



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Tuesday 7 January 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 7 January 2025

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our time for reflection leader today is Jess Pepper, founder and director of Climate Café CIC, host of the global Climate Café network.

Jess Pepper (Climate Café CIC): Happy new year. It is an honour to join you to—to quote from Edwin Morgan's poem—"Open the doors" on a new year and to look ahead in this

"building which is more than a building."

A new year can allow us to see a bigger picture, to appreciate this precious envelope of the natural world that sustains life and to reflect on the significance of this moment.

Our Goldilocks planet is not too hot or too cold for all the life it sustains. If I had a globe in my hands, our atmosphere could be represented by a layer of varnish, it is so thin. The millions of tonnes of global warming pollution dumped in our atmosphere every day are thickening it, trapping more heat and causing more devastating impacts as natural systems are disrupted. Storms intensify, droughts deepen, temperatures rise and health suffers.

As Christmas lights twinkled here in December 2014, I saw Save the Children in the Philippines reminding families to put labels in their children's clothing as supertyphoon Ruby, charged by increased heat in the ocean, headed towards them, just a year after 6,300 lives were lost and millions devastated by typhoon Yolanda. In 2024, the typhoon season there had six consecutive storm systems. From tropical cyclones to storms in Scotland, the most vulnerable suffer the worst and increasingly devastating impacts, having polluted the least.

This year marks 10 years since the world came together in Paris to make a global plan to reduce emissions. In 2020, the global panel of climate scientists warned that there was a decade left in which to act to avoid being locked into the most devastating impacts of climate disruption. The year 2025 is the mid-point for that decade of critical action—the cusp of two possible futures. Will we accelerate disruption and systems collapse or realise a vision of a fair, safe future for all? There is no time for denial or despair. Despite

the challenges, there is hope and optimism for that vision. It is a choice.

Solutions exist, and transition to a cleaner economy is gathering momentum across communities that are connected across regions, states and nations, despite barriers that could be removed. I see momentum through a growing global network of community-led climate cafes, which are often led and informed by the youngest, by women and by our elders.

Carbon dioxide emitted today can remain in the atmosphere for 100 years. We may all be able to make some choices about what we do now and what we leave as our legacy for future generations. In this place, your decisions can enable everyone to have more choices.

In 2025, as we return to "Open the doors" in "this great building, don't let your work and hope be other than great".

The significance of this moment is huge, and our choices will define the future.

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-16025, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to today's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Tuesday 7 January 2025—

after

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Health and Social Care Response to Winter—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Topical Question Time

14:05

Youth Crime and Antisocial Behaviour

1. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is responding to reported increases in instances of youth crime and antisocial behaviour. (S6T-02270)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I take this opportunity, Presiding Officer, to wish you and all members of the Scottish Parliament a happy new year.

I was, of course, appalled to learn of the recent criminal incidents in Ben Macpherson's constituency. I know that police are actively investigating to identify those who are responsible.

The Scottish Government remains committed to preventing children from getting involved in offending behaviour and to taking action to stop any reoffending where they do get involved. We work with partners to deliver a range of activities. For example, we expanded the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit's work and delivered knife crime prevention education to practitioners and young people across Scotland.

I know that this is cold comfort to victims, but recorded crime is down 40 per cent since 2006-07. As of 4 November, Police Scotland reached officer numbers of 16,600, with further intakes planned throughout this year. In 2025-26, we will increase police funding to £1.62 billion. In addition, the First Minister will host a cross-party youth violence summit next week, on Monday 13 January.

Ben Macpherson: I thank the minister for her answer and welcome the initiatives that are under way, particularly the final one that she mentioned.

First, I note that I raise these issues in the Parliament with no enthusiasm but feel that I must do so on behalf of those whom I represent.

As I said last year, in my constituency, I received correspondence about many very concerning instances of youth crime and antisocial behaviour, including people being threatened with weapons such as axes and knives; theft and robbery; unprovoked and sometimes very harmful assaults on other young people or passers-by; harassment of women, girls and vulnerable people; and dangerous driving of motorbikes, e-bikes, pushbikes and scooters, with people clipping pedestrians, stealing phones and generally causing alarm to pedestrians and drivers. All those things are usually done by people who are wearing menacing balaclavas and have a sense of being above the law.

It is a very small minority of Scotland's young people who engage in such criminality, but I worry that the problem is growing and is now very serious in Edinburgh. It is increasing in frequency and the severity of violence is worsening. In recent months, I have received—almost weekly—very worrying correspondence from the communities that I serve. For example, in December, a mother and daughter were reportedly attacked by a gang in Leith and, just before Christmas, a boy was stabbed by a gang of youths elsewhere in Edinburgh. The issues around bonfire night are well known.

A trend is emerging in Edinburgh and, unfortunately, it is happening elsewhere in Scotland, too.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Mr Macpherson, I must ask you to get to the question.

Ben Macpherson: Sure. I would be grateful if the Scottish Government would outline how—beyond what is happening next week, which I very much welcome—it intends to respond to the situation in 2025.

Siobhian Brown: The incidents that Ben Macpherson has mentioned are totally unacceptable. He is right that we are talking about a very small minority, but I very much recognise the impact on the people and communities who are directly affected and, therefore, the need for continued relentless focus to tackle any rise in violence.

Addressing the root causes of crime, undertaking effective preventive and diversionary activity and ensuring appropriate enforcement are critical to safeguarding our communities, which is why, for example, the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit has been working to develop a community of practice for more than 100 police schools liaison officers across Scotland. In addition, the independent working group on antisocial behaviour that I established is expected to publish its findings shortly, and we have committed to act on its recommendations.

Ben Macpherson: I welcome that. Unfortunately, a trend is emerging, which is exacerbated by social media, sometimes enabled and encouraged by adults and potentially influenced by organised crime. I appreciate the minister's reassurance to the Parliament and the public that the Government will use its convening abilities and, I hope, its legal powers, backed up with necessary resources, to support Police Scotland officers, other statutory services and youth workers and to focus efforts across agencies to tackle youth crime and antisocial behaviour this year.

