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Thursday 19 December 2024

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 19 December 2024

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

General Question Time

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

Free School Meals (Primary School Children)

1. **Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it remains committed to rolling out universal entitlement to free school meals for all primary school children within the current parliamentary session. (S6O-04137)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government remains committed to the universal provision of free school meals in primary schools. The current financial position means that we are prioritising targeted support for those pupils who are most in need. In 2025-26, we are providing £37 million of resource to support the expansion of free school meals to pupils in primaries 6 and 7 who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment. Agreement to the budget from parties on all sides of the chamber will ensure that that work continues.

Ash Regan: Universal free school meals have been a policy aspiration for the Parliament for many years, supported by members on all sides of the chamber and by the Scottish Trades Union Congress and Action for Children. Child poverty is not unavoidable—it is, as we know, a political choice—and free school meals are essential to reduce pressure on often fragile household budgets and to drive down the number of children who are going hungry at school.

However, the school day does not get any cheaper after primary school. Will the Scottish Government therefore agree to complete its promised delivery of universal free school meals to all primary school children by the end of the current session of Parliament, and then commence the roll-out into high school by increasing eligibility to secondary school children who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment?

Jenny Gilruth: The Government stands by the commitment to delivering free school meals to all primary school pupils. Having taught hungry children as a teacher, I know how transformative the policy has been for families across Scotland, with those who take up the offer saving roughly £400 per child per year.

Right now, we are delivering universal free school meals during term time for all 273,054 children in primary 1 to primary 5 and children in special schools, as well as eligible pupils in primary 6 to secondary 6. Outwith term time, we remain the only part of the United Kingdom to provide families with extra support through our holiday hunger programme, with £21.75 million being provided to support free school meals to eligible families during the school holidays in the current academic year. The next step of the universal roll-out is a targeted approach supporting those children most in need who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment in primaries 6 and 7.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): What more is the Scottish Government doing to improve uptake of free school meals among children in receipt of the Scottish child payment, and what additional measures has the Government included in the budget for 2025-26 to provide support with the costs of the school day for families?

Jenny Gilruth: I mentioned in response to the previous member the extension of the roll-out of free school meals to those who are eligible in primaries 6 and 7 in receipt of the Scottish child payment. The budget also prioritises further support for families—for example, we have committed to lifting the two-child cap and uprating the school clothing grant, as well as allocating £18.7 million to continue to deliver the education maintenance allowance programme, which provides vital financial support to young people from low-income households to enable them to remain and progress in their learning.

Offshore Wind Hub (Impact on North-east Renewables Sector)

2. **Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact its recently announced hub for offshore wind will have on the renewables sector in north-east Scotland. (S6O-04138)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): The offshore wind hub in north-east Scotland will provide an additional route for industry to engage meaningfully with the Scottish Government. It will build on what we already have in place with our consenting teams, as we fully unlock sector opportunities and jointly deliver on Scotland's offshore wind potential.

That complements our announcement of our capital funding in offshore wind being almost tripled to £150 million next year. It is part of our strategic investment of up to £500 million over five years, which is expected to unlock £1.5 billion in

private investment and support thousands of new jobs.

Audrey Nicoll: Scotland's offshore energy industry has been a success story for more than 50 years, and repurposing the North Sea as a global multi-agency basin will ensure that the sector can power the country for decades to come. Recently, Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce highlighted the benefits of locating Scottish Government agencies in the north-east in order to accelerate planning and consenting processes for offshore wind and to remove grid bottlenecks. With that in mind, can the cabinet secretary provide further detail on how the proposed Scottish Government hub will work with stakeholders to realise Scotland's energy potential?

Gillian Martin: The offshore wind hub in Aberdeen will provide an opportunity for the Scottish Government and other parties across Scotland to work with the offshore wind industry. The development of the hub is in its initial stages, and my officials will engage further with industry, as well as with other stakeholders, to understand what they would find helpful to support the offshore wind sector, which, as Audrey Nicoll has described, plays a critical role in Scotland's journey to net zero and a just transition.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I welcome any pounds spent in the north-east, because the Scottish National Party Government has treated the north-east like a cash cow for far too long—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Lumsden.

Douglas Lumsden: What funding will be made to the Net Zero Technology Centre after the city region deal funding from the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government comes to an end in 2026? I am sure that the cabinet secretary would agree that that organisation is vital for growing the renewables sector in the north-east.

Gillian Martin: As we have done in the past, we are committed to funding the Net Zero Technology Centre, because it does absolutely excellent work.

As for the use of the words "cash cow", I would just reflect on the fact that most of the funds from offshore oil and gas have, for the past 50 years, gone down to the Westminster Treasury, and that Scotland, and indeed Aberdeen and the north-east, have seen very little in return.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers has highlighted that more than 200,000 jobs have already been lost across the offshore oil and gas industry in the past decade. I

am sure that the cabinet secretary will agree that we need offshore workers in the north-east for our green energy transition—we need their experience, knowledge and skills. Does she agree that we cannot expect those workers to pay the cost of the transition? If so, can she tell those workers how the new hub will remove the cost to them of retraining and skills passporting to the green transition?

Gillian Martin: Mercedes Villalba might have understood the purpose of the hub slightly incorrectly, because it is not going to be a training hub as such. We have been working on industry-led skills passports, which are starting to come to fruition. I suggest that Mercedes Villalba catch up with Offshore Energies UK and Renewable Energy UK, which are leading on that vital work.

Electrical Safety (Christmas Period)

3. Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking, including in discussion with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, to promote electrical safety over the Christmas period. (S6O-04139)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Scottish Government works closely with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, which has an annual fire safety campaign. This year, the focus is on devices powered by rechargeable lithium-ion batteries, which householders will be urged to buy, charge and dispose of safely to prevent accidental fires at home.

In addition, the SFRS will issue public safety advice over the festive period, with a particular focus on kitchen safety, as more fires start in the kitchen than in any other room in the house. Raising awareness of the risks associated with lithium-ion batteries is particularly important, as products containing them are becoming increasingly popular.

Clare Adamson: Research from the Child Accident Prevention Trust shows that almost three quarters of parents wrongly believe that any product aimed at children under five has to be fully tested and certified safe by an independent body before it can be sold online. As the minister has highlighted, online marketplaces are littered with substandard fake goods. During this festive period, will the minister join me in emphasising the need to stay vigilant, particularly if people are buying online, to stick to trusted traders and to make use of freely available resources produced by organisations such as the Child Accident Prevention Trust and Electrical Safety First?

Siobhian Brown: I thank Clare Adamson for highlighting that important issue. I would

emphasise the crucial role that everyone has to play in their own safety and in the safety of their families, and I strongly urge people to buy products only from reputable retailers whom they know and trust. It is vital that any electrical items are used, charged and stored carefully and safely.

I urge everyone to be aware of the risks. If anyone sees smoke or flames coming from a battery or device, they should, if in doubt, never tackle it themselves. They should get out, stay out and call 999. I also recommend that people make use of the range of fire safety information that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service hosts on its website.

Transport Infrastructure (Inverclyde)

4. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last discussed transport infrastructure in Inverclyde with Transport Scotland. (S6O-04140)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Transport Scotland is Scotland's national transport agency and is part of the Scottish Government. My Transport Scotland officials are in regular contact with their colleagues in planning and regional economic development departments regarding a wide range of topics, including transport infrastructure in Inverclyde.

Recent discussions have included the preparation of Inverclyde Council's local development plan and the delivery of city region deal projects. In the case of the local development plan, transport infrastructure is a critical enabler, in the planning process, of long-term sustainable growth.

Stuart McMillan: I thank Amey for its investment in the trunk road network in my constituency over the past two years, particularly the resurfacing between Greenock and Port Glasgow on the A8 and the A78.

However, Amey has let itself down on one aspect: the relining of roundabouts in Greenock and Port Glasgow. There are serious safety concerns about three particular roundabouts because of the lack of relining. I ask the cabinet secretary to engage with Transport Scotland to ensure that that work is undertaken as quickly as possible.

Fiona Hyslop: The Scottish Government recognises the importance of the A8 through Inverclyde, and we will continue to invest in keeping it well maintained and safe. Our operating company, Amey, has committed to renewing the road markings at the roundabouts at the earliest opportunity, following representations from Stuart McMillan as the constituency MSP. In the meantime, weekly safety inspections will continue,

and any safety-critical defects will be addressed quickly.

The Presiding Officer: I remind all members that they should attend from the beginning of a question session in which they have a question.

Dumbarton Castle

5. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether Dumbarton castle is an important cultural asset. (S6O-04141)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government recognises Dumbarton castle's historical significance and its protection as a scheduled monument under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979.

We are proud that Historic Environment Scotland, our lead public body that investigates, cares for and promotes Scotland's historic environment, continues to look after the many important cultural assets in our care, including Dumbarton castle. That is why we have allocated more than £74 million in the 2025-26 budget for Historic Environment Scotland's invaluable ongoing work.

Jackie Baillie: Dumbarton castle does not receive even a tenth of the money that goes to Edinburgh castle or Stirling castle. Scaffolding has been up for years, the castle is sometimes closed for no apparent reason, and its collection is scattered to other castles across Scotland.

The castle's importance in Scottish history is not in any doubt: it has been home to kings and queens, including James IV of Scotland and Mary Queen of Scots, and it has the longest recorded history of any stronghold in Scotland. However, there is not a single mention of Dumbarton castle in the Historic Environment Scotland annual report for 2023-24.

What will the cabinet secretary do to ensure that Dumbarton castle is restored to its former glory? I wonder whether I could invite him to come on a visit.

Angus Robertson: Jackie Baillie is correct to highlight the importance of Dumbarton castle. For those who are interested, I commend "Vanished Kingdoms", an excellent book by Norman Davies, who dedicates a whole chapter to the kingdom of the rock Alt Clut. I am happy to take up the invitation to visit.

Given the importance of Historic Environment Scotland's invaluable work in relation to Dumbarton castle and hundreds of sites around the country, I hope that Jackie Baillie will vote for the budget early next year.

Draft Budget (Support for Economic Growth)

6. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government how its draft budget 2025-26 will support the growth of the Scottish economy. (S6O-04142)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): The budget puts money firmly behind the programme for government's priorities for economic growth. It is a budget for the whole of Scotland and lays the foundations for the long-term prosperity of our people, places and businesses.

That is why the budget prioritises supporting our economy to be more productive and competitive, and creating the economic conditions that increase employment and earnings, lift people out of poverty and raise living standards. We are making major capital investments and leveraging in private investment in housing, transport, energy and digital connectivity to deliver a green and growing economy.

James Dornan: Increased investment in growing our green economy is a welcome and vital part of the draft budget, particularly in the light of diminishing capital funding from the United Kingdom Government over recent years. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to generate private sector investment in Scotland's next net zero economy?

Shona Robison: Scotland is already one of the most attractive places in the UK for inward investment. The budget builds on that even further through leveraging in private investment to drive economic growth. That includes £321 million for our enterprise agencies to support Scottish businesses; a further £200 million for the Scottish National Investment Bank to invest in projects such as Ardersier port, which attracted £300 million in private investment; and, of course, £150 million of investment in the offshore wind sector to deliver the supply chain and port infrastructure required to maximise the economic benefits that the growth of the industry will bring to Scotland.

