gray should listen to this. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Ms Baillie, could you pause, please? Thank you.

Can we all hear how quiet the chamber is now? Let us imagine that quiet continuing, with just one person speaking—the person who has been called to do so.

Jackie Baillie: Thank you so much, Presiding Officer.

Waiting lists are now at a staggering 864,000 people, or one in six of our fellow Scots, which is the highest number on record, although the Scottish Government promised to bring down waiting lists in the previous programme for government—another SNP failure.

Delayed discharge is also at a record high; it was not so long ago that the finance secretary was health minister and declared that delayed discharge would end—another SNP failure.

What about cancer treatment targets? The 62-day target has not been met in the 12 years since it was introduced, and now the 31-day target is being missed—another SNP failure.

Delays in accident and emergency are now normalised and winter pressures are now all year round—another SNP failure.

The use of the private sector has almost doubled, with 36 per cent of all hip and knee operations being done privately because people cannot wait any longer in pain. I very much welcome the attitude that is taken by the SNP Government when it keeps protesting that it is not creating a two-tier health service, but that is exactly what the SNP Government is presiding over.

Let me thank the staff who work for the NHS for all that they do. They are let down by the Government. So, too, are patients, as excess deaths are up and the Government's failure is literally costing lives. What the Cabinet Secretary for Finance really did not want to talk about yesterday were the cuts that health boards are having to make right now. Caroline Lamb, who is the chief executive of NHS Scotland, told health boards in June that the expectation was that there

would be a £1.1 billion shortfall in the NHS budget. In NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde alone, the deficit is about £226 million.

Neil Gray: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: No. [*Interruption.*]

That will impact on front-line services and staff. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance said that essential staff would be protected. Why, then, are vacancies for nurses and consultants frozen? I did not get an answer from her yesterday, so maybe she can try again, because that is going on under her nose. As staff are not replaced, the pressure on those that remain increases, and they risk burnout.

There are cuts to mental health services, cuts to primary care, and cuts to services for disabled people. Does the Government have no shame? All the Government has is a sticking-plaster approach. It has no vision and no solutions. Anas Sarwar was right: it is clear that the SNP Government has lost its way, and its incompetence is failing the people of Scotland. The programme for government is a missed opportunity—but so, too, was the last one. It effectively demonstrates that the SNP's record is one of abandoning its flagship pledges, missing its own targets and leaving every institution in Scotland weaker. The SNP is out of ideas, it is out of time and, increasingly, the people of Scotland want it out of office.

16:47

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The debate is taking place in the week that the chickens have come home to roost for the First Minister and his failing Government, on whose watch Scotland has become a high-tax, low-growth economy. Public services are crumbling, unable to cope after 17 years of the SNP's incompetence and mismanagement. The number of drug deaths—unmentioned by the First Minister—is soaring. Waiting times remain high. The pupil attainment gap is growing. Lifeline ferries have failed to be delivered. All of that combined has produced the SNP's reverse Midas touch: a unique ability to spend more and, at the same time, deliver less.

As my colleagues Douglas Ross and Liz Smith rightly said, the Government has mismanaged the tax system, mismanaged public sector pay negotiations and mismanaged largely unreformed public services, and it has woefully mismanaged the public finances. As Rachael Hamilton has said, it is therefore no surprise that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government was forced to come to the Parliament yesterday to reveal a £1 billion in-year budget black hole. It is a

black hole that is of the SNP's making—and its making alone—and one that Shona Robison conceded will have a profound effect on the Government's ability to deliver public services and public service reform.

However, the First Minister confirmed this weekend that one of the only areas that will be protected from the SNP's cuts agenda is the Scottish Government's independence unit. The Government is still prioritising spending on party political propaganda at the expense of Scotland's patients and pupils.

I listened carefully to SNP members, including Michelle Thomson, Stuart McMillan, Kenneth Gibson and Emma Harper, and they all played the blame game. Frankly, I do not know what is in the water on the SNP's floors of the MSP building, but there has been a sudden and severe outbreak of delusion among its MSPs.

Michelle Thomson: I merely pointed out that the macro economy resides with Westminster. Craig Hoy made a point about the Scottish Government's budget. The Scottish Government has to operate to a fixed budget, yet the UK Government has consistently borrowed massively, to the extent that the ratio of debt to gross domestic product is now 88.8 per cent. How is that for fiscal rectitude?

Craig Hoy: That borrowing was, in part, to fund the country through the Covid pandemic and, in part, to ensure that we properly funded public services. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: Mr Swinney was finance secretary for long enough to realise that he has to balance the books. Contrary to what has been said, the budget deficit did not arise by chance, it did not arise because of Westminster and it did not arise because of Brexit or the war in Ukraine. It has arisen because the SNP Government has repeatedly made a series of bad decisions and wrong calls on the pace and scale of public sector reform, on tax—

The First Minister: Will Mr Hoy give way?

Craig Hoy: I will give way if Mr Swinney will answer this simple question: why are Scots being taxed more today when his Government delivers less?

The First Minister: That is not the case.

Craig Hoy: It is.

The First Minister: Well, in Scotland, people are eligible for more early learning and childcare provision than they are in any other part of the United Kingdom; young people get to go to university without paying tuition fees; Mr Hoy and his colleagues do not pay prescription fees; and

free personal care for the elderly is available. That is what people get for their taxes in Scotland, which they do not get in any other part of the United Kingdom.

However, I wanted to ask Mr Hoy this question: does he believe that the shocking economic performance of the public finances in the United Kingdom has anything to do with Liz Truss's budget, the war in Ukraine, the Covid pandemic and the spiralling inflation as a consequence of Conservative decisions? If it has, his attack on the SNP Government is absolutely fatuous.