The fact that the First Minister is convening the meeting next week is significant. Following that, if

it would be appropriate, I would be grateful if the minister would consider hosting a meeting in Victoria Quay in Leith, in my constituency, with key stakeholders and partners to further discuss the situation and how we can tackle it together.

Siobhian Brown: I am happy to discuss with the member the idea of having a future meeting at Victoria Quay.

Our priorities are also reflected in the budget, which will, if passed, increase funding to support police capacity and capability to £1.62 billion and will include almost £57 million in additional resource funding. As I said, Police Scotland confirmed on 4 November that the service had reached 16,600 officers. Our priorities are reflected in the budget. If members back the Scottish Government's budget, an additional £3 million will be made available to Police Scotland specifically to help it to tackle retail crime.

Good collaboration between partners is essential to tackling the issue effectively. We are ensuring that bespoke interventions and support are provided through social work and third sector interventions such as Includem's adapt programme, which supports children who are involved in offending and their families. We also continue to support the cashback for communities programme, which is funded by money recovered through the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, and we are investing in projects that are helping to deliver a positive future for our children and young people.

The Presiding Officer: There is a lot of interest in this question, so I would be grateful for concise questions and responses to enable more members to be involved.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The impact of youth crime and shoplifting on retailers is worse than ever. The organisation Retailers Against Crime says that losses to stores last year were at the highest level since 1997. Retailers are also in no doubt as to why that is and have told me that, because there are few or no consequences from the courts for theft from shops, criminals feel free to reoffend at will. Those people are dangerous organised criminals who not only steal but attack and intimidate staff and shoppers.

There have already been multiple incidents in 2025, but, as it stands, the only people who face the consequences of violence and abuse are the retailers and victims. Meanwhile, the perpetrators get off scot free. When will the Scottish Government show some common sense and get tough on those individuals so they know that their actions will have consequences?

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Government totally recognises the significant disruption and harm that retail crime causes and condemns any

violence against retail workers. We recognise retail workers' vital role in our society and want to ensure that they are protected. The Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021 created a statutory offence of

"assaulting, threatening or abusing retail workers",

which highlights the seriousness of such behaviour.

We support the innovative Scottish partnership against acquisitive crime, which is led by Police Scotland and retailers, and we encourage retailers to report all crimes to the police and to engage with that partnership. If our budget is approved by Parliament, it will make an extra £3 million available in 2025-26 to tackle retail crime.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment to deal with young people's involvement in crime and antisocial behaviour. Does the minister recognise the crucial role that youth work plays in addressing youth crime and antisocial behaviour? I know that she will not acknowledge it, but Government cuts have had a detrimental impact, so should youth work be placed on a statutory footing so that young people can avoid becoming involved in crime?

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Government's budget will increase funding for local authorities, which will assist youth and community projects. Our hugely successful cashback for communities programme supports young people who are most at risk of being drawn into antisocial behaviour, offending and re-offending and delivers positive outcomes. Future work in all of Scotland's 32 local authorities will prioritise opportunities for young people aged between 10 and 25 in the most deprived 20 per cent of areas in Scotland.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Adults also commit antisocial behaviour. The minister will recall my exchanges here with the First Minister about the scourge of antisocial behaviour by adults driving high-performance vehicles around the village of South Queensferry, in my constituency. I am grateful to the First Minister for his engagement on that topic. He has assured me that we are making progress towards the establishment of a national task force oversight group, which is to be chaired by the minister, so will she update Parliament on progress towards that group?

Siobhian Brown: I know that the member, Mr Doris and I will meet Police Scotland, Mr Fairlie and others. In the future, we will include other members in a working group to look into antisocial behaviour with off-road vehicles.

Child Sexual Abuse

2. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its progress in tackling child sexual abuse, in light of reported calls for a full United Kingdom national inquiry into child sexual abuse by grooming gangs. (S6T-02268)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): Child sexual abuse and exploitation are abhorrent crimes that have devastating impacts on victims. We are taking direct action through the Scottish child abuse inquiry, the terms of reference for which were established following extensive public consultation with survivors of in-care child abuse. The inquiry is considering the current legislative, policy and practice framework to prevent and address child abuse and it will set out where it considers that changes are required.

Given the importance of the issues, we are not waiting for the inquiry to report, and we established a child sexual abuse and exploitation national strategic group in October 2024 with operational partners and other expert stakeholders including the former chair of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales, Professor Alexis Jay, to review current actions and agree where additional focus is needed to better protect children from abuse and exploitation.

Pam Gosal: I thank the minister for her answer. I make it clear that my intention is not to label any ethnic group but to shed light on the issue as a whole—rather than leaving the matter to people such as Elon Musk.

The stories that we hear from young girls who were victims of grooming gangs are heartbreaking. I use this moment to thank all the brave survivors for coming forward.

In 2020, Barnardo's Scotland and the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration launched the first national study of child sexual exploitation in Scotland. It is now more than four years since that report was published. It included 15 recommendations, many of which were for the Scottish Government. How many of the report's recommendations has the Scottish Government implemented?

Natalie Don-Innes: We have made progress in delivering the outcomes that were sought in the Barnardo's report, which included recommendations for a number of agencies that are involved in the response to child sexual abuse in Scotland. On the Scottish Government's part, that includes public-facing campaigns on child sexual abuse and, more recently, on the risk of online sexual exploitation. We remain committed to the Promise and its transformative support for

families in need. We have established a national contextual safeguarding group, supported by child protection committees Scotland, and we continue to embed care and risk management processes to assist local authorities with identification, assessment and management of children who display harmful sexual behaviour.

Improving understanding of childhood sexual abuse and exploitation is essential, but any data must be gathered in a manner that minimises the risk of retraumatisation of victims. Data on reported concerns about child abuse or neglect is collected by Police Scotland and reported nationally in a monthly dashboard. That data set is currently being extended in order to provide more in-depth analysis of characteristics and trends in abuse and exploitation. Improvements in training have also been made by the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration, with child sexual exploitation now being addressed in children's panel members' pre-service training.