Mandatory Food Waste Reporting (Larger Businesses)

7. **Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the Circular Economy (Scotland) Act 2024, what progress it has made towards implementing mandatory food waste reporting by larger businesses. (S6O-04143)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): Following the unanimous support for the Circular Economy (Scotland) Act 2024, yesterday, we published the final circular economy and waste route map, which sets out 11 priority actions to drive progress in

more sustainable resource use and reducing waste. Actions include developing with stakeholders effective options to implement mandatory reporting on food waste and surplus by businesses from 2025-26. To do that, we will establish an expert advisory group to help to develop proposals. Further consultation and engagement will be undertaken as part of the development of secondary legislation, which will be informed by best practice from existing voluntary reporting.

Lorna Slater: I think that the minister is saying, "Nothing yet".

Significant amounts of good food are wasted in Scotland, despite a cost of living crisis in which people are struggling to feed their children, as well as the significant carbon impact of waste food. Many businesses in hospitality, retail and food production already follow best practice and report their waste and surplus via the Waste and Resources Action Programme, which allows them to save money through identification of wasteful processes, as well as helping them on their journey to net zero.

Delaying until next year the creation of a new advisory group that will take two years to come up with ideas for something that industry is already doing does not reflect the urgency that is required. Is the Scottish Government doing what it so often does on climate matters—setting out bold intentions but failing to follow up with effective and timely action?

Gillian Martin: I do not accept that we are doing nothing. Ms Slater characterises the action that we are taking in a rather negative way. Given that she worked so closely on the issue before I became responsible for it, she knows that we need to work with businesses to make sure that we do this in the right way.

She mentioned that about 27 per cent of food waste is created by businesses. The WRAP data indicates that hospitality outlets could save up to £10,000 per year per outlet by reducing food waste. We must capitalise on that, but we must work with the industry to ensure that what we put in place is efficient and accepted by the industry, which has so much to gain from such policies.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): On food waste and the responsibility of large businesses, although BOGOF—buy one, get one free—offers have largely been consigned to the bin, "buy one, get one half price" offers have not. Does the cabinet secretary agree that much of that food is not eaten and is thrown away? Would it not be better if businesses and supermarkets simply brought down the prices of single items,

particularly for those who live alone, such as pensioners?

Gillian Martin: Christine Grahame makes a very good point. The latter part of her question indicates that some of the packaged produce on our supermarket shelves is not suitable for those who live alone, and we face a lot of food waste as a result. I hope that supermarkets hear Christine Grahame's points loud and clear. I am happy to speak to her about what more we can do in the Scottish Government to get the message out and to work with retailers to ensure that supermarkets provide for a range of customers and eliminate food waste at source.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): Christmas must be coming, because I find myself agreeing with Lorna Slater. If food waste were a country, it would be the third-biggest emitter of carbon after China and the United States of America. What is the Scottish Government doing to promote the changes that we can all make to ensure that we reduce our food waste and tackle climate change?

Gillian Martin: It is best to refer Brian Whittle to my initial answer to Lorna Slater. Yesterday, we published the circular economy and waste route map, which sets out the 11 priority actions to drive progress.

We are absolutely committed to reducing food waste to the absolute minimum or eliminating it, and to having a closed loop on the amount of waste that we have more generally in Scotland. I hope that, through the further consultation and engagement that we will undertake in developing the secondary legislation, Brian Whittle will work with me to make sure that businesses in his area are fully involved.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Plea Deals

1. **Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** In criminal cases, prosecutors often strike plea deals with defence lawyers. That practice can result in very serious charges being watered down or dropped altogether, even when the evidence is overwhelming, and victims are routinely not told or consulted about that. That is not justice.

I have been working with a group of female domestic abuse survivors, including Liz Shanks, who have suffered from those secretive plea deals. This week, I lodged amendments to the Government's Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill on their behalf. Those amendments would give victims a voice in the process, or, at the very least, let them know what is happening. Will John Swinney work with me to back those critical amendments?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I share Mr Findlay's objective of ensuring that justice is done for individuals who suffer as a result of criminal behaviour in our society. The Government has introduced the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, which is being scrutinised in Parliament, and which is designed to strengthen the experience of victims in our criminal justice system. We will consider the amendments that Mr Findlay has lodged on behalf of those individuals—he mentioned the name of Liz Shanks—to advance those issues. We will consider the contents of those amendments as the committee and Parliament look at the contents of the bill.

Russell Findlay: I want to ask the First Minister about another horrific case involving a plea deal. Royal Air Force veteran Keith Rollinson went out to work as a bus driver but never came home. He was subjected to a frenzied attack by a 15-year-old passenger and died later in hospital. Because of the sentencing guidelines, the killer received a sentence of just over four years, and it is possible that he will not spend any time in prison. The killer was charged with murder but, in a plea deal, he admitted to a lesser charge of culpable homicide. Keith's widow, Sue, is heartbroken, hurt and confused. She told me:

"The justice system keeps twisting a knife in my back. I don't want any other family to go through this hell."

Does John Swinney agree that those guidelines need to be scrapped?

The First Minister: First, I express my sympathy to Mrs Rollinson for the loss of her husband. The attack that Mr Findlay talks about

was unspeakable, and the criminal justice process has taken its course. I extend my sympathies to Mrs Rollinson on her loss. I cannot comprehend how she will be feeling.

Mr Findlay raises an important issue, but it gets us into territory that he knows that I have to keep well out of, which is decisions that are made about independent prosecutions that are taken forward by the Crown. As a society, we pride ourselves on the fact that the constitution of our Parliament and our criminal justice system is founded on the independence of the judiciary and the independence of the Crown in determining approaches to prosecution. Those have been fundamental building blocks of our society.

It is important that Parliament expresses its view when it considers that issues need to be addressed to ensure that concerns about sentencing policy and prosecutorial policy are reflected by Parliament, when it is appropriate for Parliament to do so. Ultimately, however, those decisions are taken independently by the prosecution service and the judiciary.

Russell Findlay: The truth is that the guidelines were issued by the Scottish Sentencing Council, which was in turn created by the Scottish Government.

I also want to ask the First Minister about one of Scotland's greatest miscarriages of justice. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that George Beattie did not and, indeed, could not have murdered Margaret McLaughlin. Campaigners including the late Labour MP Jimmy Hood have spent 50 years fighting for justice on behalf of George and Margaret. Four years ago, new evidence emerged about a more likely suspect, but the authorities appeared to do nothing. Now in his 70s and in poor health, George has told me that he fears going to his grave as a murderer. Will John Swinney consider what his Government can do to right that egregious wrong?

The First Minister: In relation to Mr Findlay's earlier remarks, I make the point that, although the Scottish Sentencing Council is a creation of statute, it acts independently of the Government. That ensures that all the different elements in the criminal justice system that I talked about—the independent judiciary, the independent prosecutorial service and the independent sentencing council that advises on sentencing approaches—are undertaken in a way that assures all of us that the criminal justice system is operating in a fair, appropriate and dispassionate fashion across all cases and that nobody is prejudiced as a consequence.

In relation to Mr Beattie's case, Mr Findlay will be aware of the route through the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission for potential

miscarriages of justice to be explored, which has led to judgments and decisions being overturned in the past. That is a well-established statutory route through which such approaches can be pursued.

Russell Findlay: I hear what the First Minister says about the Scottish Sentencing Council, but he could perhaps heed our calls to include a greater voice for victims on it.

In my final question of the year to the First Minister, I want to raise the tragic case of baby J, whose identity cannot be disclosed. Baby J was found dead in West Lothian 10 years ago. He was just 11 weeks old. The authorities knew that he was at risk, even before he was born, but that did not protect him. His tiny body had numerous injuries, including multiple broken bones, and a judge said that only his parents could have inflicted those injuries. No criminal charges have ever been brought. Six months ago, I was pleased when the Lord Advocate told me that she had instructed a new investigation by specialist prosecutors. She also said that a fatal accident inquiry might be held. Will the First Minister back my calls for that inquiry and ensure that every effort is made to secure justice for baby J?

The First Minister: On Mr Findlay's first point, I hope that my first answer to him gives him reassurance that I attach the greatest significance to the voice of victims being heard in our criminal justice system. If there are ways in which that needs to be strengthened—indeed, we have legislation before Parliament to do exactly that, which, in our former lives, Mr Findlay and I scrutinised together on the Criminal Justice Committee; we were able to co-operate there, so we might be able to co-operate on some of those questions—I assure him that we will look at those points. There is scope for the bill to be amended on the basis of the point that Mr Findlay has raised.

In relation to the tragic case in West Lothian, the Lord Advocate has made it clear that a renewed investigation should take place. The Crown will determine, on the basis of a police investigation, what actions, if any, should be taken—to do so is the proper role of the Crown.

Any question of a fatal accident inquiry, again, rests independently on the Crown's judgment, and the Lord Advocate has made clear her position on that. We will, of course, hear more from the Lord Advocate as the case is considered.

Housing Emergency

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** Presiding Officer, I wish you and everyone across the chamber, and all the Parliament staff, a very merry Christmas and all the best for 2025. I send a

special thank you to our emergency service personnel, who will be working throughout the festive period.

Scotland is in the middle of a housing emergency. While all of us here will wake up this Christmas morning to see the joy on our loved ones' faces, this year a record number of Scots will wake up without a home to call their own. Homelessness is at record levels, 10,000 children are living in temporary accommodation, and hundreds will be left to wake up in hostels, refuge centres and bed and breakfasts. Is John Swinney still proud of his Scottish National Party Government's record on housing?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I associate myself with Mr Sarwar's remarks and express my good wishes to you, Presiding Officer, and to parliamentary staff for a happy Christmas. I express my appreciation to those in the emergency services, our volunteer community and our public services who will be working hard to keep everybody safe and supported during the Christmas break.

On the question of housing, the Government accepts that there is a housing emergency. We are not building enough houses. We have built more affordable houses per head of population in Scotland than have been built in other parts of the United Kingdom, but we are not building enough, which is why the Government has significantly increased the housing budget for the next financial year by more than £200 million. We have allocated £768 million, representing a 38 per cent increase in the housing budget, to help build the housing that is required to meet the needs of people in Scotland.

The Government has a strong record on building houses, but we have a changing society that requires more house building, and the Government is putting in place the resources to make sure that that can be the case.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney is talking about correcting the mess that his Government has made, but this is about people here and now. I will give one example out of thousands.

Mariam is a single working mum in Glasgow. Almost two years ago, she and her four children were evicted after she complained about mould and leaks that were affecting her children's health. She was forced to declare herself homeless and was put into temporary accommodation, an hour from her children's school, where she and her family have been living ever since—five people crammed into a two-bedroom flat. Despite Mariam's efforts, her daughter, who dreamed of being a dentist, had her education so disrupted by the chaos that she missed out on her dream by just one mark.

The housing emergency has an immediate impact, but can you not see that it is also impacting the life chances and outcomes of our young people? How can the Government be proud of its record?

The First Minister: It is important to look at the data and the evidence. Over the past 14 years, we have lived through a period of punishing austerity. That is a financial context that Mr Sarwar and I agree about: we agree that the period of austerity has been incredibly damaging for public infrastructure and the public fabric of our country and that it has significant social and economic implications.