Craig Hoy: This is John Swinney's programme for government. These are John Swinney's cuts, and he needs to own them. This is John Swinney's first—and, perhaps, his last—programme for government, and it is very thin indeed. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: There are some elements that can be cautiously welcomed. There is the renewed commitment to our policy of freeports, and there is an additional £100 million for more mid-market homes, but only after the SNP slashed the housing budget last year. There is the focus on the further education sector and enhancing Scotland's skills—something that the SNP has long neglected. The changes to the ministerial code will mean that the First Minister will no longer sit in judgment on himself, although I note that the Parliament will still have no role in that process.

I also welcome the First Minister's renewed emphasis on reducing child poverty. Who would not? However, what is really going to change? How are we going to tackle the root causes of poverty, including poor housing, poor pupil attainment and stubborn social stains such as the effects of drug and alcohol misuse? In fact, as Pam Duncan-Glancy said, the programme for government waters down the Government's commitment to reducing the attainment gap. In truth, one in four Scottish children is still living in relative poverty. That is light years away from the target that was set by the Government of 10 per cent by 2030. The Government's own analysis says that the number of children who are growing up in poverty in Scotland today is broadly stable. In other words, despite all the extra expenditure, child poverty levels are the same, or even higher, than they were when the SNP came to power in 2007. Billions of pounds have been spent, but the dial is shifting in the wrong direction.

This morning, the finance secretary appeared on the radio to blame everybody but herself for her swingeing cuts. She repeatedly insisted that the SNP was investing in welfare and in public sector pay. Noble though that may be, if policies do not improve outcomes, they are not sustainable, and,

if they are not sustainable, they cannot be classed as an investment. If investment in welfare is working, why are so many Scottish children still living in poverty? If investment in public sector pay is working, why has there been no improvement in productivity or service delivery?

Why has the SNP not taken on board Audit Scotland's advice and embarked on root-and-branch reform of the public sector? Why is the centrepiece of the programme for government not a bold, urgent and wide-reaching public sector performance and productivity bill so that there is real change in the way in which we deliver public services? Instead, we get a vague commitment to a 10-year reform programme.

Why are NHS waiting lists in Scotland so long, given that, as the First Minister says, we have avoided strikes and we pay more to our NHS staff? To put it bluntly, it is because SNP ministers have failed to rebuild, reform and renew our NHS.

In truth, the First Minister is leading a Government that is simply not up to the job of delivering reform. This is not a programme for government; it is a programme for managed decline or, under John Swinney, mismanaged decline. Yesterday, we found out that the Scottish Government is out of money. Today, we find out that it is out of ideas—an intellectually bankrupt First Minister is leading a financially bankrupt Government.

16:55

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The programme for government sets out our commitment to delivery and focuses on four key priorities: eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency and ensuring high-quality, sustainable public services. It comes against a difficult backdrop of an ongoing cost of living crisis, war in Europe and decisions by the UK Government to address its £22 billion funding shortfall, all of which have been studiously ignored by the Opposition in its comments this afternoon.

Michelle Thomson captured some of the other challenges that we face—inflation, the failure of budgets to keep pace with inflation and the fact that costs are continuing to rise—and that is before we talk about the self-inflicted budget decisions of Liz Truss. It looks as though the Conservatives are still not facing up to reality.

Despite that, we have set out a serious, clear and focused agenda to deliver for communities. The programme for government recognises our many strengths, on which we can surely agree across the chamber. Scotland's inward investment projects, which are worth more than rhetoric, grew

by 12.7 per cent in 2023, compared with 6 per cent growth across the UK and a 4.5 per cent fall across Europe. Thankfully, those investors are ignoring the Opposition's rhetoric.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: One of our many strengths which, as the Deputy First Minister puts it, we can all agree on, is our tremendous renewables potential—generation and otherwise. Yesterday, we saw the Scottish Government half-plug the hole in our national finances with the remainder of the revenue from licensing and leasing our sea bed. What plans does the Scottish Government have to plug that same hole in next year's budget?

Kate Forbes: I can tell Alex Cole-Hamilton about the £500 million that we are investing in offshore energy, including £67 million this year alone; I can talk about the fact that a Japanese company has invested £350 million in a cable factory; and I can talk about the international investors who have invested in the port of Ardersier for the first time in decades. We have seen a record number of foreign direct investment projects in Scotland, which, outside London, has been the top-performing part of the UK for nine years. The point is that international investors look to Scotland, see projects that they can be proud of and invest their funding, because they see Scotland's strengths.

I believe that all parts of Scotland, and perhaps all parties in this chamber, recognise that Scotland has a wealth of natural resources and that it has great talent and community cohesion. Building on that, the programme for government wants to deliver prosperity with a purpose. That purpose is to eradicate child poverty, to ensure that our public services are sustainable and to reach that net zero target. Those are our clear aims and objectives.

Jackie Baillie talked about the charge sheet. I agree with Anas Sarwar that we have only eight weeks to go on, but the sad thing for the Labour Party is that, in those eight weeks, we went from a position of promising change and things only getting better to a Prime Minister articulating that things will get worse. Labour was elected on a promise to reject austerity. We have already heard—read my lips—that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is the only person who appears to be surprised by the black hole in the UK's finances. As Anas Sarwar rightly said, Labour has been in power for only eight weeks, but that has still been enough time to strip pensioners of winter fuel payments and enough time to turn a promise to reduce energy bills by £300 into the delivery of a £149 increase in those bills.

Michael Marra: Does the Deputy First Minister not recognise that the job of fixing the public finances is the first priority of the UK Labour Government? It was once her first priority, and her

plan was ditched. That is why we are in the mess that we are in now. Is that not right?

Kate Forbes: On the contrary. It amuses me when the Opposition accuses us of underspending and overspending at the same time. We are very proud as a Government of having ensured that every penny is spent on serving Scotland, including by providing 1,140 hours of high-quality early learning and childcare, providing free bus travel for more than 2 million people, offering free school meals and providing five family payments to restore dignity at the heart of our welfare system. Those initiatives are not all available elsewhere in the UK, and we have pushed the spending envelope as far as possible, because of the values on which we stand of eradicating child poverty, delivering prosperity and reaching net zero.