Pam Gosal: Although recent attention has been on grooming gangs in towns down south—I echo Kemi Badenoch's calls for a national inquiry—it would be wrong to think that we are immune to the problem in Scotland. Major police investigations—operation dash and operation Cotswold—have uncovered grooming gangs operating right here, in Scotland. A third investigation, known as operation cerra, revealed the existence of yet another grooming gang but, despite that investigation taking place in 2016, it appears to have been covered up for four years before the brave work of journalists revealed its existence to the public back in 2020.

Will the minister confirm whether she is aware of any on-going police investigations into grooming gangs in Scotland? If there is to be a national inquiry into grooming gangs, will the Scottish Government do its bit to help to facilitate the inquiry's work?

Natalie Don-Innes: As I said, this is an extremely serious matter. As, I am sure, Pam Gosal is aware, I am not able to comment on on-going police issues or activity.

As I have already stated, the Scottish child abuse inquiry is on-going, and its terms of reference were established following extensive public consultation with survivors of in-care child abuse. The terms of reference task the inquiry with investigating the nature and extent of the abuse of children in care in Scotland as well as identifying any systemic failures that allowed that abuse to happen.

I am clear that the inquiry is independent, and it is the responsibility of Lady Smith, its chair, to decide exactly what the inquiry examines in order to fulfil its full terms of reference.

The Scottish Government will carefully consider any recommendations made by the inquiry to improve the protection of children in Scotland. However, as I have set out, evidence from inquiry hearings and the inquiry's findings are already being considered as part of on-going improvement work. The Scottish Government is making a number of moves, across Government, to better support children and young people who may be at risk of abuse.

The Presiding Officer: Concise questions and responses would be appreciated.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): In her earlier answer, the minister spoke of the child sexual abuse and exploitation national strategic group, which has been set up by the Scottish Government. Can the minister update the Parliament on how she envisages that that group will support survivors of sexual abuse as well as prevent and tackle child sexual exploitation? Can she provide details on the issues that it will be looking into this year?

Natalie Don-Innes: As I have set out, the Scottish Government is working closely with partners to deliver a co-ordinated multi-agency response in order to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation. However, in recognition of the need to go further, we have established the new group to provide national leadership and further improve our shared response to child sexual abuse and exploitation in Scotland.

The group met on 18 November and 11 December. It brings together key stakeholders, including from social work, police, health and education, as well as local authority representatives, expert practitioners, representatives of charities, researchers and academics. As I have stated, it includes the former chair of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse.

The group will share outputs of its discussions shortly, but I am pleased to report that significant progress was made at the first meetings towards identifying some potential priorities, and work is now under way to further explore those priorities, with the aim of identifying actions for the group's consideration when it meets again in the coming months.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Scotland has had its own sexual abuse scandals involving children. One well-reported case, operation planet, was an investigation into the alleged abuse of young boys recruited for sex work, many of whom were in care. That case is not included in the inquiry.

I acknowledge the presence of the First Minister, John Swinney, who has been personally

dedicated, over many years, to addressing the issue of historical child sex abuse.

I wrote to Lady Smith last year to ask for the inclusion of such abuse cases involving children in care that are currently not included. I hope to have the minister's support for that. I also ask the minister to confirm that the continuing commitment to invest in the survivors of child abuse will give practical support to those adults who have survived child sex abuse.

Natalie Don-Innes: As I made clear in my previous answer, the inquiry is independent. As Pauline McNeill implied, it is the responsibility of its chair, Lady Smith, to decide on what exactly the inquiry examines.

I did not catch the member's full question, but I believe that it alluded to support for victims of such behaviour. I have already laid out some of the actions that the Scottish Government is taking to support victims and to look at what more action can be taken to do that. I also draw the member's attention to our on-going investment and commitment to the bairns' hoose model, which is transforming victims' access to the services that they need. I am happy to pick up those points in further discussions with the member.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): There are, of course, parallels with other areas of child safeguarding failures, whereby whistleblowers have been vilified, intimidated and shut down. A civilised society must not rely on the bravery of a small number of whistleblowers. It is the Government's role to make sure that the system supports people such as the police, social workers and care home staff to do the right thing.

Those girls were failed at every turn by a system that was meant to protect them—even, in some cases, criminalised for their own abuse, which is sickening. My unbuyable bill would allow for a debate and a vote on commercial sexual exploitation, placing the shame where it belongs—on the perpetrator.

Can the Scottish Government give assurances that such a failure has not happened, and is not happening, in Scotland? Is the Government confident that there has been no such cover up here?

Natalie Don-Innes: Although I have set out what the Government is doing to tackle this, I have been very clear today that I am aware that there is still a way to go to fully provide the support needed and to eradicate such behaviour.

As I said, the working group has been set up, the inquiry is on-going, and actions are being taken that will help with the situation. If the member would like to discuss any specific matters with me, such as other things that we could be

doing to help with this, I would be more than happy to pick those up with her.

The Presiding Officer: My apologies to those members whose questions we have not been able to reach. That concludes topical questions.

Health and Social Care Response to Winter

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Neil Gray on the health and social care response to winter.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:26

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I thank the Presiding Officer for this opportunity to update the Scottish Parliament on how our health and social care system is responding to the pressures of winter.

It is clear that our health and social care services and the people that they serve are experiencing the impact of peak winter demand. It is traditionally a challenging period of the year, and this year has been no different. In particular, the national health service continues to see significant numbers of cases of influenza A, which have been, and remain, very high. This extraordinary flu surge of course adds to the normal respiratory issues that we might expect at this time of year. In the face of that particular issue, and the wider winter pressures, I would first like to express how enormously grateful I am—and, I am sure, everyone in the chamber is—to all those working in our health and social care settings for their immense efforts over the busy festive period. The resilience and determination shown by staff in the face of pressures across the health and care sector are inspiring.