In that context, the Scottish Government has built 73 per cent more affordable homes per head of population than has been built in Wales and 47 per cent more than in England since 2007. That is the record of this Government, and I will argue for it. The facts speak for themselves: against the prevailing tide of austerity, the Scottish Government has built more affordable houses per head of population than any other part of the United Kingdom. However, I accept that that is not enough, which is why we have just increased the budget and put in a commitment to ensure that we can encourage and motivate more house building to address the very issues that Mr Sarwar raises with me today.

Anas Sarwar: The facts do speak for themselves. There are 10,000 children in Scotland who are in temporary accommodation, which is a record high, but all that the First Minister wants to do is point to other parts of the country rather than look at his own record of failure.

The truth is that this crisis has been years in the making. I remind members that these are your constituents who I am talking about—children in your own constituencies—who are living in temporary accommodation.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Always speak through the chair, please.

Anas Sarwar: The truth is that this crisis is years in the making. Mariam's heartbreaking story is just one example out of thousands. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Sarwar.

Anas Sarwar: On John Swinney's watch, house building is down by 10 per cent, the number of affordable and private homes that have been built is the lowest in more than a decade, and there are more than 11,000 council houses lying empty. Every statistic is another example of a family that has been failed and a future that has been squandered.

As Alison Watson from Shelter Scotland has said:

“Despite declaring a national housing emergency earlier this year, the Scottish Government has failed to get to grips with a deepening crisis ... More than 10,000 children will wake up facing the trauma of homelessness this Christmas—the highest number on record”.

That is 10,000 children without a home to call their own on Christmas morning. First Minister, how many children will wake up homeless under this Government next year?

The First Minister: I agree with Mr Sarwar on the objective of ensuring that children do not live in poverty—that is absolutely at the heart of my Government’s programme and of everything that we are trying to do.

On housing, I am afraid that it is not good enough for Mr Sarwar to dismiss the points that I have made about the evidence. In a climate of austerity, the Scottish Government has built more affordable houses per head of population than have been built in any other part of the United Kingdom. That is a simple statement of the evidence on our commitment to housing.

In the budget proposition that we have put forward, £768 million is allocated to the housing budget. As part of that, resources are available to tackle the issue of voids, which has been tackled during the current financial year, to bring more properties into use. Government expenditure is being used to support that activity.

In addition to all that, the Government’s budget provides a record settlement for local authorities: the £1 billion increase in local authority funding will support services that include homelessness services.

This is where we get to the crunch point. In a few weeks’ time, we will find out whether Mr Sarwar is interested in a solution or whether he is interested only in rhetoric. The Government’s budget will have to be voted for in this Parliament. The people of this country have just had an insight into Mr Sarwar’s rhetoric. We have heard Mr Sarwar’s rhetoric on the WASPI women—women against state pension inequality. Before the election, the Labour Party promised big, bold action on the WASPI women, but it has delivered absolutely nothing whatsoever.

Mr Sarwar is in no position to come here and give any of his rhetoric unless he is prepared to vote for the Government’s budget and help to lift children out of poverty.

Climate Action

3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Presiding Officer, I, too, wish you and all Parliament staff, and members across the chamber, all the best for the festive season, and a good new year.

However, 2024 was the year when the Scottish Government had to admit that it is years behind schedule on climate. In response, the Scottish National Party said that it would accelerate action by providing an energy strategy, a plan to cut car traffic, funding to help agriculture to become climate friendly and a new bill to get Scotland off the gas grid and roll out clean heating in homes across the country. So far, none of that has happened. That last action is urgent, because if we get that bill right, it will cut not only emissions but people’s energy bills. The Government said that it would introduce that bill by the end of this year. Where is it?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is working to introduce legislative proposals in that respect, but Mr Harvie’s characterisation of the Government’s programme is not accurate and not representative. On a variety of issues—whether on transport, agriculture, heating, renewable energy or measures to reduce carbon through investment in forestry or in peatland restoration—the Government is taking the steps that are necessary to tackle climate action. We will do that as part of a sustained programme. That includes the underpinning of provision of £4.9 billion of investment, in the Government’s budget, to support those objectives. We are determined to fulfil those commitments to Parliament.

Patrick Harvie: Each of the specific examples that I mentioned was promised earlier this year and has not yet been delivered. The First Minister knows that the clean-heat industry will take off only if the Government gives clarity and leadership, so any more delay on the bill to which I referred is unacceptable.

Trust in politics matters. We have just heard John Swinney rightly condemning the United Kingdom Government for breaching the trust of the WASPI women—women against state pension inequality—but that question of trust applies to him, too. The Scottish Government promised to accelerate climate action to make up for its record of failure, but that is simply not happening. The first months of 2025 will be critical for Scotland’s future efforts on climate, because that is when we are due to get new carbon budgets and a new climate plan. Those decisions will determine whether we succeed or fail for the next decade.

How is anyone supposed to trust that the First Minister will do what needs to be done when we are still waiting for so many of the actions that he promised?

The First Minister: That will come down to the delivery of actions, and the Government is focused on getting on with those things.

Let us take renewable energy as an example. Because of the policy certainty that is offered by this Government, we have, essentially, decarbonised Scotland's electricity network by the shift to renewable energy.

We are delivering on many other aspects of our policy agenda, but I have made it pretty clear that we do not all have to wait for new plans and strategies, because we have lots of those things. The Government's commitments to climate action and a programme of delivery are clear, and are what ministers are taking forward.

I look forward to engaging with Mr Harvie and his colleagues on how we can support that by passing the Government's budget, because none of what Mr Harvie is talking about will be achieved if the budget is not passed and if the £4.9 billion that we plan to invest in climate action cannot be invested.

Sale of Puppies and Dogs (Festive Period)

4. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will encourage the public not to buy puppies or dogs during the festive period, in light of the reported possibility that these may be the product of irresponsible breeders, including illegal puppy farms. (S6F-03648)

The First Minister (John Swinney): On the basis that a dog is for life, and not just for Christmas, the Scottish Government works throughout the year with key stakeholders, including the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, local authorities and other Administrations, to raise awareness of the responsibilities of prospective dog owners and of buying a pet safely. We particularly point to the Scottish SPCA's Christmas campaign on the issue and we encourage prospective owners to consider rehoming a dog, instead of buying a puppy.

We welcome and support Christine Grahame's efforts with the Welfare of Dogs (Scotland) Bill, which will help to emphasise the need for people to act responsibly when deciding to buy a dog or to take one into their lives, and to be responsible owners in ensuring the dog's welfare for as long as they have it.

Christine Grahame: Will the First Minister take the opportunity to commend the responsible breeders and rescue centres that will not home dogs, puppies or kittens over the festive period? The disturbance, bright lights and noise are the last thing those animals need as an introduction to their new home.

Anyone who has concerns that puppies are being trafficked should report that to the police or the SSPCA. Anyone who sees a puppy being

advertised online or is buying it out of the back of a van in a car park will have no idea where that puppy came from or the misery that brought its journey to an end.

The First Minister: I know, admire and respect Christine Grahame's long interest in those issues and commend all the wise advice that she has put on the record for members of the public. All the steps that she has set out are valuable in ensuring that individuals purchase pets in a responsible and sustained climate in which the welfare of the animal has been assured and protected. My colleague's advice is very important at this time.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I also voice my support for the Scottish SPCA's efforts to promote responsible pet purchases, and I commend the work by Christine Grahame and Maurice Golden, along with that of other agencies, to smash the smugglers.

The public also have an important role to play. Ferries, especially through the port of Cairnryan, are one of the key smuggling channels. Does the First Minister agree that it is important that passengers are aware of suspicious activity and know how to report it? Posters and social media efforts do not reach everyone, so what more can the Scottish Government do to ensure that more passengers receive that message?

The First Minister: Mr Whittle raises an important point. The Government works closely with officials in the Northern Ireland Executive and with key agencies, through the paws for thought puppy trafficking group, to disrupt and target those who are involved in that trade. Many collaborative actions are taken by us and the Northern Ireland Executive, and the multi-agency pet trade task force shares intelligence and targets those who are involved in the illegal breeding and smuggling of puppies. I hope that that assures Mr Whittle that there is active engagement between the Scottish Government and that of Northern Ireland, as well as with other United Kingdom Administrations, to ensure that the issue is properly and fully addressed, to the best of our ability.

INPS (Administration)

5. Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister what steps the Scottish Government is taking in response to the reported announcement that NHS Scotland's information technology software supplier, INPS, has entered administration, in light of concerns that this could leave general practitioners without the digital infrastructure to maintain electronic health records. (S6F-03654)

The First Minister (John Swinney): I begin by assuring the Parliament that there is currently no

impact on patient care or the availability of IT systems for GPs as a result of the announcement.

Scottish Government officials are liaising with NHS National Services Scotland, which holds the national framework contract with INPS on behalf of NHS Scotland, and with the INPS administrators. NSS has established an incident management team, and contingency planning is under way. The Royal College of General Practitioners, the British Medical Association, GP practices and health boards in Scotland have been fully apprised of the situation. Officials have also engaged with counterparts across the four nations, with a further meeting being due to take place tomorrow.

This is an emerging situation. The company is now formally up for sale, and I anticipate that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care will be able to provide a fuller update to Parliament in January.

Sandesh Gulhane: I declare an interest as a practising NHS GP.

The BMA has told me that the Scottish Government has not invested well in GP IT infrastructure. Hardware is out of date and we are using legacy software without support from software companies. Our systems in our Scottish GP surgeries were often designed for the English market and have been downgraded and shoehorned into our surgeries. The First Minister said that there are currently no issues, but INPS supplies Vision, which is one of our most vital systems. The situation is a disaster in waiting or in the making, as it will potentially leave GPs unable to safely see patients. A GP in Orkney wrote to us with that exact concern. What will the First Minister do to ensure the integrity of our vital NHS IT infrastructure?

The First Minister: The Government is focused on exactly that point. That is why I indicated that there is an incident management team, with contingency planning under way, and that the various relevant organisations that need to be advised about these issues are currently being advised.

There is, of course, technical capability in our GP practices already, and the health secretary will be actively engaged to ensure that our officials are doing everything that they can to support continued provision of that activity.

However, I come back to my key point, which is that there is currently no impact on patient care or the availability of IT systems for GPs as a result of the announcement.

Contact Scotland BSL (Termination of Contract)

6. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what consideration the Scottish Government has given to what the potential impact might be on deaf and deafblind people of the termination of its contract with Contact Scotland BSL. (S6F-03665)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government wrote to the supplier of Contact Scotland BSL on 4 December notifying it that its contract would come to an end on 31 March 2025, in accordance with its terms. First, I want to be clear that there will be no break in service for users of Contact Scotland BSL while we retender for the free service. We will work closely with BSL users in Scotland and the current supplier of Contact Scotland BSL to design the service to ensure that it best meets the needs of those who use it and that it raises awareness of the availability of the service and, therefore, also increases the number of users.

Mark Griffin: That seems to be a change in direction from the Government because, in its letter, the existing service provider was informed that the contract would not be retendered. I am sure that deaf people in the public gallery and across the country will welcome the news that the service is to be retendered, which is different from the information that I have received so far. If that is a change in the Government's position, it is welcome.

We should put ourselves in the shoes of a deaf person and imagine that we are not feeling well so we go to our general practitioner and are referred for further tests. When we go to the consultant's appointment, we cannot get an interpreter. Previously, before we had the service in place, people would often have to take family members with them. Can members imagine taking a teenage family member to interpret the devastating news that they could potentially receive? The change in information from the Government is welcome, but I ask the First Minister to ensure that the deaf and deafblind community is fully consulted on what the new service will look like.