I want to talk about how we will build on our strengths—the strengths that, I hope, all of us in Scotland are agreed on—to unlock Scotland’s potential and deliver our aims. We have set out a priority list of three areas in the economy to do that.

Douglas Ross: Will the Deputy First Minister give way?

Kate Forbes: Before I set out that list, I will take my last intervention.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to the Deputy First Minister for giving way. She is speaking about building and priorities. Will she confirm, or otherwise, whether the SNP still believes in fully dualling the A96 from Aberdeen to Inverness? When will that be delivered? The promise was to do so by 2030.

Kate Forbes: As somebody who lives in the Highlands and who values the north, I absolutely agree with our commitment to upgrade and improve the A9 and the A96.

In relation to our programme of delivering economic prosperity with a purpose, I will talk about three areas. The first is a co-ordinated programme to attract investment in delivering net zero, building housing and improving our infrastructure. The second is to ensure that the decision-making process is accelerated and streamlined by, for example, creating a planning hub and building capacity and resilience into the system. The third is to support our people—our entrepreneurs and more women—into business, and to ensure that we embed fair work in everything that we do. With the few minutes that I have remaining, I will go through each of those individually.

On investment, we know that our public finances are constrained, so our commitment is to leverage and stimulate private investment with that co-

ordinated programme, to implement recommendations from the investor panel, to improve engagement with investors, to strengthen our capacity and capability to deliver and to explore new funding mechanisms such as blended finance and guarantees to ensure that there is a national project pipeline of investment opportunities. Specifically on housing, we will invest £100 million, growing to £500 million with institutional investment, to deliver at least 2,800 mid-market rent homes, on top of the public investment that we are putting into affordable housing.

On decision making, we know from looking at the figures that people want to invest in Scotland. Our commitment is to streamline and accelerate those opportunities, to support early adopters to develop a masterplanned consent area and to front load consents, including planning permission for housing, and to ensure that there are enough planners in the system through a planned apprenticeship programme that will invest in new talent. That will sit alongside the work that we are doing with communities to create local employment through the community wealth building bill.

On entrepreneurship, we want to build on the Techscaler programme, to support more women to start and grow a business and to integrate the Techscalers into manufacturing and industry to ensure that we are not creating jobs elsewhere with our talent and ingenuity and that those jobs are coming here to Scotland. We will develop our strengths in data, in digital, in artificial intelligence, in health and in life sciences not only to create jobs and deliver economic prosperity but to solve the big problems in the health service. Anyone who wants an example of that need only look at Scottish Brain Sciences, which has recently come to Scotland with the aim of curing Alzheimer’s. It is working here in Scotland with the NHS, using that talent and ingenuity.

A number of areas in the programme for government are truly exciting. Michael Marra talked about the importance of our creative artists and our culture sector—absolutely. That is why it is great news that Angus Robertson has announced the release of £6.6 million, including £3 million for the open fund and a review of Creative Scotland, to ensure that we support that sector as much as possible.

I hope that everyone in the chamber believes in delivering prosperity. There is no greater purpose for that prosperity than to eradicate poverty, to lift the next generation of children out of poverty and to embed fairness across Scotland.

There is much to which we could dedicate time with regard to the challenges that we face and the issues that families are grappling with, but this

programme for government is built on optimism and on confidence, and it has clarity of vision. We will always employ every penny at our disposal to lift children out of poverty and to ensure that we reach our other objectives.

We cannot be accused of underspending and overspending at the same time. This programme for government will use everything at our disposal to deliver for Scotland, in the service of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the programme for government 2024-25.

Rachael Hamilton: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

I seek your advice on Christine Grahame's intervention earlier in the debate. She suggested that the Conservative-led Scottish Borders Council was responsible for an affordable housing supply underspend. That was incorrect. The council does not manage housing stock. That is managed by registered social landlords. The £8 million underspend reflected a number of development challenges that those RSLs had faced.

The Presiding Officer: The member will be aware that points of order should be used to inquire as to whether proper parliamentary procedures are being or have been followed. The content of members' contributions and the accuracy thereof are a matter for members. Members will know that a mechanism exists for correction where that is required.

Business Motions

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of two business motions. The first motion, S6M-14305, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, sets out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 10 September 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Police (Ethics, Conduct and Scrutiny) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Police (Ethics, Conduct and Scrutiny) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 11 September 2024

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands;
NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist
Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 12 September 2024

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Social Justice

followed by Ministerial Statement: National Mission
to Reduce Deaths and Improve Lives of
People Impacted by Drugs and Alcohol

followed by Scottish Government Debate:

Programme for Government – Growing
Scotland's Green Economy

followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 17 September 2024

2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by Stage 1 Debate: Scottish Languages Bill
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 18 September 2024

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Constitution, External Affairs and
Culture, and Parliamentary Business;
Justice and Home Affairs
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 19 September 2024

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

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 9 September 2024, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second business motion, S6M-14306, in the name of Jamie

Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, is on a stage 2 timetable.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 27 September 2024.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:08

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-14307, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, S6M-14308, on committee membership, and S6M-14309, on the office of the clerk.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Tied Pubs (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that Daniel Johnson be appointed to replace Foysol Choudhury as a member of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that between 1 February 2025 and 31 January 2026, the Office of the Clerk will be open on all days except: Saturdays and Sundays, 18 April, 21 April, 5 May, 23 May, 26 May, 12 September, 28 November, 24 December (pm), 25 December and 26 December 2025, and 1 and 2 January 2026.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:08

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

One question is to be put as a result of today's business, if no one objects to my proposal to ask a single question on three Parliamentary Bureau motions.

The question is, that motions S6M-14307, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, S6M-14308, on committee membership, and S6M-14309, on the office of the clerk, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Tied Pubs (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that Daniel Johnson be appointed to replace Foysol Choudhury as a member of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee.