There is so much to thank them for. Every part of our health service has gone above and beyond to serve the country during the hardest months of the year. I thank the staff of the Scottish Ambulance Service staff for their sacrifice and devotion to their task in staying at work beyond the end of their shift as they wait to turn around at hospitals. I thank the social care staff who are doing extra shifts to make up for staff being off sick with flu. I thank the general practitioners who are working at the weekends to offer appointments and bolster the resilience of the entire system. I thank hospital staff, such as the porter I met at St John's hospital in Livingston on Christmas eve who was working extremely hard to turn around beds as quickly as possible. We, in this chamber, often talk about service, but that is the reality of public service: the hard, relentless, skilled, devoted and dedicated work to serve the people who need it most. We owe all of them a debt of gratitude.

In recent days and weeks, I, with the First Minister, have been meeting health boards, representatives from the Scottish Ambulance Service, health and social care partnerships, Public Health Scotland and NHS 24. We have discussed the latest system updates, the high cases of influenza and how the health service is responding to increased demand. I am very encouraged to hear about the collaborative working right across the system, with strong leadership and staff supporting one another. In practice, that co-operation has seen boards working closely with the Scottish Ambulance Service to manage the flow of patients through emergency departments across Scotland.

The Scottish Ambulance Service and board senior clinical managers have been present on hospital sites, assessing risk and prioritising patients who are most in need of urgent treatment. GPs from out-of-hours services have been working in minor injuries departments and helping to treat and discharge patients, where clinically appropriate. The Scottish Ambulance Service's integrated clinical hub, which receives calls transferred from NHS 24, has calls reviewed by GPs in the call centre. They help to advise self-care, prescribe medication, or refer to out-of-hours services when it is clinically appropriate to do so. That helps more patients to be treated at home or in the community, and prevents unnecessary ambulance conveyance to hospital. That kind of co-ordination has played an important role in protecting resources for those who are most urgently in need.

I express my regret that anyone seeking care has to wait longer than necessary to receive it—as, no doubt, will have happened during this difficult period—but, at this point, thanks to our robust preparation and the dedication and hard work of staff across the health service and the social care sector, our services continue to hold up well in the face of the additional pressures. That has been important, because there is no doubt that Scotland has been hit hard by flu this winter. Although we planned for increases in flu over the winter, the very high levels that we are experiencing inevitably put additional strain on the system.

Data from Public Health Scotland shows that the incidence of influenza in the community in Scotland has continued to increase in the latest week for which figures are available, although the rate of increase has slowed. We have seen the impact of flu in our hospitals, where there have been more than 1,500 influenza-related admissions in the latest week, surpassing the peak of around 1,400 in the winter of 2022-23.

Every year, the demands of winter challenge our health systems. That is why, in preparation, we

published our winter plan a month ahead of the equivalent date last year, and earlier than ever before, to allow more time for whole-system preparedness. Published on 24 September, the winter plan was developed with input from the whole health and social care system, in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, bringing together best practice and improvement work to ensure that the most appropriate care is received in the right place and at the right time.

Our investment in the hospital at home service has paid dividends, as it has enabled patients to spend Christmas in their own homes, with their families, where that is clinically appropriate. That vital service reduces hospital occupancy while still providing high-quality care.

As part of the winter plan, we committed to providing additional staffing for NHS 24 to support demand over the winter period. That recruitment programme has been a success, with call handlers now fully established and additional clinical staff in post.

Health boards have ensured the provision of NHS pharmaceutical services, so that people continue to have access to prescribed medicines and to services such as NHS pharmacy first Scotland. That service is available in all community pharmacies, to anyone registered with a GP practice in Scotland. It allows members of the public access to expert healthcare professionals without the need for an appointment.

In making those winter planning efforts, we have learned from previous intense winter pressures and we have built our approach to out-of-hours services, escalation and board delivery support on the basis of our experience. Out-of-hours services have remained resilient and responsive thanks to that approach and to our continued investment in the service and rigorous planning of staff cover for winter.

The flu vaccination programme runs until the end of March and the Covid vaccination programme until the end of January. As of 15 December 2024, we had administered more than 1.2 million adult flu vaccinations. The Scottish Ambulance Service has been instrumental in collaborating with boards during the winter vaccination programme. Its mobile vaccination outreach service has provided accessible vaccination facilities to remote, rural and island communities.

Vaccination offers the best protection against serious illness from flu, so I urge all those who are eligible for vaccinations this winter to come forward as soon as possible, to protect themselves and to support our health and social care services. Beyond vaccination, everyone can reduce the

chance of catching flu or spreading it to others by practising good hand hygiene, taking other precautions and staying at home if they have respiratory symptoms.

I have thanked our health and social care workforces and will continue to do so. However, I also take this opportunity to thank the Scottish public for taking heed of our messages about accessing the right care in the right place and for taking steps to slow the spread of infections. As I have stated throughout recent weeks, it is important for everyone to be familiar with the different resources that are available, including NHS Inform's online tools that can help them to get appropriate health advice as quickly as possible. People should always call 999 in a life-threatening emergency, but if that is not the case they should first visit the [nhsinform.scot](https://www.nhsinform.scot) website or call NHS 24 on 111.

I must thank those who are looking after, or even just looking out for, other people—those who have checked in on elderly relations or friends, helped with getting their messages and provided other support over this, the hardest time of the year. I would also like to recognise the role of unpaid carers the length and breadth of Scotland, who, year round, work to support their loved ones. They are often the overlooked heroes of our health and social care system, and I thank them.

I reiterate the Government's commitment to supporting general practice during this critical time. On 29 November, I announced an additional £13.6 million investment in general practice for this financial year. That funding is aimed at addressing financial pressures, supporting staff costs and enabling practices to recruit and retain staff. It is a practical response to the challenges that GPs face, especially during this period of high demand.

Our dedicated social care and social work workforce have worked tirelessly throughout the festive period, supporting people to remain well and live independently in their communities. That proactive support reinforces our health service by preventing the need for hospital admissions at a difficult time, while ensuring that individuals are cared for in the most appropriate setting.