The First Minister: I give Mr Griffin that assurance. I am sorry if there has been an impression that there was to be no retendering of the service. I will make sure that that is properly explored.

I know the long-standing interest that Mr Griffin takes on these issues. He has given a very distinguished contribution to Parliament on these topics, and I want to make sure that the legitimate issues that he raises are properly explored. I give

the assurance that there will be engagement with the BSL community.

If, to seek further assurance, Mr Griffin wishes to raise any more material with me, he knows that I will happily engage with him about that, as will ministers, to make sure that the service is available for all the legitimate reasons that he has put to me today.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome what the First Minister has said in response to Mark Griffin. However, Mark Griffin is right—in the correspondence that the Scottish Government sent to the existing service provider, it says:

“following Ministerial agreement in November, the Scottish Government will not be retendering a BSL Video Relay service”.

It says that very clearly in the letter. Will the First Minister now confirm that the service is not being defunded and that there will be no break or disruption to the Contact Scotland BSL service as it is now operating?

The First Minister: I will read my earlier answer again, because it is printed and typed in front of me, so this information will have to be correct. [*Laughter.*] I am becoming slightly uneasy at the frequency with which the question is being put to me, so this wording had better be correct: I want to be clear that there will be no break in service for users of Contact Scotland BSL while we retender for the free service.

There is clearly an issue here, which I need to get to the bottom of, because, if I am getting it from both sides of the chamber, I had better make sure that it is absolutely watertight. However, that is the commitment that I give to the Parliament today and, because I have given Parliament that commitment, that is what is going to have to happen.

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

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Jobs (East Kilbride)

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): When the previous Conservative Government proposed closing Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office operations in East Kilbride, I stood with the Labour council leader against that bad decision, which will remove 1,000 jobs from the town and will have a negative impact on many employees who are settled there. The then Labour candidate for Westminster rightly said that taking away those jobs would cause much damage. However, the new Labour Government has doubled down on that Tory plan, hoping to leave as soon as 2026. No updates from local Labour

politicians have been forthcoming, despite recent developments.

Previous United Kingdom Government figures suggest that ploughing ahead with that move could hurt East Kilbride's economy to the tune of £30 million. Can the First Minister confirm whether the UK Government has discussed that with the Scottish Government and whether the Labour Administration has shared an updated economic impact assessment of the cost to East Kilbride of its abandonment?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I express my thanks to the committed workforce at the FCDO in East Kilbride. There is a long history and tradition of contributing to international development activity from East Kilbride. It has been a source of great pride in that community and across Scotland.

I am not aware of any direct contact with the Scottish Government on that issue, nor of any updated economic assessment. However, if any update to Collette Stevenson on that point is required, I will make sure that it is forthcoming to her, because we value that employment and recognise its importance to the East Kilbride economy.

Closed-Circuit Television (Glasgow)

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): On Sunday 15 December, which was the day of the Scottish cup final, we witnessed appalling scenes of violence and disorder in the city centre of Glasgow, which was caused by groups of football supporters—who were not representative, of course, of the vast majority of football fans.

First, I agree with the First Minister when, in response to that, he said that clubs have a role to play in preventing such disgraceful behaviour. We agree on that. However, given that the police are now trying to identify those who are responsible through the use of closed-circuit television and social media footage, is the First Minister aware that CCTV cameras in Glasgow are no longer staffed 24 hours, seven days a week? That means that, before the 3 pm shift, the cameras cannot zoom in and there cannot be detailed monitoring of disorder in real time.

I fully appreciate that the First Minister will say that he is not responsible for CCTV in Glasgow, but I am asking him not to stay silent about this. Does he believe that Police Scotland needs all available resources to tackle crime, not just those relating to football events but other crimes, such as violence against women, that often occur outwith those hours? Does the First Minister agree—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, Ms McNeill.

Pauline McNeill: I appreciate that he might not be aware of this, but does he agree that it is a scandal that Police Scotland was not consulted when Glasgow City Council removed 24/7 CCTV? I would like the First Minister to agree with me on that.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will have to look into the specifics of CCTV shift patterns, because it is not something for which I carry responsibility, so I will have to explore that point.

On the substantive issue that Pauline McNeill put to me, I want to make it clear that the overwhelming majority of the fans who attended the football match behaved perfectly well. We are talking about a minority, and their behaviour has to be addressed. It is just not acceptable for Christmas shoppers to have to go through what they went through on Saturday. Whether it is Christmas shopping or shopping on any other day, it is just not on.

The clubs and the police have a role to play. Police Scotland had the situation in the city centre—unpleasant as it was—entirely under control, and they adapted their operational planning to deal with the situation as it emerged. I therefore have every commendation for the police and the way in which they deployed their resources.

Fundamentally, it is unacceptable for football fans—even a minority—to behave in the fashion that they behaved on Sunday. There cannot be a repeat of that. The police will be planning to deal with it, but the clubs have to take action and those who are responsible have to be apprehended.

Harland & Wolff (Deal with Navantia)

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Harland & Wolff's deal with Navantia will save thousands of jobs, many of which are at the Methil yard in my constituency. Will the First Minister join me in welcoming the deal, which will protect the workforce and the shipbuilding industry in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the positive news of the deal between Harland & Wolff and Navantia. It has come about with a great deal of engagement from the Deputy First Minister, trade unions, management and staff, and collaboration with the United Kingdom Government. The deal will provide security and reassurance to employees at the Methil yard in Mr Torrance's constituency and at the Arnish site in the Western Isles, in the constituency of Dr Allan. It is welcome news and I am delighted to see it.

Third Sector

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I am sure that we are all looking forward to our festive

break—I know that I certainly am—but it is fair to say that many people across Scotland find Christmas and new year to be a difficult time of year, particularly those who face social isolation, loneliness, grief, depression or illness. Unfortunately, at this time of year, we often see huge spikes in domestic violence, which is fuelled mostly by alcohol.

As well as paying tribute to the front-line blue-light workers, whom we all thank for their time and service, can we also pay tribute to the vast armies of volunteers in the third sector who, day in, day out, 24/7 and 365 days a year, will also be there to help people in times of need and trouble? As we look into 2025, will the First Minister commit his Government to supporting the third sector as best we can, given that its work very often starts when other public services end?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I happily associate myself with the remarks of Mr Greene, who has made a substantial contribution in the Parliament to the issues of mental wellbeing and support for individuals who are wrestling with social isolation and loneliness, and I commend him for doing that.

A whole range of third sector organisations provide invaluable support. As First Minister, I have the privilege of encountering and engaging with many of them. It is heartwarming to see the vital role that they perform in our society, and they will be doing so over the Christmas break, when many of us will be appreciating some time of respite.

I therefore associate myself very much with Mr Greene's remarks. I assure him that the Government's budget will be focused on supporting third sector organisations. They are a linchpin in the delivery of many of the interventions that we need to put in place to support the mental wellbeing of individuals. Obviously, the Parliament will consider those questions in the spring to make sure that we have that support in place for those organisations.

Lilias Graham Trust

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Lilias Graham Trust, which is based in Thornhill, near Stirling, has been a lifeline for families in Scotland for decades, during which time the provision of residential support and parenting capacity assessments have been part of its mission to help families on the edge of care who have been impacted by adverse childhood experiences, trauma, social exclusion and poverty. However, on 22 November, the decision was taken to wind up the trust, and the vital residential facility will close its doors on 31 January, after having written to the Minister for Children, Young

People and The Promise for support, which was not forthcoming.

Given that the sustainability of services is central to the Scottish Government's commitment to keeping the Promise, and that the vital support to improve the lives of children, families and communities that is given by third sector organisations such as the Liliias Graham Trust is at risk of disappearing altogether, how can the First Minister's Government claim to keep the Promise if it idly stands by and lets long-standing third sector organisations that are keeping it go to the wall?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand the sentiments that underpin Roz McCall's question, but I am not familiar with the case that she puts to me, about the Liliias Graham Trust. I am sure that the trust has made a significant contribution to supporting the wellbeing of children and young people. However, as is always the case in some of these areas, changes to service provision are driven by changes in the way in which we support families.

For example, at the heart of the Promise is a determination to try to keep families together and to avoid separating them. There may be a shift to putting more resources into supporting families in order to keep them together, which would be consistent with the direction of policy in the Promise, because that is fundamentally the core point in the Promise.

There may be changes in service provision. In Glasgow, for example, there have been significant changes in the way that the city deploys its expenditure for care-experienced young people, because it has now shifted its balance away from services that it provides and towards putting much more support into supporting families to stay together.

I will look at the issues that Roz McCall raises with me today, I will take counsel from the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, and I will reply in writing to Roz McCall about the issues involved.

Post Office Closures

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): My constituency has no banks—they have all deserted the communities that I serve. In Springburn town centre, however, there is a Crown post office. It is an anchor tenant in the local shopping centre and provides a vital service to hundreds of customers every week. A strategy that has been agreed by the United Kingdom Labour Government and taken forward by the Post Office could axe that service, which would be a body blow for financial inclusion and local regeneration plans.

How can the Scottish Government support areas such as Springburn that are facing such challenges? Will the First Minister write to the UK Government, as I have done, urging it to halt that flawed process and to engage meaningfully with local communities and trade unions to ensure that that post office can have a strong and vibrant future at the heart of Springburn?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand the importance of the point that Mr Doris puts to me. I can confirm that the Minister for Public Finance, Ivan McKee, has written to the UK Government on the question.

In the absence of banking facilities, post offices become central to the delivery of access to finance for individuals. I note the concerns that Mr Doris has raised and that there was a parliamentary debate on the subject the other day, led by Kenneth Gibson. That provides an illustration of the degree of parliamentary concern on the question.

I confirm that that letter has been written, and we will engage with the UK Government to try to find a different approach to that flawed process.

Violence Against Retail Workers

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I remind the chamber of my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am the director of a company with retail interests and am a member of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers.

The First Minister might have read an article that was published two days ago on the BBC website highlighting a spiralling pattern of violence against retail workers in my constituency. It detailed various incidents, including a business owner having a knife drawn on him, a customer being hospitalised, a shop owner being punched and a store manager being throttled. Those are not isolated incidents. Last year alone, 5,500 incidents were recorded under the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) Act 2021, which I took through Parliament. That was a 46 per cent increase in the rise of such incidents.

Does the First Minister agree that greater priority needs to be given to community and response policing so that such crimes can be treated with the expediency and seriousness that they undoubtedly deserve? Perhaps above all else, at this time of year, when many of us will be using the shops, does he agree with the campaign that is being run by the Scottish Retail Consortium and USDAW to urge the public to treat retail workers with kindness at Christmas?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We should treat retail workers with kindness 365 days a year.

At the root of the issue that Mr Johnson raises is criminal conduct and the fact that people are not behaving appropriately. Whether that is about criminal conduct or disrespect to retail workers, it is part of the same pattern. I agree with the sentiments that Mr Johnson expresses.

The Government has put £3 million into the budget as a specific intervention to tackle retail crime, which will be taken forward as a partnership between the retail sector and the police. That will be in addition to an investment of a record £1.62 billion next year for policing, which is an increase of £70 million on 2024-25 and which I think provides the resources for effective community policing. I am advised on that point by the chief constable of Police Scotland.