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The Presiding Officer: That concludes Decision Time, and we will move on to members' business in the name of Bob Doris. I would be grateful if those members who are leaving the chamber could do so quietly.

Off-road Vehicles

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-13189, in the name of Bob Doris, on tackling the misuse of off-road vehicles. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges what it sees as the significant public safety issues regarding the misuse of off-road vehicles, including quad bikes, being used dangerously, inappropriately and often illegally on roads, footpaths and various open spaces, which, it believes, poses a serious risk of injury and risk to life for those driving such vehicles, as well as others within the community; considers that their misuse can also have a detrimental impact on a community due to nuisance, antisocial behaviour and damage caused; notes the belief that registration of off-road vehicles, which is a reserved power, may assist Police Scotland with what it considers to be the often hazardous and unenviable tasks regarding policing, identification and enforcement; further notes that the Off-Road Vehicles (Registration) Bill is being progressed by Anne McLaughlin MP within the UK Parliament, and that the UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport has agreed to establish a task force to look at the wider issues caused by off-road vehicles, and notes the belief that such a working group in Scotland should include the Scottish Government, local authorities, Police Scotland and others to consider what more can be done to keep the public safe and nuisance-free from the misuse of off-road vehicles across Scotland, including in the Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn constituency.

17:11

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): My thanks go to fellow MSPs whose support has enabled me to bring to the chamber this members' business debate on tackling the misuse of off-road vehicles.

Increasingly, communities across Maryhill and Springburn are being impacted by the misuse of off-road vehicles—often, but by no means exclusively, quad bikes. They can cause a regular and persistent nuisance on our streets and pavements and in our parks. They can cause fear and alarm, as well as significant damage. Many of us will have witnessed the damage that has been caused to surfaces by off-road vehicles, not least in our parks and grassed areas.

However, it is the human damage and devastation that I want to draw to the attention of MSPs. In doing so, I will speak a little about David Gow. David was killed when he was struck by a quad bike on Balmore Road in February last year. He was 79 years old. David and his family were robbed of celebrating his 80th birthday. The events around David's killing remain subject to legal proceedings, so I will say no more in that regard.

However, I note that, this evening, we are joined in the public gallery by his son Craig and Craig's fiancée Donna, as well as David's brother Allan, his wife Marion and his son Gordon. Allan is a local councillor who represents the area where David lived, and where he was so tragically killed.

A quad bike has taken so much from David and his family. David should have been with his daughter Nicola to celebrate his granddaughter Renatta's wedding. He missed his grandson Craig's graduation, his granddaughter Jessica's 21st, his grandson Cameron's 18th and his brother Allan's 60th. David will also miss, later this month, the wedding of Craig and Donna, at which he would have been over the moon to welcome his wee step-granddaughter Myah, whom he adored, formally into the family.

I will say more about David later, but it is important that we never forget the devastation and loss that the misuse of off-road vehicles can cause.

I make it clear that there are many responsible users of off-road vehicles—this is not about demonising any group. There will also be those who do not understand or realise the risks and dangers that are inherent in the inappropriate use of such vehicles. Such riders put not only others but themselves at risk. We must reach out to that group to inform and educate them.

However, I will be blunt. There is a third group: those who, for whatever reason, just do not seem to care. Sometimes, a lone rider can cause nuisance or danger; at other times, they are in larger groups, which can increase the risk to the community's safety and can also be hugely intimidating.

Councillor Gow and I met Police Scotland, and it was clear from that discussion that a fourth group is emerging: those who use motorised cycles. Those cycles are often adapted to enable them to travel at high speed, and they are often used to scoot about communities in our town and city centres—at times, but not always, servicing deliveries in the so-called gig economy. I know that Police Scotland is increasingly aware of the dangers that inappropriate use of such vehicles can cause.

Our legislation and our enforcement powers are playing catch-up with those growing issues. Police officers have the thankless task of tackling the abuse and misuse of, and the misery that is often caused by, off-road vehicles. Pursuing someone who is driving such a vehicle illegally puts officers, those whom they pursue and the wider public at risk. When off-road vehicles are confiscated, they are often returned to the owner within days of the vehicle being seized. Fines, if they are levied, do

not seem to act as a deterrent. The police need greater support.

My colleague Anne McLaughlin was, until recently, the MP for the area where David Gow stayed. Anne introduced a members' bill to the UK Parliament to require the registration of off-road vehicles, which is a matter that is wholly reserved to Westminster. Anne's Off-Road Vehicles (Registration) Bill secured strong cross-party support, but, unfortunately, the bill fell following the dissolution of the United Kingdom Parliament.

However, the then UK Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Transport, Guy Opperman, agreed to establish a task force to look at the wider issues that are caused by off-road vehicles, and he was sympathetic to vehicle registration. I very much hope that we can work together, across parties and across all levels of government, to support progress on tackling the misuse of off-road vehicles. Councillor Gow and I have, therefore, written to Lilian Greenwood MP, the new UK Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Transport, as we wish to meet her to discuss those matters further.

I was encouraged to see reported in the press comments from the UK Home Secretary about potential action on fines, confiscation powers and the power to destroy certain off-road vehicles. However, there was no mention of potential vehicle registration, which is a key component of helping to identify and confiscate off-road vehicles.

I ask our Scottish Government to ensure that a working group is established on the matter in Scotland. Many aspects of road safety, education, policing and enforcement are devolved. I am sure that Police Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities could be key partners in any working group, along with various other organisations. If there is to be UK legislation, such a group would help to inform the Scottish context in that regard. I ask for that commitment from the Scottish Government this evening.

I want to end by returning to David Gow and his family. David was a son of Possilpark; a talented footballer, which took him to Jersey for a time; and a player for, and captain of, Possil FC for many years. He was a painter to trade and was a husband to Lorna, whom he met at a football dance in St Gregory's church hall in 1972 and to whom he was devoted until her sad passing in 2014.