Care homes have, of course, been affected by flu and, in some cases, have been required to close, in line with infection control procedures. We have engaged with local systems to make sure that they have the latest guidance and support on infection control, and I know that they are working collaboratively to manage that pressure.

As in previous years, there has been significant work to reduce the level of delayed discharge across the system in advance of Christmas. Health and social care partnerships have been working hard to make sure that as many people as

possible who are clinically ready to leave hospital can do that, whether they are returning home or to a care home. That includes maximising the use of discharge to assess, hospital at home and other initiatives that help to make sure that people can get the right care in the right place.

Winter tests every one of us. It tests individual people, families and our healthcare systems. However, this year, thanks to the incredible efforts of NHS staff and sure-handed planning, we are facing winter with resilience and resolve. I am sure that the whole chamber will join me in supporting and once again thanking the staff of our NHS and social care services, who provide so much to this nation in these difficult and challenging times.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practising NHS GP who was working over the Christmas period. I thank all staff who provided care for us during the Christmas period. *[Interruption.]* It seems that people do not like the fact that I was working over the Christmas period, Presiding Officer. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Please carry on. Members—let us hear Dr Gulhane.

Sandesh Gulhane: Flu is not simply a cold. It is a serious and potentially fatal illness. I urge anyone who is in a high-risk group to go and get their vaccination.

The cabinet secretary has boasted of the number of vaccinations that have been delivered, but that number actually represents a 25 per cent reduction in the number of vaccinations delivered compared with last year.

I have been telling the cabinet secretary that his winter plan is not worth the paper that it was written on, as was shown by November's accident and emergency waiting times being the worst on record since 2007, when the Scottish National Party came to power.

The cabinet secretary said that recruitment for NHS 24 has been a success, but some desperate people who called NHS 24 had to wait for more than four hours, and more than 100,000 calls were abandoned due to people waiting too long. What is the cabinet secretary doing to ensure that 111 has the capacity to deliver?

Over the past decade, there has been an almost 10 per cent decrease in the number of rural GP practices, despite the cabinet secretary claiming today that accessible treatment is being provided for remote, rural and island communities. What assurances can he provide to rural patients and to

my rural GP colleagues that those are not just empty words?

Neil Gray: I thank Sandesh Gulhane for his service, along with all those GPs and other health and social care staff who contributed to responding to the health and social care pressures over Christmas. I recognised in my statement that GPs have opened their surgeries at weekends in order to provide support to the whole system, which has helped to make sure that the resilience has been there both in hours and out of hours, as has Dr Gulhane's service. I also referred to the work that GPs have been doing in supporting the Scottish Ambulance Service and NHS 24, as well as flow navigation services.

Our general practitioners—as I have said before and I say again—are integral to our health and social care system, and I am grateful to all those who worked over the Christmas period to respond to the pressures that we have seen.

Dr Gulhane is right to recognise the severity of flu and the impact that it has had on our system, which has been clear and real. I saw the impact in the visits that I made before Christmas, and the First Minister has seen it in his visits over the weekend.

With regard to the winter plan, I have pointed to many of its successful elements, which have been developed and delivered thanks to the incredible work of our health and social care providers. Those elements include the expansion of the hospital at home service and the work to ensure that flow navigation centres have been able to provide virtual access to accident and emergency services. Our winter plan has worked in a range of areas to ensure that we have been able to respond to the impact on our systems of what I believe to be unprecedented levels of flu in recent years.

With regard to NHS 24 and the statistics that Dr Gulhane quoted in respect of those who choose to relinquish their call, there is a call-back service in place, which will have contributed to some of those people choosing to hang up. Nevertheless, I recognise that some people will have had to wait too long, and I apologise for that. The investment that has been made in NHS 24 to ensure that there is an additional level of staffing available, which I was able to see prior to Christmas, and which the First Minister has been able to see in his visits, has meant that the service has been able to respond well to the increased level of demand over the festive period. I am very grateful to everybody for the work that they have carried out over that difficult and challenging period.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I start by thanking all health and social care staff, including those who work in the third and independent

sectors, for their valiant efforts over Christmas and new year, despite the lack of vision and support from the SNP Government.

When the cabinet secretary announced his winter plan, there was not a penny extra for delayed discharge. The latest data, from October, has a record high of 2,000 people stuck in hospital. While I welcome the announcements about the hospital at home service, they relate to the next financial year and will be cold comfort to those who are waiting to get home now.

It is early for a statement on winter pressures, but perhaps the cabinet secretary is trying to get ahead of the statistics on delayed discharge next week. Can he tell us what the level of delayed discharge is today and whether it has gone up or down on his watch?

I turn quickly to the Scottish Ambulance Service. Winter has barely begun and we are seeing real pressure on the system, with ambulances routinely queuing up outside hospitals and a level 4 emergency declared. Can the cabinet secretary tell us what he has done to address that, over and above the winter plan, in order to support our hard-working paramedics?

Neil Gray: I am very grateful to Jackie Baillie for referencing, in addition to those staff whom we have already spoken about, the community and voluntary sector staff who contribute so much to our health and social care services by providing access to and reaching those people whom statutory services cannot reach. I recognise that work, and I thank Jackie Baillie for recognising their contribution.

The hospital at home service is operating now, and it has been increased in the current financial year. It is an innovation that is right for patients, as it allows people to remain in their homes, and for our health and social care services.

Should the Scottish Government's budget be passed, it will mean that, by the end of the next financial year, the number of hospital at home beds will be expanded to provide the largest hospital in Scotland. We are expanding hospital at home because it is an innovation that works.

The delayed discharge figures will be published tomorrow; Jackie Baillie will understand why I cannot pre-empt what is to be in them.