All that we need to do is pass the budget. I leave Mr Johnson that message and clarion call to support the Government so that we can get on with tackling the legitimate issue that he puts to me by ensuring that the Government's budget is passed in February.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time.

12:46

Meeting suspended.

12:48

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice

Disabled People

1. **Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what recent engagement its ministers have had with disabled people's organisations to discuss any concerns of disabled people. (S6O-04145)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): On 13 November, I met representatives of disabled people's organisations and Opposition party members to discuss the disability equality plan. Disabled people are struggling, and change is urgently needed. We are determined to do everything that we can to address the challenges that are faced by disabled people, and the Scottish budget has therefore prioritised action to address those challenges, investing an additional £2 million into the plan.

Following publication of the budget, I met representatives of disabled people's organisations on 5 December to discuss next steps, and I look forward to continuing our work together to build towards a fairer Scotland.

Paul O'Kane: The minister knows that I have raised concerns about the sufficiency of support that is provided to disabled people to meet the challenges that they face across Scotland. I know that the minister is trying to work across portfolios on those issues, but we have to take cognisance of the fact that the delays to the proposed learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill and the disabled young people's transition strategy have been very concerning. Most recently, I have raised the issue of promised health checks for people who have learning disabilities not happening.

Disabled people and DPOs want a renewed focus to deliver on those concerns when we return from recess in the new year. What concrete action can the disabled community expect in 2025 to finally address in full the concerns that I have mentioned, and to tackle the significant challenges that disabled people face, not least the disproportionately high poverty rate?

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Paul O'Kane for his interest and for acknowledging the hard work, collaboration and co-operation that is going on. We continue to do that work, and we are committed to delivering positive change for disabled people. As I mentioned, there is £2 million to enhance the disability equality plan in

recognition of the work that is needed to improve disabled people's lives.

We introduced the pension-age disability payment, which is worth between £290 and £434 per month to people of state pension age and over who are disabled. The child winter heating payment will help households with severely disabled children to manage the additional costs that they face this winter. We have also secured agreement from energy suppliers, consumer organisations and disabled people's organisations to co-design a social tariff mechanism to evidence its viability.

After recess, I will continue to work in collaboration cross-party and with the DPOs to advance further steps.

Social Isolation and Loneliness (Urban Areas)

2. Humza Yousaf (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide further details on the implementation of its social isolation and loneliness strategy, "Recovering our Connections 2023-2026", particularly in relation to urban areas. (S6O-04146)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): The Scottish Government acknowledges that loneliness is a public health issue that impacts people across Scotland. Our December budget confirmed funding in 2025-26 to support projects tackling social isolation and loneliness through our social isolation and loneliness fund. The fund supports the delivery of our social isolation and loneliness delivery plan, and we are providing £3.8 million over three years to 53 community projects across Scotland that provide opportunities for people to connect. Of those 53 funded organisations, 26 are based in urban areas such as Edinburgh, Glasgow—where the member has his constituency—Aberdeen, Stirling and Inverness.

Humza Yousaf: I thank the minister for her detailed response. There are a number of excellent organisations and community groups in my constituency and across Scotland that do so much to combat isolation, especially during the Christmas and festive period. There are too many groups in Glasgow Pollok to mention them all. However, I give a special mention to Southwest Arts and Music Project—SWAMP—Glasgow, Tea in the Pot, Govan craft cafe and the many faith organisations and groups in my constituency.

Does the minister agree with me that local community organisations play a vital role in combating isolation and loneliness, often supporting people whom other services cannot reach? Will she join me in congratulating the staff and, crucially, volunteers in my Glasgow Pollok

constituency, and across Scotland, for their invaluable service in helping to combat loneliness and isolation this Christmas and during the festive period?

Kaukab Stewart: I agree with the member. He mentioned Tea in the Pot; I am aware that my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice has visited that excellent service.

I thank the people of Pollok for their tenacity, resilience and community spirit. The Scottish Government recognises—as do I, personally—the contribution that is made by community-based organisations in responding to local needs. Community activity brings positive changes to people's lives, and that is why the Government remains a strong advocate for the third sector. We remain committed to empowering communities to do things for themselves and make their voices heard in the planning and delivery of services.

Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): Christmas is a happy time for many, but for some it can be the most difficult and lonely time of the year. Social isolation services, such as befriending, have been shown to greatly improve wellbeing. Can the minister advise us how the Scottish Government is ensuring that people who need those services are offered them, including through referrals from other public services such as the national health service and schools?

Kaukab Stewart: We have identified priority groups for the social isolation and loneliness fund, including young people, disabled people, people with a mental health condition, older people and people living in areas of deprivation or on a low income. Alongside members of the advisory group, we are analysing the impact of the fund, which has reached just over 11,000 people in year 1. Our delivery plan also contains a number of actions, across Government and beyond, that aim to stimulate activity to help to tackle the stigma associated with loneliness and to provide opportunities for people to connect.

Temporary Accommodation (Waiting Times)

3. Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to address wait times in temporary accommodation. (S6O-04147)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): Increasing the supply of affordable and social housing is key to reducing the time spent in temporary accommodation. The proposed 2025-26 affordable housing supply programme budget of £768 million more than reinstates funding to 2023-24 levels. Additional investment of £42 million in affordable housing this year has been targets five local authorities in the central belt with sustained temporary accommodation pressures, to

increase the supply of social and affordable homes through acquisitions and to bring empty social homes back into use. We are also working with energy suppliers to address issues to ensure that empty social homes can be turned around more quickly.

Graham Simpson: I am sure that the minister will agree that some of the waiting times in temporary accommodation have been absolutely appalling. There was one case in South Lanarkshire in which a child spent 420 days in temporary accommodation, and an adult who endured a 760-day stay. That is unacceptable. Given that the First Minister said earlier, “We are not building enough houses”, does the minister agree that we need a better approach and that it should be targeted at those areas that are most in need?

Paul McLennan: I will touch on some of the actions that we are taking. First, though, there was a capital budget cut from the Tory Government last year, and we also had the freezing of local housing allowance. Those are important contexts.

In addition to the £42 million acquisition funding that I talked about, there are other actions in this year’s budget, including £4 million of additional funding for homelessness provision and £2 million for empty homes initiatives. We are also spending £90 million—and continue to do so, even under the Labour Government—on the discretionary housing payment.

The £768 million that I mentioned will produce 8,000 homes. As Mr Simpson knows, and as we have discussed, there are prevention duties under the Housing (Scotland) Bill. The Government is taking a number of actions on homelessness and will continue to do so.

Scottish Welfare Fund (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley)

4. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any benefits of the Scottish welfare fund for constituents in Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley. (S6O-04148)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish welfare fund provides an essential source of crisis support and helps people with independent living in Scotland. Last year, people in Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley benefited from nearly 1,800 community care grants, totalling more than £765,000, and almost 3,500 crisis grants, with a value of more than £168,000.

Those living in Mr Coffey’s constituency will also benefit from the additional funding for East Ayrshire Council from the recently announced £20 million investment in the fund. That is on top of the

£1.1 million funding that has already been provided by the Scottish Government for the council this year.

Willie Coffey: In 2023-24, more than £1.3 million of Scottish welfare fund support came to East Ayrshire alone, benefiting my constituents during the worst of the cost of living crisis. What role is the welfare fund due to play in the year ahead in the Scottish Government’s priority mission to eradicate child poverty?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mr Coffey is right to point out the Scottish welfare fund’s important role in our benefits and support system. It is a key priority for the Scottish Government to continue that essential source of support for those who are in crisis.

We must also do what we can to continue to press the United Kingdom Government to take the actions at source, such as an essentials guarantee, which would lift people out of poverty, cure the systemic challenge of the inadequacy of UK Government benefits and, therefore, ensure that the Scottish Government has more flexibility in how we use the Scottish welfare fund to support more people.

Women Experiencing Domestic Abuse (Support)

5. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what levels of support are currently available to women experiencing domestic abuse. (S6O-04149)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): Domestic abuse is abhorrent, which is why we are providing record levels of funding to vital front-line services to support survivors. We fund Scotland’s domestic abuse and forced marriage helpline to ensure that round-the-clock specialist advice is available. Through our £19 million per year delivering equally safe fund, which I recently announced will be extended for another year, we support a range of organisations across Scotland to ensure that vital support to women and children is available locally. Our victim-centred approach fund provides £18.5 million for specialist advocacy support for survivors between 2022 and 2025.

Carol Mochan: I know that tackling violence against women and girls is a priority for the minister and the Scottish Government.

The minister will know that, according to Police Scotland, between April and September 2024, the number of domestic abuse crimes rose by 2,028 compared to the same period last year. In addition, through Scottish Women’s Aid, we know that, on average, 25 per cent of women who have suffered economic abuse report that that abuse continues after they leave their abuser.

With that in mind, what is the Government doing—or could it be doing—to protect and support the rising number of women who experience and survive domestic abuse, particularly those who experience economic abuse after they leave?

Kaukab Stewart: As I said, domestic abuse is a total blight on our society. We had extensive discussions during the 16 days of activism against violence against women and girls.

I acknowledge that there has been a small increase in the number of incidents that have been reported to the police, but we know that many of those crimes go unreported. I encourage victims to seek help and support. We continue to make changes to the justice system to make it easier to report incidents, and we have legislated to give police, prosecutors and the courts greater powers to tackle domestic abuse crimes.

We are also taking steps to address financial abuse. That is clearly set out in our delivering equally safe plan, which is jointly delivered through partnership with stakeholders, local authorities and the Scottish Government.

I also highlight the £500,000 fund to leave pilot, which provided financial support to women who were leaving an abusive relationship. The assessment is nearly at the end stage, and I will be able to report back soon.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am keen to get in all members who have requested to ask a question. Concise questions and responses would help in that regard.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): I have been contacted by women's support services in my region about the devastating impact of Labour's national insurance hikes.

One service estimates that the hikes will cost £9,000. The service's budgets are already cut to the bone and it has waiting lists of six months or more. It will likely have to lose a practitioner, and the impact on survivors will be absolutely awful.

People from the services are watching proceedings today to hear your answer to my question. What action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure the sustainability of those vital services, so that all survivors receive the vital support that they need?

Kaukab Stewart: I am aware of the time, so I will be brief. I acknowledge that there is a massive impact on the third sector. We would appreciate it if everyone in the chamber could join us in pressing the United Kingdom Government to address its economic decisions, which are having an impact.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I share the concern of many of my constituents at the news that Highland Council is considering plans to invite a single provider to deliver domestic abuse services for all genders across the Highlands. I know at first hand the invaluable levels of expertise and knowledge that exist in the women's groups in the Highlands. Any changes that could limit access to support for women in need require careful discussion.

What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that women in the Highlands and Islands can access specialised local domestic abuse services?

Kaukab Stewart: The Scottish Government is committed to supporting front-line services that provide crucial support to survivors of domestic abuse. Through the delivering equally safe funding programme, we fund local women's aid services in the Highlands, including Lochaber Women's Aid, Caithness and Sutherland Women's Aid, Inverness Women's Aid and Ross-shire Women's Aid. The Scottish Government cannot interfere with local authority autonomy and procurement procedures, including the commissioning of domestic abuse services. We encourage local authorities to utilise the joint Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Scottish Women's Aid guidance on good practice in commissioning specialist domestic abuse services.