David's son Craig described him as a great family man, a great friend and a great colleague—an extremely intelligent and fiercely independent man, whom Craig was lucky enough to have known in all those capacities.

I very much hope that the debate can provide fresh impetus for Scotland's Parliament and our Scottish Government to work in partnership to do all that we can to protect our communities from the misuse of off-road vehicles and to protect other families like the Gow family, who have faced such tragedy.

17:18

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): First, I pay my respects and send my heartfelt condolences to David's family, who are in the gallery. I thank Bob Doris for bringing the debate to the chamber. He is my local MSP, and I will happily work with him on anything that we can do.

Improper use of off-road vehicles has negatively impacted communities across Scotland, most notably through incidents of antisocial behaviour and the risk that that poses to public safety. According to Citizens Advice Scotland, antisocial behaviour can broadly be defined as behaviour

“that causes or is likely to cause alarm or distress”

to other people in a different household. That behaviour can range from vandalism to intimidation, harassment and excessive noise. All those examples of antisocial behaviour often stem from the misuse of off-road vehicles in areas such as dedicated footpaths and public roads, and in our lovely parks.

Unfortunately, that has been an on-going problem in Glasgow, as Bob Doris and I know only too well. Where I live, I can look out of the window every night and see quad bikes and unlicensed motorbikes jumping about with no lights on them, with riders wearing no helmets just zooming about the place. They have no regard for public safety or for the safety of any other vehicle users.

Last June, I wrote to Police Scotland. I submitted a freedom of information request about the number of incidents in Glasgow involving uninsured quad bikes and motorbikes. More specifically, I asked whether there had been a spike, how it might have pertained to youth violence and what Police Scotland was doing to address the problem.

While I was attempting to get that information, I was informed about the lack of vehicle insurance offences, which in any case are not sub-categorised by type of vehicle. Given how widespread the issue is, I was delighted to see Anne McLaughlin take her bill through the UK Parliament. It is a shame that Anne is not there now to carry that work forward.

Bob Doris: I thank Annie Wells for her kind words. Councillor Gow and I met representatives of Police Scotland, who identified the lack of data. The police are actively trying to work on that. I

thank Annie Wells for highlighting that we need proper data to inform potential legislation.

Annie Wells: I totally agree with Mr Doris: we do.

The bill would have made registration for certain types of off-road vehicles mandatory, and it would have required those vehicles to display registration plates. That would have made identification enforcement a lot easier for Police Scotland.

Moreover, as we have heard, a great additional step was taken when the UK Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Transport at the time agreed to the creation of a dedicated task force to examine the wider problems associated with off-road vehicle misuse. I would welcome the involvement of local authorities, Police Scotland and the Scottish Government in any such working group to address the numerous facets of the issue. Input from authorities at all levels of government in Scotland would be an absolute necessity in tackling it.

Misuse of off-road vehicles of various types has been a continual problem in Scottish communities, especially in Glasgow. Aside from being a public nuisance, the problem has often resulted in criminal offences being committed and in people being hurt or even, in the case of Mr Gow, being killed. That extends both to those using the vehicles and to fellow drivers and pedestrians. I support greater cross-body collaboration so that we can resolve the issue, which blights our communities, and so that the cost to human life of off-road vehicle misuse is tackled head on.

17:22

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank Bob Doris for securing this afternoon's debate. Members might be aware that I have been raising the issue of antisocial behaviour on quad bikes and off-road bikes, in my Mid Scotland and Fife region and more broadly, for a number of years. That included leading a similar debate in the chamber in 2015. During that debate, I highlighted the hard work of Shelagh Cooper, who had collected thousands of signatures in support of her campaign for action on illegal bike use, after her dog died following a collision with an off-road motorbike. I spoke about our

"responsibility to respond to the problem",

and I said:

"We cannot be complacent about the degree of illegal off-road motorbiking and the accompanying antisocial behaviour that is happening in some of our communities."— [*Official Report*, 18 June 2015; c 26.]

Since then, I have raised the matter on a number of occasions, in response to increasingly frequent incidents of antisocial behaviour on

farmland, grass and parks, and on local pavements and streets. A decade on from that members' business debate, it is frustrating that more progress has not been made. I have been disappointed in the Government's fairly weak response to the issues so far, but I hope that today's debate provides a greater focus for action.

Although I have focused on behaviour in the Mid Scotland and Fife region, I know that similar problems exist in other parts of Scotland. I have repeatedly called for a national campaign and for measures to ensure that the police have sufficient powers and resources to deal with the issue.

In Levenmouth and elsewhere in Fife, the police have been proactive and have led a multi-agency task force to address antisocial behaviour on bikes. It is a social problem that cannot be solved by the police alone.

Over the years, I have been happy to highlight and support the efforts of the Kingdom Off Road Motorcycle Club in Fife, which provides a controlled environment for children, young people and adults to enjoy off-road motorcycling, alongside social awareness and re-education programmes. Kingdom provides an example of how the appeal of off-road biking can be used to engage with young people and to influence their behaviour positively. The club provides low-cost access to equipment and riding to those from disadvantaged areas, as well as an accredited learning programme equivalent to a national 4.

National messages—

Bob Doris: Will Claire Baker give way?

Claire Baker: If I have time, Presiding Officer.

Bob Doris: I am sorry to cut across your speech, Claire. First, I want to thank you—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair.

Bob Doris: I thank Claire Baker for her on-going work for over a decade in this area. Does she agree that this debate should act as an impetus for strong partnership working between the Scottish and UK Governments? There is a crossover between reserved and devolved powers, and actions by both Governments should complement each others to deliver the best for communities, which is what we both want.

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

Claire Baker: I have seen the positive effect of cross-party working in Fife, and I have described how that has been done in Levenmouth. I will go on to talk about registration and whether that is the solution. I know that MPs have looked at that at a UK level over the years, but we need to think clearly about what we expect registration to

achieve in tackling the issue. I will talk about that towards the end of my speech.