With regard to the Scottish Ambulance Service, Jackie Baillie is absolutely right that it has faced unprecedented demands on its services. However, in order for her argument to hold water, she has to pretend that ambulance services elsewhere in the United Kingdom have not also faced unprecedented challenges. The critical incidents that were announced in Wales and in various hospital trusts in England point to those pressures

being a shared challenge that has been faced this year because of flu.

I was incredibly heartened by the conversation that I was able to have with Wes Streeting and other health ministers across the four nations just before Christmas about what we need to do on reform and improvement, because I believe that there are shared areas in which we are looking to invest. Those include shifting the balance of care; reducing hospital occupancy; reducing the length of stay in hospitals; and reducing delayed discharge, because that is what is causing our systems to choke, which has meant that our ambulance service staff—to whom, again, I am very grateful—have been struggling to be able to convey patients into hospitals.

I am not absolving myself of responsibility for the situation that is being faced; I am simply trying to point out to Ms Baillie the context, of which I know that she and others across the country will be aware.

The Presiding Officer: I am keen to enable as many members as possible to put questions, so concise questions and responses are required.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Yesterday, I met GPs and the practice manager at the Atrium medical centre in Coatbridge. I was given a demonstration of a typical day at that busy GP practice, and I heard about the pressures that are faced all year, particularly during these difficult winter months.

What support is available for GPs in their role in response to winter pressures? What opportunities will there be for GPs to feed their concerns into Government?

Neil Gray: I thank Fulton MacGregor for his engagement with general practice in his constituency, and I am heartened to hear that that engagement is happening.

I also reiterate the Government's commitment to supporting general practice during this critical time. In answer to Sandesh Gulhane, I referenced the areas where I have seen incredible work by general practitioners over the festive period, for which I am very grateful.

In addition, on 29 November, at the British Medical Association's Scottish local medical committee conference, I announced an additional £13.6 million investment in general practice for this financial year. That funding is aimed at addressing financial pressures, supporting staff costs and enabling practices to recruit and retain key staff. It is a practical response to the challenges that GPs face.

I frequently meet the BMA, and my officials have regular meetings with the Scottish GP committee. Those meetings provide opportunities for GPs not

only to raise their concerns but to discuss the opportunities for reform and improvement, and to shift the balance of care from secondary into primary care.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary talked about ensuring that as many people as possible who are clinically ready to leave hospital can do so, whether they return home or to a care home. However, care home places have been cut by a fifth, and that is felt especially in rural areas, where, at the same time, many cottage hospitals have been closed. Such a reduction in step-down care has a direct impact on delayed discharge, so it is little wonder that there is a strain on hospital admissions.

Neil Gray: One of the key areas in the budget that has been proposed for the next financial year is the £100 million for reform and improvement, which is to support the shifting of the balance of care from secondary care to primary care and to provide greater capacity in social care.

I accept Brian Whittle's premise that we need to ensure that there is capacity in all aspects of our service, to relieve the current pressure.

In response to Jackie Baillie, I narrated that the central pressure that our Ambulance Service colleagues have faced has been the inability to convey patients from the ambulance into accident and emergency departments: our accident and emergency staff are unable to move patients from emergency departments into hospital because patients are not moving on from hospital.

I encourage members to support the budget, so that we continue to see investment in social care, in order that there is capacity to meet the demands of patients across Scotland.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): At the end of last year, constituents of mine—and of colleagues across the chamber—saw at first hand the pressures on A and E services and hospital capacities, when NHS Grampian declared a critical incident. Can the cabinet secretary outline the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that, should that situation occur again in any area of Scotland, staff and members of the public alike are prepared and—which is important—informed of the best course of action to take to access the care that they need?

Neil Gray: I am grateful to Audrey Nicoll for raising that point. The First Minister has chaired meetings with all the representatives whom I mentioned my statement in order to co-ordinate and ensure that there is confidence in the resilience of the system to avoid situation such as the one in NHS Grampian that Audrey Nicoll outlined.

In practice, there has been incredibly strong co-operation among national and regional boards, which have been working closely with the Scottish Ambulance Service to manage the flow of patients through emergency departments across Scotland.

GPs from out-of-hours services have been working in minor injuries departments to help to treat and discharge patients, and the Scottish Ambulance Service's integrated clinical hub, which receives calls that are transferred from NHS 24, has been having its calls reviewed by GPs in the call centre, so that they can advise about self-care, prescribe medication or refer patients to out-of-hours services.

With regard to critical incidents, health boards operate their own escalation policies for management of in-patient capacity. That includes well-established processes, with locally agreed trigger points, for maintaining a safe service and ensuring patient safety. Actions are widely communicated with staff to ensure that they know the appropriate course of action to take to respond to pressures, and boards can, of course, ask the Government for advice as and when it is required.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The cabinet secretary said that services are holding up well this winter, but those words are of little reassurance to many staff and patients, including my constituent who is in his 80s who had an emergency urology problem on new year's day but was told that no urology services would be available at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital until at least the following week. After phoning around, he was advised to attend Glasgow Royal infirmary's A and E department, but no ambulances were available for six hours, so he had to take a taxi. He was admitted and an emergency urologist was called in, but that was after hours of agonising pain, confusion and frustration for my constituent.

What assurance can the cabinet secretary offer to elderly constituents, such as mine, who are understandably frustrated about the lack of provision of specialist services over the Christmas period, when many of them are at their most vulnerable?

Neil Gray: I thank Paul Sweeney for raising the case of his 80-year-old constituent, and I apologise for the situation that he faced. In my statement, I recognised the fact that too many people will have waited too long over the festive period. As I referenced, prioritisation and escalation, through the winter plan, have allowed the system to hold up well in the face of what I believe to be unprecedented levels of flu in the system, compared with recent years.

However, I recognise that too many people will have waited too long. I would be more than happy

to receive more information about the situation that Mr Sweeney's constituent faced and to ask for more information from NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde so that he can have full information about what happened in that situation.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I understand that a record number of NHS 24 call handlers will support the public to access the most appropriate care this winter, as services deal with increased demand. Will the cabinet secretary highlight how effective that has been so far this winter and how the Scottish Government will continue to support that service to ensure that patients receive the right care in the right place at the right time?