Social Security Scotland (Fraud)

6. **Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to tackle any fraud in Social Security Scotland. (S6O-04150)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Social Security Scotland has a zero-tolerance approach to fraud. It has published a counter-fraud strategy and has in place counter-fraud response measures to identify and tackle emergent fraud risks.

Where Social Security Scotland has good reason to believe that fraud has taken place, it will investigate and make efforts to stop on-going financial loss and will seek to recover payments. Where appropriate to do so, Social Security Scotland will report to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service on cases of suspected fraud.

Sandesh Gulhane: Despite receiving almost 8,000 allegations of fraud, Scotland's benefit agency has referred just one person to prosecutors, and that one case was subsequently dropped—so much for a zero-tolerance approach. Surely the cabinet secretary must share my concern—those figures should send alarm bells through Government—unless she believes that

there is simply no fraud. Will she protect taxpayers' money and look at the robustness and staffing levels of the anti-fraud team?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I extend an invitation to Sandesh Gulhane to meet Social Security Scotland to go through exactly what is in place. I appreciate the points and the figures that he has laid out, but they do not necessarily reflect that there is an issue in the system.

Rather than being limited to what we can go through in the chamber, it would be useful to talk about what happens with the claims that come in about fraudulent activity and the detailed processes on fraud risk and suspected fraudulent activity. There is an enormous amount that we could go into on the investigative methodology and data analysis and on working with partners to approve the appropriate response to fraud. Not all cases should go to the Crown Office, but very stringent measures are in place in the agency. I invite the member to meet the agency to talk through that. If he still has any concerns, I would be happy to discuss those with him in detail.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will agree that it is vital to minimise any fraud, not just fraud in relation to benefits that Social Security Scotland delivers. She will be aware that the United Kingdom taxpayer was defrauded of tens of billions of pounds during the Covid pandemic, from dodgy personal protection equipment to some employers falsely claiming furlough payments. What co-operation has there been between the Scottish and UK Governments to recover that money and money lost through tax evasion by wealthy individuals?

The Presiding Officer: I am not wholly content that that relates to the substantive question. We will move on to question 7.

Kenneth Gibson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My question was about fraud—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson, I have ruled.

Draft Budget (Mitigation of Two-child Benefit Cap)

7. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the announcement in its draft budget 2025-26 that it plans to mitigate the United Kingdom Government's two-child benefit cap policy in Scotland, what it estimates the cost will be of doing so, per affected child. (S6O-04151)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The universal credit child element is worth £287.92 per month for the first two children in a household. Our mitigation will

seek to make a payment equal to the universal credit child element for each eligible third and subsequent child in a household that is impacted by the cap. At current levels, that would be almost £3,500 per child per year. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that mitigating the two-child limit in Scotland could lift around 15,000 children out of poverty.

Gordon MacDonald: The UK Labour Government, which promised change, has left it to the devolved Governments to mitigate the most pernicious and costly Tory austerity measures, such as the two-child limit. Will the cabinet secretary outline the total cost to the Scottish Government of all the UK Government policies that are being mitigated, including the two-child benefit cap?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Next year, in our draft budget, mitigating the impacts of UK Government policies will rise to more than £210 million per year, which is an increase of more than £56 million. That includes spending more than £99 million on discretionary housing payments to mitigate the bedroom tax and the benefit cap; maintaining our £41 million commitment to the Scottish welfare fund, which provides crisis support and helps eligible people to establish independent living; and spending around £70 million above the block grant adjustment to mitigate the winter fuel payment cut, ensuring that all pensioners' households will receive a minimum of £100 of support next winter.

I also noted with some disbelief that, only yesterday, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions seemed to suggest that, despite the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government not having the powers to do so, it is somehow up to the Scottish Government to alleviate the critical situation of the WASPI women—women against state pension inequality. It is a deep disappointment that the UK Government has abdicated its responsibility on that and on the other areas that we mitigate.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government said in her budget statement that data would be required from the Department for Work and Pensions before the Scottish Government could put a cost on the mitigation measures. Will the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice spell out exactly what data would be required to implement the policy?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We need some additional information sharing and data sharing with the DWP. Work on that has begun—letters have been exchanged, and officials from the social security directorate in the Scottish Government and from the DWP are working on that.

I would be happy to provide information on the data that we think is still required. What we need might still change, because we are working through that; in essence, we are in the first sprint of the discovery phase for what needs to happen. With the caveat that it might change with that discovery work, I would be happy to provide Liz Smith with that information.

Draft Budget (Eradication of Child Poverty)

8. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how the measures announced in its draft budget 2025-26 will support its mission to eradicate child poverty. (S6O-04152)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The Scottish budget for 2025-26 prioritises action to eradicate child poverty, outlining wide-ranging investment to support progress on that national mission. In addition to our continued investment in measures such as the Scottish child payment, early learning and childcare and free bus travel, we have announced increased investment in the affordable housing supply and the expansion of breakfast clubs and free school meals. Importantly, we have also committed to spend £3 million to develop the systems that are necessary to effectively scrap the impact of the two-child cap in 2026. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that scrapping the two-child limit in Scotland could lift 15,000 children out of poverty.

Clare Haughey: Poverty campaigners have made it clear that, for child poverty to be eradicated in Scotland, policy makers cannot work in a silo. Will the cabinet secretary outline how the First Minister's four priority missions support one another, and how the draft budget ensures that low-income households in Scotland are set to benefit not only from more generous and comprehensive social security measures than in the rest of the United Kingdom but from a thriving green economy and improved public services?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Clare Haughey is quite right to point out that, as the eradication of child poverty is a defining mission of the Government, it is not just for this portfolio but for all ministers to take exceptionally seriously, and that is why we have a cross-Government response.

I believe that the budget demonstrates that response, whether that is through the investment in employability, in housing or, indeed, in social security, with the reintroduction of the universal winter fuel payment and the work on mitigating the two-child cap. That is just a small but significant sample of what is in the budget.

That support for people will only happen, however, if the Parliament votes for the budget.

The important work that we are all obligated to do to eradicate child poverty can be done only if the budget is passed.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions.

Decision Time

13:15

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business, so I take this opportunity to wish all members and all staff in the Parliament a very merry and peaceful Christmas.

Potholes

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-14155, in the name of Pam Gosal, on repairing potholes on Scotland's roads. The debate will be concluded without any question being put, and I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the degrading state of Scotland's roads, due to potholes; understands that, between April 2023 and February 2024, 108,256 potholes were recorded in 29 out of 32 Scottish local authorities, including 2,463 potholes in East Dunbartonshire and 1,867 potholes in West Dunbartonshire; further understands that the number of potholes recorded by local authorities has increased by 15% since the fiscal year 2021-22; acknowledges the findings of a report from the RAC, which has shown that the state of roads was the main concern of six in 10 drivers across the UK, and that pothole damage costs drivers an average of £460, and notes the calls for the Scottish Government to take meaningful action to repair Scotland's roads by providing local authorities with the funding that they need to repair potholes.

13:16

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am delighted to bring chamber business to a close today. I thank all the organisations that have provided briefings for my members' business debate and all the MSPs who have chosen to speak in it, as well as those who have kindly stayed behind. I am sure that we are all wanting to get out of here and enjoy our Christmas holidays, so I will try my best to keep my remarks short.

The presence of potholes is one of the most frustrating parts of driving, and I know that because I have been driving for more than 30 years. I can say that, like many others in the chamber, I have been cursed with potholes many times.

Potholes, as we all know, are often caused by weather conditions such as heavy rain and freezing temperatures, which Scotland is no stranger to. Potholes can cause excessive damage to cars through tyre, exhaust, suspension and wheel damage, bent rims and much more.

Potholes are more than capable of causing car accidents, whether people are going through the pothole or avoiding it—especially when having to veer to the other side of the road, which is not only dangerous but illegal. That means that drivers are often left to decide whether to break the law or damage their vehicle.

Research by the Scottish Conservatives has shown that, from fiscal years 2021-22 to 2023-24,

the number of potholes that were reported to councils increased by 15 per cent—from 94,356 to 108,256. In my area of East and West Dunbartonshire, drivers reported 2,463 potholes and 1,875 potholes respectively for 2023-24. In fact, Great Western Road, which partially crosses through my area, was found to be one of the worst roads in Scotland for potholes. The frustration with potholes often comes up through constituent correspondence and surgeries, and at the doors when I am speaking to constituents in East and West Dunbartonshire who have expressed their anger at the lack of action.

It is estimated that it could cost a total of £2.6 billion to fix the potholes in Scotland's roads, and more than £4 million has been paid out to fix pothole damage by local authorities since 2019.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Does Pam Gosal agree that the situation will get worse because of the additional weight of electric vehicles—cars, buses, vans and other vehicles—which will just exacerbate the problem?

Pam Gosal: I absolutely agree with my colleague that things are going to get worse. We are having this debate today so that the Scottish Government can let us know what its plans are in this regard.

I recently read the story of Leesa Mckay. Leesa is a bilateral amputee who was crossing a road in Paisley in the rain and, as she approached a dropped kerb, her wheelchair clipped a pothole that was filled with water. As a result, Leesa came right off her chair, landed with full impact on her right stump and passed out. She was taken to the Royal Alexandra hospital, where she was treated for fractures to her leg. That shows that potholes and bad road conditions affect not only drivers but pedestrians—particularly those in wheelchairs.

As I mentioned earlier, bad weather can lead to the creation of potholes. As we go through the winter months, we can only expect road conditions to get worse. Unfortunately, our local authorities do not always have the necessary resources to repair their roads. Research undertaken by the Scottish Parliament information centre shows that the percentage of local government allocation as a percentage of total Scottish Government spending dropped from 29 per cent in 2014-15 to 23 per cent in 2023-24 and, more recently, to 21.4 per cent in the latest Scottish budget for 2025-26.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Will Pam Gosal take an intervention?

Pam Gosal: Will I get any extra time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes.

Pam Gosal: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

John Mason: Pam Gosal says that local government needs more money, so will she perhaps explain whether that money should come off, say, the national health service budget or whether it should come from higher taxes, which her party opposes?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Pam Gosal, I will give you the time back.

Pam Gosal: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

To respond to John Mason, I note that it is important to understand that we are sitting over here in Opposition. It is your Government that is in the position to tell us what you are doing. If you stop wasting money—

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

Pam Gosal: To be honest, I think that we can spend more money on our local authorities.

Let us talk about the Scottish National Party Government's track record when it comes to neglecting drivers, starting with the disastrous Bute house agreement. By going into coalition in 2021 with the Greens—an anti-driver and anti-road party—Nicola Sturgeon chose to put support for independence above the needs of motorists, particularly those in rural areas.

The Greens are so radical on this issue, with Lorna Slater once saying that cars are not safe for people or for the planet. She has even called for a ban on car advertisements. Just yesterday, Lorna Slater held a members' business debate on banning cars from Holyrood park. Her co-leader, Patrick Harvie, pledged in this parliamentary session to shift billions of pounds away from road building. The only good thing that Humza Yousaf did as First Minister was to get rid of the Greens from Government.