National messages could be clearly communicated so that those using off-road bikes understand the risks that they are taking, the laws that they are breaking and the consequences of doing so.

As we get closer to Christmas, there should be awareness raising to ensure that those gifting off-road bikes are also aware of the rules, potentially through a campaign among retailers to encourage responsible sales and to ensure that buyers have a full understanding of the law. Not all bikes will be purchased through traditional sellers. Bikes are passed on once they are outgrown or sold through informal means. We need to get information on the responsibilities and legalities for those people, too.

The motion refers to the Off-Road Vehicles (Registration) Bill, which was being progressed at Westminster by Anne McLaughlin. I recognise that she introduced the bill in honour of her constituent David Gow, who sadly died after being struck by an off-road bike while crossing the road to his home. That was a tragic consequence of the type of behaviour that we are talking about today. I thank Bob Doris for sharing with us the impact of the loss of David on his family.

Although a registration scheme has the potential to help the police to more easily track down and identify vehicle owners, there is a need to ensure that it will be effective in addressing those who act irresponsibly.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Claire Baker spoke about identifying not only the bike but the perpetrator, so I will give her some information. Since March this year, Police Scotland in the north-east has been using SelectaDNA, which is a light spray that is harmless to skin and clothes. Police spray it when someone is not using a bike legally, and it can identify someone later as having been at the scene.

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

Claire Baker: I am aware of that type of policing model, which is really positive. That example identifies the struggle that the police have when they cannot pursue someone who is on a bike, but it is a way to secure identification. We need to ensure that that method is available in all police forces. Sometimes, we find that some police forces will have an effective method but that it is not always shared or the resources are not always available in all areas. However, I am aware of that tactic.

The existing voluntary registration scheme is a means mainly to deter theft and retrace bikes, so

we need to think about whether a mandatory scheme would help to prevent illegal activity. The key challenge for the police is identifying the bike, and registration will assist only if they already have the bike. Identifying users often has to be done with the support of the community as part of a wider approach to address the antisocial behaviour that has impacted our communities for far too long.

At a school visit in the Parliament yesterday, parents raised their concerns with me about the safety of their children due to illegal quad bike activity in their area. The area is within a stone's throw of the charity Kingdom Off Road Motorcycle Club's off-road track, and people should be using that track. As Bob Doris explained, some people who use bikes are just there to have fun but have no regard for others, and we must get on top of the issue before more people are hurt.

17:28

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I thank my colleague Bob Doris for bringing this important debate on the misuse of off-road vehicles to Parliament. As others have emphasised, this is a very serious issue in many of our communities, including the one that I have the privilege of representing. It is a growing challenge and issue and, as has just been emphasised, it is one that we need to get on top of.

As other colleagues have emphasised, those who partake in the misuse of off-road vehicles are a small minority in our communities—it is often young people and often minors—and we must make sure that that point is made. However, it is a minority that is causing a lot of difficulty. Others have talked about their work on these matters for some time.

When I was elected in 2016, there was a trend in my constituency in which a minority was stealing motorbikes from across the city, driving them around the city dangerously and antisocially and then coming to my constituency, continuing in that behaviour and burning them out. Police Scotland, along with other partners, reacted to that. Through operation Soteria and significant youth work interventions, a difference was made and trends were changed. The issue did not go away but it was no longer the everyday concern and nuisance that it had been for a number of years.

Unfortunately, since the pandemic and particularly this summer, there has been a rise in such casework in my constituency, primarily in the Leith area. A new trend is emerging—partly, as is documented, influenced by social media—of quad bikes, off-road bikes and e-bikes known as Sur-

Ron bikes after one of the companies that make them being driven dangerously along footpaths and on main pedestrian arteries, such as pavements. That is causing real difficulty.

The small minority of people who are engaging in that behaviour are often involved in crime as well, whether theft, snatching phones—again, a trend that is worryingly growing—or violence. Some of that behaviour is considered to be linked to organised crime, which makes sense, so we have a multitude of competing elements to the challenge.

As others have said, it is difficult for the police to address that behaviour, given the fact that many of those involved are minors, often do not wear helmets and are in public areas where, if the police were to pursue them, it could create more danger for the people who are around. We need a collective, innovative and creative response. I support calls for a working group, for greater focus on whether and what new regulation would make a difference and for engagement with the UK Government and local authorities to come to solutions. From what I have observed and read, the problem is much bigger in some cities in England. We do not want to get to that point in Scotland, so let us get ahead of the situation and try to put intervention and collaboration in place to make a difference.

Another point that is perhaps worth considering, but perhaps even more sensitive, is that a lot of the minority of young people involved in the behaviour wear face coverings that, by any logical conclusion, are not required. We might have had a bad summer, but I do not think balaclava wearing was necessary in Scotland at this time of year.

Those are very serious, overlapping issues. Previously, when there was an increase in motorbike crime in my constituency, a young man died falling off a bike. Also, a young child was hit by a motorbike and, thankfully, recovered fully. Let us not have any more tragedies.

I offer my condolences to the relatives who are in the public gallery and I thank the Government in advance for taking action on the matter.

17:33

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Bob Doris for bringing the debate to the chamber and David Gow's family for allowing Bob Doris to share his tragic story in the chamber.

I will make a short contribution to the debate, which follows a number of discussions with residents in my South Scotland region over the summer break. Following those conversations, there is no doubt in my mind that off-road bikes and vehicles are being driven illegally and

recklessly throughout Scotland. I will give an example.

I was in Netherthird, part of my constituency near where I live, on the doorstep with someone, and what I would describe as a dirt bike was being driven up and down the street. Residents said to me that they had tried to work with the community council and the police, but it was a continuing issue.

Members have outlined many of the points that I would raise.

I also note that my friend and colleague Claire Baker has raised that important issue in the chamber many times. I am really glad to have the debate right across the chamber. We agree that we need to move the issue forward.