Neil Gray: I thank Stuart McMillan for raising that point. As part of the winter plan, we committed to providing NHS 24 with additional staff to support demand over the winter period. That recruitment has been successful, with call handler numbers now at full establishment and additional clinical staff being in post. This winter, a record number of NHS 24 call handlers have been available to direct people to the most appropriate care, and that has helped to reduce the number of unnecessary accident and emergency department attendances. As of September 2024, NHS 24 had in post a total of 1,492.3 whole-time equivalent staff, and the number of staff in post in NHS 24 has increased by 54.5 per cent over the past 10 years.

During my most recent visit to NHS 24, before Christmas, in addition to the direct service that NHS 24 provides, I heard about the work that the breathing space team provides in supporting people who find the festive period to be incredibly challenging from a mental health perspective. I am grateful to all those who have been working across NHS 24 for the work that they have done under the considerable pressure that has resulted from demand across the system.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): In the past few weeks, winter pressures have meant that we have heard several warnings from health boards not to come to A and E departments unless it is an emergency. For many people, the alternative minor injuries unit is not as close as their local A and E department. That includes my constituents in Falkirk, for whom the nearest minor injuries unit is in Stirling. For some people, going to that unit means their passing two hospitals, including an A and E department. For many people, that is just not an option. Has the cabinet secretary assessed what benefit there might be in opening a minor injuries unit in Falkirk to help to relieve pressure, especially during the winter months?

Neil Gray: I thank Gillian Mackay for raising that point. I reiterate the point that I made in my statement about ensuring that people access the

right care in the right place and that they utilise the services that are available through NHS Inform and NHS 24. I hear the point that she has made about minor injuries units. Such a decision would be for NHS Forth Valley to take, and I would be more than happy to facilitate a discussion between it and Gillian Mackay on that potential option.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I echo the words of the cabinet secretary and give thanks to all those who worked over the festive period.

This morning, we learned that only 58.4 per cent of people who attended A and E departments in the last week of December were seen within the four-hour waiting time target. More than 3,000 people waited over eight hours to be seen. That is not just intolerable for the patients and staff in our emergency care departments; it is causing ambulances that are unable to discharge their patients to stack up outside, and it is causing delays to getting emergency care to people in our communities who urgently need it. People are dying as a result. Will the cabinet secretary finally instruct an inquiry into deaths that have been caused by the emergency care crisis?

Neil Gray: I recognise the challenge that exists in the system. As I said in response to Jackie Baillie, Sandesh Gulhane and others, we need to make the investment that is in the proposed budget, which would allow for greater capacity in social care and primary care and thereby avoid people being admitted to hospital in the first place. That would also provide the capacity that would enable our accident and emergency departments to deal with patients and our Scottish Ambulance Service to convey patients.

It is about dealing with hospital occupancy, length of stay and delayed discharge. We have prioritised spending in the budget to enable that to happen. I look forward to members of the Scottish Parliament from all parties supporting the budget so that we can provide for improvement of our services.

I agree with Alex Cole-Hamilton: the situation with regard to our four-hour standard is not good enough. It is not one that I accept and we need to see improvement. That will happen by creating capacity, and that will come through the investment that is set out in the budget.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind members that I am employed as a bank nurse by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

I recognise that there has been increased concern, not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom, about the high level of flu infections in all age groups this winter. Will the cabinet secretary outline what work has been done to encourage

uptake of the flu vaccination and say what the current rate of uptake is?

Neil Gray: I thank Clare Haughey for highlighting a critical area. Again, I encourage anyone who is eligible for a flu vaccination, or who is part of any of the vaccination programmes this winter, to take up the opportunity to be vaccinated.

As of 15 December 2024, we had administered more than 1.2 million adult flu vaccinations and more than 517,000 child flu vaccinations. Uptake in the highest-risk groups, such as people who are living in care homes and those aged 75 and over, remains strong—although it is slightly lower than we achieved in the winter of 2023—with 82 per cent of care home residents and 78 per cent of those aged 75 and over having been vaccinated against flu this winter.

Health boards have been heavily advertising their drop-in clinics, with many citizens accessing vaccination over Christmas and new year. Therefore, we expect the figures to have increased when Public Health Scotland publishes the next round of data later this week.

A range of tailored resources and promotional materials have been prepared by PHS and disseminated through partners, including local NHS boards and the community and voluntary sectors, as well as the Government, to encourage uptake by all who are eligible.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): What is the cabinet secretary's assessment of the availability of flu vaccine and appointments for people under 65 and not within the at-risk groups who want to be vaccinated but have simply been unable to do so?

Neil Gray: We have been working with all health boards to ensure that they are providing ready access to people who are eligible to receive a vaccine and to ensure that barriers to their doing so are removed. I was heartened to hear that many health boards are seeking to provide vaccination clinics for staff, for instance, to increase their access to vaccination.

If Annie Wells has specific examples of where that has been an issue, I would be more than happy to hear about them and to raise the matter with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde—or, indeed, with any other health board where that is perceived to be an issue.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): We know that one of the best ways to reduce the risk of flu and other viruses is for people to take steps to protect themselves. The cabinet secretary has already mentioned uptake of vaccines. I remind members that my previous role was as a clinical educator in NHS Dumfries and Galloway. What further public health messaging will the Scottish

Government utilise to re-emphasise how people can keep themselves safe from flu and other viruses? I am thinking about infection control and prevention measures, as well.

Neil Gray: Again, I refer Emma Harper and colleagues to the work that has been provided by Public Health Scotland, as well as that which is provided by the Government through the right care, right place guidance and the important messaging about people utilising the opportunity to get a vaccination.

That is the right thing to do for oneself in order to avoid critical illness—we heard from Sandesh Gulhane about how serious influenza is—but it is also important for our health and social care services. Social care services in particular have been impacted by staff absences because of flu. That is partly why I encourage anyone who is eligible for vaccination to take every possible step to ensure that they utilise that opportunity before 31 March.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement. There will be a moment or two for members on the front benches to organise themselves for the next item of business.