A few months ago, we found out that the Government had spent £16 million on consultancy fees for the A83 Rest and Be Thankful project, yet the road has mostly been closed to two-way traffic since August 2020. The A83 crosses through my region, and many of my constituents have expressed their frustration about the delay.

The Scottish Conservatives are the only party standing up for motorists, whether on repairing potholes or upgrading key trunk roads. Many times in the chamber, we have called on the Government to stop dragging its feet and get on with the job of upgrading key roads, including the A96, A9, A75, A77 and A83.

Here is hoping that SNP ministers will listen to motorists rather than looking at their own crazy proposals, such as charging drivers £15 a day to drive cars into towns and cities.

13:24

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde)

(SNP): I thank Pam Gosal for securing this afternoon's debate on potholes, which is the final debate of the year. Thinking of Christmas, I am sure that the Christmas wish of many drivers across Scotland will be for all the potholes in the country to be repaired. As I cannot comment on the council roads in East Dunbartonshire, which Pam Gosal mentioned in her motion, I will focus on the trunk roads in my constituency.

During the pandemic, Amey took over the maintenance of the south-west trunk roads maintenance contract for the A8 and the A78. Amey has been a breath of fresh air. I say that not only because of the greater investment that has been put into the network over the past three years, but because of the engagement that I and my staff have had with Amey. As I highlighted at general question time earlier today, most of the almost 5 miles of trunk road between Parklea in Port Glasgow and the bullring roundabout in Greenock has been resurfaced—in both directions—over the past two years. There have also been resurfacing projects on the A78. That has been welcomed by my constituents.

However, when significant stretches of roads are resurfaced, whether in my area or anywhere else in the country, road works will be unavoidable, and that can sometimes cause frustration among drivers. That was certainly the case in my local area, as some people felt that there were too many road works at one time. However, that was not always the fault of Amey. It was a result of a mix of factors: the situation that it inherited and the work as part of the year-long Scottish Water flood investment project along the A8. As I led the campaign for that project, I was delighted to see investment going into the road infrastructure and the flooding prevention infrastructure in my constituency.

I will not suggest that there are no potholes in Inverclyde. On the contrary, there are. However, the reality is that I receive more complaints about the length of time that it takes to drive from Wemyss Bay to Port Glasgow than I do about potholes. That was not always the case. Inverclyde has two trunk roads—the A78 and the A8—which are the main arteries of my area.

On the local aspect, only a few months ago, I held a round-table meeting on the road and pavement infrastructure. Inverclyde Council, Amey, bus operators and folk from ScotRail and Network Rail were all in attendance. I held that meeting to discuss how disabled constituents were affected by the state of that infrastructure, an example of which Pam Gosal gave in her speech. Specific points had been raised with me, so I wanted to get folk around the table to have a

dialogue with a view to making things better and improving the outcomes for all my constituents.

My challenge to Amey and other organisations that are in charge of maintaining the roads is to keep on top of the maintenance. My office staff and I regularly report some of the smaller defects to Amey. Inverclyde Council used to have an app that was a great tool for highlighting such issues. The council has stopped that app, but it is looking at providing something else. It has been proven that, if people report defects timeously to Amey, it will fix those very quickly. I warmly welcome that.

Pam Gosal's motion addresses the aspect of local authority roads. I note her challenge to the Scottish Government. Obviously, the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity will respond on behalf of the Scottish Government, but I gently say to Pam Gosal that, in the budget, the Scottish Government proposes to provide local authorities with an extra £1 billion. I urge Pam Gosal to support the budget and to lobby local authorities in the West Scotland region to spend more money on roads.

I am sure that we all agree that we would like more to be invested in roads and in many other policy areas, but this Parliament has limited financial powers and a limited budget, so it must make political choices. I am not sure whether Pam Gosal lobbied the previous United Kingdom Conservative Government for additional resources for this Parliament to spend on roads. However, if we did not need to wait for the block grant every year, our situation would be somewhat different.

I put on record my thanks to all the staff who work on the trunk roads and local authority roads daily. They will be out over the festive period, in all weather conditions, working to keep our roads safe. I wish them and everyone in the chamber today, and all my constituents, a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

13:29

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Pam Gosal for bringing the debate to the chamber and for allowing us all to speak in the last debate of 2024.

It is fair to say that many of our constituents raise with us the issue of potholes on Scotland's roads. If we knock on doors, do street surgeries or go into our local Co-op, people stop us to say that we should be dealing with potholes. Constituents definitely put the issue at or near the top of the list of improvements that they would like to see in their local community. That anecdotal evidence is backed up by other evidence, some of which we have heard today.

I pay tribute to my colleague Alex Rowley for his work earlier in the year. Following a freedom of information request, he obtained figures on the estimated cost of fixing the country's local roads in 2024, which had risen to at least £2.5 billion, despite four councils not providing data. For my home council—East Ayrshire Council—the bill totalled £67,000, and the bill for neighbouring South Ayrshire Council totalled £42,500. That money is for pothole repairs. I argue that that is not investment in our transport infrastructure: it is more about patching things up and hoping that there will be a quick fix. That is why constituents are frustrated.

People are frustrated not only because of potholes but because of the time that it takes to repair them. For example, in South Ayrshire, it reportedly took 295 days to complete a work instruction for repairing a local pothole. Members of the public tell me that they are fed up with reporting issues, because it feels as though nothing is ever done and, if something is done, it is a temporary fix that breaks down quite quickly. It feels as though there is no preventative maintenance of drains and verges, with water staying on the surfaces of roads. There is nothing to ensure the longer-term functioning of our road network. That definitely frustrates members of the public.

I want to mention pavements. There are ever-increasing complaints about the safety of pavements because of deterioration and potholes in them. Potholes are very dangerous for users of wheelchairs and people with visual impairments. That adds to the sense of disappointment in communities about the way in which politicians view the look and safety of our roads and streets.

Reports from organisations such as the RAC show that motorists have put fixing potholes at the top of their priority list. I think that that is the first time that the issue has been at the top of that list.

I am conscious of the time, but I want to make two points in closing. First, when researching for the debate, I found that the Scottish Government's standard line is, "It's the responsibility of local government." However, if we are absolutely honest, we know that local government is on its knees in terms of funding so, understandably, it is prioritising front-line services. The Government needs to recognise the impact that potholes have on our constituents, and there needs to be some honesty about how we might help local government. That will be helped by Opposition parties continuing to put pressure on and scrutinising the Government.

Secondly, in truth, we need to think about the debate more in relation to sustainable transport. Transport is part of the community health that we often talk about. We must seek solutions that

lessen the load on our roads and that lead to a future in which we have connected travel, with trains and buses, good paths to walk on and opportunities to be less reliant on cars. At the moment, some journeys are almost impossible without having a car. It is important to think about that when we are considering the ways in which we invest in transport infrastructure, including roads, in Scotland.

I thank members for taking part in the debate and, like others, I wish everyone, including our constituents, a really good festive period.

13:34

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Many Scots will be driving to visit family and friends over Christmas. The RAC has warned that the next few days will be the busiest festive travel period in a decade. With such a high volume of motorists on the road network, I thank Pam Gosal for securing the time to debate the pothole emergency this afternoon—and it is an emergency.

It is one of those topics about which people say, "What are you talking about?" If someone asks what our last debate was about and you say, "Potholes", they will ask, "Potholes?" but, actually, at the moment, everybody has a pothole story, either from their own experience or their family's. Therefore, it is an issue, and it is an emergency right now. Constituents across the north-east raise the issue consistently.

Potholes are a menace. They are costing cash-strapped councils millions of pounds and they are costing drivers hundreds of pounds in repairs. This is during a cost of living crisis, so people feel that cost even more. Potholes can cause burst tyres, engine issues and even collisions. They can affect lives and livelihoods. This week, when I said that I was going to make a speech on potholes, one constituent told me that her son had written off his car, driving from Carnoustie to Arbroath, after going over a pothole at night, that she said he could not see. Fortunately, he was lucky and he survived, but too many other drivers and cyclists have been badly injured because of road defects.

Unfortunately, councils are trying to make up for shortfalls in funding, and they are having to magic up money that they simply do not have for repairs.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Tess White will be well aware that the SNP administration of Aberdeen City Council is trashing the city centre by implementing bus gates and low-emission zones. Does the member agree that the money that the council is raising—by penalising drivers who are just trying to get into the city centre—could be used to repair the roads?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give Tess White the time back.

Tess White: I will give a quick response to that question. Yes, the council could do that but, as my colleague will know, motorists do not want to feel badly let down by having to pay millions of pounds in parking fines and such things. They feel extremely concerned about the matter, so a balance needs to be struck. Yes, councils need to find funds, but I would say that they need support. There is a pothole fund, but they need more support from the Scottish Government.

Local government has been chronically underfunded by the SNP Government. My colleague mentioned Aberdeen City Council. Aberdeenshire Council manages and maintains a whopping 3,467 miles of road, and it is forking out huge sums for bridge maintenance, including for the Aboyne, Dinnet and Banff bridges. I have been told that the repair costs are in the millions of pounds, which is just not sustainable. Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks has proposed a megapylon pathway in the north-east, which will also affect our roads. Heavy machinery and lorries will do enormous damage to ageing road assets. Who is going to cover the bill? Who is actually thinking about that?

Storms and heavy rainfall will only make matters worse, and will lead to further deterioration in the condition of the roads. The road at Marykirk completely fell away in storm Babet, and that took several months to fix. The road between Marykirk and Montrose and the bridge between St Cyrus and Montrose were out for months.

The SNP Government says that it is up to local authorities to decide how to spend their budgets, but they cannot be expected to do more with less. How far can we stretch an elastic band? The massive backlog in road repairs could cost billions to remedy, and motorists, motorcyclists and cyclists are paying the price of the SNP's contempt for drivers.

Although funding is a huge problem, we also need to look at the process for repairing potholes. A quick patch might be cost effective, but it is not long lasting.

Finally, response times after a pothole is reported are also key. It can take days, months and sometimes years for the necessary repairs to be completed, which means that drivers must swerve or go slow to avoid them. Such changes in driver behaviour cause accidents. With lives at risk, councils must have the resources to properly repair roads.

13:40

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I commend Pam Gosal for bringing this important issue to the chamber. It is an issue across the UK, and the research from the RAC that is cited in Pam Gosal's motion is about roads across the UK. All the parties that have contributed so far in this debate have been in power in one form or another in different parts of the UK. This is a collective issue, and here is an MSP from the SNP on their feet speaking about motorists, which I hope gives some reassurance.

I want to speak about urban roads, given that I represent Edinburgh Northern and Leith, which is the most densely populated urban area of Scotland. In the Parliament, there is rightly much discussion about our national roads—our important A roads and motorways. Urban roads are primarily the responsibility of local authorities, and others have spoken about rural roads. However, it is important that, in representing our constituencies, we are able to talk about the issues for motorists in our area. For example, Lower Granton Road, which goes along Wardie bay in my constituency, handles more traffic in a year than the A9 does, and I have argued to the council that I should be able to advocate on behalf of my constituents for appropriate investment in that area. The issue in our capital city is of relevance to the Scottish Government as well, even though it is not fully responsible for it.

The challenge of the quality, maintenance and integrity of our urban roads is a challenge across the UK. As highlighted in the motion, the challenge of potholes is partly about repair. The reason that potholes occur is partly to do with the weather, but a lot of the time it is because the integrity of the road has been weakened by utility companies doing the various works that they need to do.