Constituents have raised multiple issues around safety, fear, excessive noise, and damage to fields, farmlands and their favourite community walks and, of course, fencing around property and pathways, which other members have mentioned.

Other members have also mentioned the variety of vehicles—I have learned of more tonight. In my area, there are issues with off-road bikes, quad bikes and dirt bikes, as they are described, particularly around sound and noise pollution. However, the adaptation of bikes and e-bikes is something that I have just heard of tonight.

Bob Doris: The member raises the variety of bikes. I associate myself with Ben Macpherson, who mentioned criminality in some respects. There is a new fad just now—which, as a dad, I get—of young people who are desperate to ride e-scooters and are on the roads at the very youngest of ages. Those young people are the next generation of quad bike and Sur-Ron bike users. We must tackle that issue with education at an early-years level. The amount of people on our streets just now who ride bikes irresponsibly will only grow unless we tackle the issue at the roots.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Carol Mochan, I will give you the time back.

Carol Mochan: The member is absolutely right. We are discussing trying to tackle the issue on all fronts so that we get it right, because the reality is that those vehicles are being driven right through the heart of our communities. Local councillors and community councils have raised the issues with me. There is no doubt in my mind that we must work with communities to tackle the issue, which causes them undue concern and stress.

As we have heard, great safety issues exist, with often tragic outcomes. We have heard that young people often will not understand the tragic risks to themselves and their wider communities, and I believe that working together is the answer. We need to get the correct legislation, but we

need to do so with communities. It is essential that we work together if we are going to turn a corner. I am interested in hearing what the minister believes we can do together to make a difference.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Clare Adamson, who is the final speaker in the open debate.

17:37

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I will not take much time. I would like to tell the Gow family—my colleagues know this as well—that I convened the cross-party group on accident prevention and safety awareness, which was established when I joined Parliament in 2011. My reason for doing so was that I lost a teenage member of my family in a road traffic accident, so I have some understanding of your pain and the impact that the issue will have had and will continue to have on your family. You have my deepest condolences.

We have looked at the issue of quad bikes, including the fact that they are not toys. We had serious conversations with the farming community and some of the people who work in forestry and other areas about the need for helmet use. I know that Emma Harper ran a campaign called hing yer helmet, in which she engaged with the sellers of quad bikes and some of the farming magazines to ensure that they stopped showing pictures of people on the bikes without their helmets, to try to get the message through that wearing a helmet is imperative.

Last week, Charlotte Lawrence, a 33-year-old forestry worker, was killed in Pitlochry.

Emma Harper: It is good that Clare Adamson mentioned the hing yer helmet campaign, which I was keen to support. It is about farmers wearing helmets and safety in fields and on roads, so I know that it is different from what Bob Doris and others are describing in relation to antisocial behaviour. Does the member agree that it sounds as though there is merit in the Scottish Government's leading on that issue and taking some action?

Clare Adamson: Yes, absolutely. We have known about the concerns around that area. The cross-party group has also looked at emerging trends. Bob Doris has just mentioned e-scooters, and our trading standards officers and the fire service are really concerned about the fire risk from the charging of those scooters. In other parts of the UK, particularly the more populated ones, pedestrians have frequently been injured by e-scooters being used on the pavement.

The issue is an emerging one and everybody has been so positive tonight in highlighting the

challenges and saying that legislation has to catch up. That is where there is a willingness to come together to ensure that we make some progress on this. It has taken far too long for the Government—a lot of it is reserved to Westminster—to recognise just how serious these problems are.

It is absolutely right to say that there are good organisations, such as those in South Lanarkshire and Livingston, that run parks for quad bike use. They have rules and regulations, and the young people are taught safety on top of everything. However, it is an emerging issue and we have to get on top of it. My colleagues in the chamber will know that.

I reach out to the Gow family to say that if there is anything that we can do in the cross-party group that is engaged in talking about these issues, I will be more than happy to meet them and see whether that group can take something forward in the Parliament.

17:40

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I offer my sincerest condolences to the family of David Gow, who are with us tonight.

I thank my colleagues from across the chamber for their contributions to such an important and current debate. I appreciate Bob Doris raising the subject on behalf of his constituents today.

As I have a farming background, I have worked with quad bikes for 30-plus years, but I had not realised until tonight's debate that they are such an issue in the urban sector.

The Scottish Government acknowledges that there are issues with off-road vehicles, including quad bikes, being used inappropriately, recklessly and dangerously, jeopardising the safety of all road users and the public, and issues with the impact that they are having on communities. Such misuse can lead to or involve links with antisocial nuisance and more serious criminal behaviour. It can alarm residents, particularly more vulnerable people. It can damage land, pavements, roads and local facilities. Such misuse is not acceptable, and we need to work together to get that message across. We must address the problem where it occurs and try to change the law to give us more powers to do so.

Presiding Officer, allow me to set out some of the Government's position in more detail. The enforcement of all traffic offences is a matter for Police Scotland, which operates independently of Scottish ministers. However, the Scottish Government in no way condones or disregards the rules of the road. No road user should disregard the rules of the road.

Despite challenging financial circumstances, we are investing record funding of £1.5 billion in policing in the current financial year. The Scottish Police Authority, working with the chief constable, will determine how to allocate its budget to meet those policing priorities. However, people should be assured that the Scottish Government fully supports Police Scotland and its partners in dealing with the misuse of the vehicles that are under discussion in our debate today.

Local policing teams are ideally placed to identify where the misuse of vehicles is causing risk and distress to the public, and to ensure that local knowledge and prioritisation of resources can best inform the approach that is required. As has been mentioned a number of times tonight, local communities know better than most.

Police Scotland's corporate communications department co-ordinates messaging on trending issues—I hope that this addresses some of Claire Baker's points—such as those that are under debate at the moment, and that is then disseminated and circulated via local divisional social media. The communications department also co-ordinates with other emergency service partners and local government to ensure a consistent approach to road safety campaign messaging.