After the financial crisis, the Conservative Cameron Government considered whether to create a duty on energy and other utility companies across the UK to better co-ordinate their works. The then UK Government backed away from that idea because utility companies opposed it and said that they would simply pass on the cost to consumers. Of course, during the financial crisis, people were impacted by the recession, as they are now with the cost of living crisis.

The carrying out of utility works is the main reason why we get potholes in urban Scotland. My constituents regularly write to me because they are sick of seeing roads, including roads near this Parliament, dug up one month by one company, dug up the next month by another and then dug up a few months later by another company. That causes inconvenience for drivers and it weakens the road.

Douglas Lumsden: I completely agree about the utility companies—they are probably not doing the repairs that they are meant to do after their work. When I was a councillor, one big issue was that there were not enough road inspectors to inspect the works after the utility companies had done what they wanted to do. Stripping back on the number of inspectors almost felt like a false economy. Does Ben Macpherson agree that we should maintain that role as much as possible to ensure that utility companies fix the roads properly once they have done their work?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ben Macpherson, I can give you the time back.

Ben Macpherson: That is an important point. There is a general duty to co-ordinate road works, as set out in section 118 of the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991. Under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, the Scottish road works commissioner has been given more powers to issue a compliance notice if they think that there is a breach of that general duty.

However—and I say this to be constructive for the Government, as the issue is UK-wide, particularly because many utility companies are regulated by reserved legislation—until we get on top of the co-ordination issue, we will really struggle and will always be patching our roads. We want to get to a position where, as in other countries, utility companies that want to do works must do those together and where there is a duty on them to relay the whole road, so that its integrity is maintained.

Lastly, and luckily—and I will send this information to the minister, in case it is helpful—Scotland has a software company called ProceMX, which manages the co-ordination of utility works in New York City. This summer, I met the chief executive officer—I think that is the correct title—Iain Ritchie. That company already has the software, but we need politics, leadership, permits and penalties, because utility companies do not want to co-ordinate as that is inconvenient for them. If we can pull together some engagement with that Scottish company and some collective determination, perhaps we can get to a better position with fewer potholes to repair in future.

13:46

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I congratulate Pam Gosal on lodging the motion and on her excellent speech in opening today's debate. Moray Council, like many others, suffers from potholes in our roads. I know that the council always seeks to fill those as quickly as possible but, as one is filled, another is created.

I will pick up on Ben Macpherson's point about utility companies, because I had complaints last month about the number of roadworks across the Moray area. I contacted the council to ask how many roadworks incidents had occurred in Moray this year and was told that, from 1 January to 14 November this year, when the council responded to me, almost 5,000 roadworks had been registered with the council. Of those 5,000, 3,500 were caused by work done by utility companies and, although that work is needed, it causes disruption to local roads. A further 1,350 were local council works, causing a huge amount of disruption for travellers in the area. We need more joined-up working by utility companies and councils to minimise disruption for our constituents.

Other members have mentioned trunk roads. I am keen to get on the right side of the Deputy Presiding Officer and note that a line in the motion shows that the debate is not only about potholes, so I will spend the rest of my time today talking about the A96 and particularly about issues at the Union bridge in Keith. I mean absolutely no disrespect to the minister, but I had hoped that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport would be responding to this transport debate. I do mean no disrespect to the minister, but we know that Fiona Hyslop was in the chamber for First Minister's questions and then left before this debate. My points are for the cabinet secretary, and I hope that the minister will pass them on.

I have raised the issue of traffic lights on the A96, which is the trunk road between Inverness and Aberdeen. They have caused huge disruption for constituents and businesses in Keith. I asked Fiona Hyslop to come to Keith to hear the concerns of local businesses, but she refused. Perhaps that was personal and she just did not want to accept my invitation, but last night I was copied into an email by Linda Gorn, the chair of the United Keith group, who had written to Fiona Hyslop in similar terms, asking her to come to Keith to see the impact that roadworks are having on the area.

Linda Gorn sent that letter on 22 October and she finally got a response on 18 December. That did not come from Fiona Hyslop, despite the letter being sent to her. It came from her permanent secretary, a civil servant who took two months to respond and whose response was that Fiona Hyslop is too busy and that diary pressures mean that she cannot come to the north of Scotland to hear about those impacts. That is not acceptable and I am urging in this debate, as I will in a follow-up letter, that Fiona Hyslop should finally get out of the central belt, come to Moray, visit Keith and see the impact on the area.

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I cannot answer the individual point that the member made about Keith, but I would strongly and strenuously defend Fiona Hyslop's responsibility and her actions in getting around the country. She has been all over Scotland to look into many transport issues, and I do not think that the member represented her properly in that last statement.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I add that, although Mr Ross has attempted to address the fact that I might have concerns about relevance, those concerns are growing. The motion is largely about potholes, so, Mr Ross, if you could use your creativity to link what you are saying to the substance of the motion, that would be helpful. I can give you the time back.

Douglas Ross: I will make that link, because another line in the motion is that the Scottish Government has

“to take meaningful action to repair Scotland's roads”,

which include the A96 at the Union bridge in Keith.

On the point that the minister has just made, I believe that I am backed up by facts. I lodged a written parliamentary question to Fiona Hyslop asking when she last travelled on the A96, and the response showed that it was more than six months ago. I think that the time has come for her to travel on the A96 again and to come to Keith to visit those businesses.

Today, after the debate, I will present to the minister the petition in my hand, which has been signed by more than 350 local people and businesses, that urges urgent action on that road to get the repairs completed and the traffic lights removed. People are avoiding the area, and there is a concern that the situation is costing businesses in Keith £50,000 to £60,000 every month. That needs the urgent attention of Amey as the operating company, but it also has to be taken on board by the Government. On behalf of local people, I will present this petition to the minister, and I hope that he will hand it on to the Cabinet Secretary for Transport later today.

Once again, I urge Fiona Hyslop to come and meet the people of Keith who are suffering because of those on-going works.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members about the use of props. You might have got away with it once, Mr Ross, but waving it for a second time was probably stretching it.

I call on the minister to wind up the debate.

13:51

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): In the spirit of the season of good

will, Presiding Officer, I very much wish a merry and peaceful Christmas and a happy and healthy new year to you and your family. I also put on record my sincere thanks to all the people in this place who get things done, make this place work and allow us—who are absolutely privileged to be here to represent our constituents—to get on with the job that we are here to do. I extend that to everyone.

I thank Pam Gosal for bringing this important debate to the chamber—and it is indeed an important debate. The facts that she mentioned about one of her constituents outline why it is important, and I would in no way minimise that in my contribution.

I make it clear that we absolutely appreciate that road maintenance for both trunk and local roads faces challenges across the network. We acknowledge the importance of safe, well-performing roads; indeed, they are absolutely essential, not just to the health of our people, but to the health of Scotland's economy.

As members are aware, Scottish ministers are responsible for the management and maintenance of the strategic trunk road network, while, in accordance with the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984, local roads clearly fall under the responsibility of the relevant local authority. I know that members do not like to hear that, but those are the facts. It is important to make that distinction, because only the funding for the maintenance of the trunk road network, which makes up around 6 per cent of Scotland's overall road network, is directly controlled by the Scottish Government.

The vast majority of funding to local authorities from the Scottish Government is provided via the block grant. We do not stipulate how local authorities should utilise their individual allocations, nor do I think that any member on any side of the chamber would be comfortable with the Scottish Government doing so. As I have said, the vast majority of local authority funding comes from the block grant, and it is the responsibility of each local authority to manage its own budget and to allocate the financial resources that are available to it on the basis of local needs and priorities, having first fulfilled its statutory obligations and the jointly agreed set of national and local priorities.

With regard to the maintenance of our trunk road network, the operating companies that maintain the trunk road network on behalf of the Scottish Government have a contractual obligation to inspect the network at least weekly and to make any necessary repairs within a strict timescale. The Scottish Government fully funds the inspection and repair of all serious defects that could present a hazard to road users on the motorway and trunk road network.

To support that work, we have increased total investment in the safety, operation and maintenance of the trunk road network by more than 30 per cent, to a record level of more than £683 million in 2024-25, and in 2025-26, that is planned to increase by a further 4.5 per cent to more than £714 million. The increased budget for the trunk road network's safety, adaptation, operation and maintenance enables the Scottish Government to meet all of its contractual and legal commitments, as well as supporting its wider commitments on road safety, air quality and climate adaptation.

As I stated earlier, local road maintenance is the responsibility of local authorities, which allocate resources based on their priorities. The Scottish Government is providing more than £15 billion in 2025-26 to the local government settlement; that is a £1 billion increase in the resources available to local government, which is equivalent to a 7.2 per cent cash-terms increase and a 4.7 per cent increase in real terms. Indeed, the independent Accounts Commission recently confirmed that the Scottish Government provided a real-terms increase to local governments in 2023-24 and 2022-23.

Again, I emphasise that it is for the local representatives to decide how to best deliver for their communities. There is no dedicated pothole fund. It is important to note that any Barnett consequentials arising from Westminster spending are added to the Scottish block grant as a whole, and Scottish ministers will decide how best to allocate those resources. As part of that process, consideration is given to what support can be provided to help improve road conditions where required.

Stephen Kerr: I would be grateful if the minister would address the issues raised by Ben Macpherson and Douglas Ross about what is weakening the integrity of our roads. I would also raise with him the point that I raised with Pam Gosal. Given that the impact of the increased use of electric vehicles is only going to make the problem worse, does he expect that we will have to continue to increase the amount of money that we are spending on road repairs as a result?

Jim Fairlie: I take on board the points that Stephen Kerr made. I was interested to hear the points that Ben Macpherson made, too, and I look forward to hearing about ProceMX and what it does. I am more than happy to engage on that matter.

The point about the utility companies is correct. In my constituency, gas, electricity and telephone communications works were being done at different times, all of which reduced the integrity of the road. There needs to be a conversation about what can be done to ensure that such works do

not damage the integrity of the road and that there is a responsibility to repair those roads to the standard that they should be in.

Ben Macpherson: I am grateful to the minister for taking my intervention and for the points that he has just made. If the minister and the Scottish Government can use their convening power together with the commissioner and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and if improvements can be made as a result, that would be warmly welcomed by all representatives and all the citizens of Scotland.

Jim Fairlie: I take that on board. I will write to the member and we can have a conversation about next steps.

We have a long history of working with local authorities and bodies such as the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to ensure that council finances are sustainable and that resources are available to meet their commitments. However, this is not just about money; Ben Macpherson and others were absolutely correct to highlight that this is about whether we are doing the right thing at the right time. Let us have a conversation about what that looks like.

The Scottish Government will always seek to ensure that Scotland continues to receive the high-quality public services that we all expect, but I have to say—[*Interruption.*] No, I am going to keep the politics out of it. It is the season of good will, so I will leave it there.

I conclude by saying that I take the points on board that have been made by Pam Gosal and other members of the chamber, and I am more than happy to have a conversation with Ben Macpherson. I thank Carol Mochan and everybody else for spending time on the last day of term—just before Christmas—taking part in this very good and constructive debate, and I wish everyone a happy festive season.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate. I, too, congratulate all those who have shown the stamina to make it all the way through to the final debate of 2024.

I wish you all a very merry Christmas and a happy and healthy 2025. With that, I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 13:59.

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