In addition, in February 2024, some members of the Scottish Community Safety Network, including those in local authorities, raised concerns about off-road motorbikes and quad bikes. In response, we set out to the SCSN and its membership how Police Scotland is dealing with the issue and highlighted the significant partnership work that is being done. We encourage local partners to raise or continue to raise the issues locally with police colleagues.

Police Scotland has also extended the use of selected DNA tagging spray, which was mentioned by my colleague Jackie Dunbar. The hand-held tagging spray is used by officers to target offenders who are involved in antisocial and illegal use of motorbikes and bicycles, including electric bikes. The spray is deployed as a fine mist that does not cause any harm or damage to the skin, clothing or property, but it does not wash off surfaces and can therefore help to forensically link offenders after the passage of time. However, with registration, that might not be necessary, and that is one of the things that we have to look at.

In 2024-25, we have committed a record £36 million to road safety. Of that, £10 million is being invested to enhance local road safety through the road safety improvement fund. That includes £1 million to support Glasgow City Council to help to reduce casualties and risks on its roads through the implementation of the measures that align with the principles of the safe system.

I will highlight our road safety framework. Road safety is of paramount importance to the Scottish Government. Through the delivery of Scotland's road safety framework to 2030, we have committed to making Scotland's road travel safe for everyone. The framework sets out the vision for Scotland to have the best road safety performance in the world by 2030, alongside our ambitious long-term goal of no one being seriously injured or killed on our roads by 2050. I know that that is ambitious, but it is an ambition that we have to drive for. One death on Scotland's roads is too many, and my sympathies are with the families who suffer such tragic losses.

Children in Scotland's poorest areas are more likely to be injured by road traffic. Analysis shows that children on foot or bike in the 20 per cent most deprived areas are more than three times as likely to be involved in a traffic accident as those in the 20 per cent least deprived areas.

Claire Baker: I appreciate what the minister is saying about road safety, but—although I may be mistaken—that appears to be about the bigger issue of cars and other road usage. What members are concerned about is off-road bikes, which are sometimes used on roads but also cause problems in parks and public spaces. They are not always on the roads—they are in other spaces as well. I am not sure about the road safety advice—will it address such issues?

Jim Fairlie: I am merely giving an outline of all the things that the Scottish Government is doing and how seriously we take the issue.

Previously, Transport Scotland has funded a police-led initiative for young people to produce and circulate a short film to discourage their peers from taking part in the theft or antisocial use of motorcycles. That was found to help increase awareness of motorbike crime and the wider ripple effects that that can have on communities.

Looking ahead, analytical work is under way to establish the current scale and nature of the off-road biking challenge in Scotland. The findings that are identified and will flow from that will be shared with stakeholders through future meetings of the motorcycle focus group, which last met in late July this year.

Prior to the election, as we have heard, Anne McLaughlin introduced a private member's bill in Westminster on the registration of off-road vehicles. Registration is reserved, and the Department for Transport and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency were leading on the bill. It now seems likely that the UK Government may take forward Anne McLaughlin's proposed bill—I hope that it will—or bring forward new legislation that broadly follows what has been proposed in that bill. We would welcome that. We would, of

course, prefer to be in charge of all such transport matters here in Scotland but, while the issue is reserved, we expect and will seek the opportunity to be fully and appropriately engaged in the development of any work that the UK Government may take forward on off-road vehicles.

In a similar space, under the umbrella of off-road vehicles, I turn briefly and specifically to e-scooters and e-bikes. E-scooters are covered by the same UK-wide laws and regulations that apply to all motor vehicles. As such, in order to be used lawfully on public roads, e-scooters need to meet legal requirements including valid motor insurance, technical standards, the payment of vehicle tax, licensing and registration, and the use of relevant safety equipment. In practice, however, it is very difficult to comply with all those requirements, which means that it would be a criminal offence to use one on the road. In Scotland, it is currently illegal to ride an electric scooter on a public road or pavement, on a cycle path, on a shared path or in any public place.

Ministers in the previous UK Government publicly stated their intention to bring forward a new regulatory framework to enable the use of e-scooters. Both primary and secondary legislation will be required; therefore, the timescales for when such a framework would be in effect remain unclear. As such, the Scottish Government supports calls for greater clarity on the UK Government's plans—in particular, on the timescales for work to progress in that area. Transport Scotland will continue to engage with the Department for Transport as necessary to discuss its proposed regulatory framework.

If electric bikes—electrically assisted pedal cycles—adhere to certain criteria and requirements, including maximum power output for the electric motor, which should also not be able to propel the bike when it travels at more than 15.5 mph, they are classed as normal pedal bikes, and cyclists can ride them on cycle paths or anywhere else a pedal bike is allowed. We will continue to engage with the Department for Transport on any developments in that area.

I also highlight that, as outlined in the updated “Highway Code”, people

“MUST NOT ... ride in a dangerous, careless or inconsiderate manner”

when cycling, and

“MUST obey all traffic signs and traffic light signals.”

Again, clearly, that is reserved.

To conclude, I reassure members across the chamber, and our constituents, including road users and pedestrians, that the Scottish Government takes very seriously the misuse of off-road vehicles, and we will continue to work with

Police Scotland and local partners to seek to eradicate that misuse.

Bob Doris: I am sure that the minister was just coming on to this, but I had a very specific ask about establishing a working group in Scotland. I agree with the minister that I wish that all those powers sat here, but this is not a constitutional issue—it is about partnership working across Government and with local authorities to deliver for our communities. I look for reassurance that we will progress some of this.

Jim Fairlie: Bob Doris has pre-empted me. I was going to say that, in response to his ask, I am very open to establishing a working group, in conjunction with my colleague Siobhian Brown—Minister for Victims and Community Safety—and others, to try to find solutions in order to prevent another unnecessary tragedy such as the one that was suffered by the family of David Gow.

Meeting closed at 17:50.

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.

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