Child Poverty

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-16003, in the name of John Swinney, on tackling child poverty and inequality through the Scottish budget. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call the First Minister to speak to and move the motion.

15:01

The First Minister (John Swinney): When I became First Minister, I made it abundantly clear that the foremost priority of my Government would be the eradication of child poverty in Scotland. I reiterate that commitment today, at the start of 2025.

There can be no acceptable number of children living in poverty—not in a prosperous, modern society such as ours. Poverty limits a child's opportunity, their health and their wellbeing. Its wider impacts stretch across every aspect of our community and span generations. It shackles our economy and strains our public services. Put bluntly, it holds us all back.

My Government will be relentlessly focused on acting to meet the ambitious targets that were agreed unanimously in Parliament, and I have committed every aspect of my Government to achieving them. Indeed, our action is already making a real difference to the lives of families. Modelling that was published in February estimates that the Government's policies will keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty in 2024-25, with relative poverty levels 10 percentage points lower than they would have been otherwise. That includes keeping an estimated 60,000 children out of relative poverty through investment in our Scottish child payment. That payment is available to families in Scotland only; such a payment is not available in England and Wales. That is a key commitment of, and a key policy delivered by, the Scottish Government.

Child poverty is a deeply entrenched systemic problem, and it continues to affect too many children in Scotland. We must not only sustain our efforts but redouble them, and we must pioneer new and innovative ways of acting to achieve the aims that we have all agreed as a Parliament.

In the programme for government in September and in my November speech on my approach to government, I outlined how I propose to use the powers of Government to tackle the issue. It is not through quick-fix sticking plasters; I favour tackling the root causes of child poverty by working collaboratively within our communities, from the bottom up.

This year's budget makes that approach possible. In it, we commit more than £3 billion to a range of actions to tackle poverty and the cost of living for households. Yesterday, I described it as a budget of "delivery and hope". I said that because it delivers the things that make the biggest difference to people today, and it lays the foundation for a hopeful future in which Scotland can grow and prosper for years to come.

Because family poverty is child poverty, our approach to delivery addresses the issues that have a direct and immediate impact, day in and day out, on families in Scotland. That begins with the essentials: warm, safe homes, good jobs and money in people's pockets.

Next financial year, we will invest £760 million to boost delivery through the affordable housing supply programme. That will support housing providers to deliver at least 8,000 properties for social and mid-market rent and low-cost home ownership. It will help to tackle the housing emergency by supporting immediate actions that will return existing housing stock to use, through addressing voids and increasing acquisitions, and it will ensure that families have secure and affordable homes in which to raise their children. We will also invest an additional £4 million to enable local authorities, front-line services and relevant partners to prepare for the new homelessness prevention duties. Also, because the best and most sustainable route out of poverty is good employment, we are investing up to £90 million in the delivery of devolved employability services. That includes specific funding to continue supporting parents to enter employment and to embed child poverty co-ordinators in local authorities.

We are investing more than £2.6 billion to support public transport and to make our transport system available, affordable and accessible to all, helping to connect parents to employment, training and skills opportunities and the services that they need to navigate their way out of poverty. That includes providing £415 million for concessionary bus travel, which enables access to free bus travel for 2.3 million people across Scotland.

The cornerstone of our support for families, however, is our investment in social security. Many families are struggling with the cost of living, and the budget provides them with immediate support for the day-to-day cost of living. We have made the decision to invest roughly £6.9 billion in benefits expenditure. That is almost £1.3 billion over and above what Scotland receives from the United Kingdom Government for social security, and it includes £644 million in benefits and payments that are available only here in Scotland and are not available in any other part of the UK.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Given the high cost of the benefits bill, how will that be paid for if the Scottish Government cannot produce the economic growth that we so desperately need?

The First Minister: The Government has a fully costed budget, which is available for Parliament to scrutinise and to support in February and which provides for the cost that I am talking about. The benefit of what the Scottish Government is doing with that investment is that we are helping to keep hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty as a consequence. That is an investment in economic growth and the future of our country.

I mentioned the £644 million in benefits and payments that are available only here in Scotland. Our five family payments can be worth more than £10,000 by the time that an eligible child turns six and around £25,000 by the time that an eligible child turns 16. That compares to less than £2,000 for families in England and Wales, where support ends when an eligible child turns four. Last November, Social Security Scotland announced that we have reached the milestone of paying £1 billion to support families through our five family payments. We know from speaking to those families how important that support has been to them.

From April, we will enhance that support by increasing all Scottish social security assistance by 1.7 per cent, which is in line with inflation. Our Scottish child payment will increase to £27.15 per child per week. This coming year, it is forecast to support the families of 333,000 children. In total, our investment in social security is expected to support around 2 million people in 2025-26. I want to underscore—this is my response to Liz Smith—that those payments are an investment and not a cost to be borne. They are an investment in Scotland's people and communities and in its future.

I cannot be alone in expressing my concern about the abrupt new direction that is being set by the Labour leader in Scotland, who suggested yesterday that Labour is now committed to lowering rather than increasing that vital investment in our society. That will consign more children to living in poverty, and it is not the agenda of the Scottish Government.

I said at the start that the Government's budget is one of delivery and hope. With it, we are setting a firm foundation for the success of our society and future generations. In the long term, we will realise the greater return on that investment. We will see it in a robust and resilient wellbeing economy that promotes economic and social equality and that decarbonises our communities.

We must make those investments today, however, if we hope to benefit from them tomorrow. That will work only if all children are supported to have the best start in life. That is why we are prioritising areas such as early years, childcare and education.

With this budget, we are continuing our investment of around £1 billion each year to deliver 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare to all eligible children. We are also providing £9.7 million in additional funding to local authorities to increase to at least the real living wage the pay of early learning and childcare workers delivering funded childcare. The budget includes additional measures to support attainment and to address the poverty-related attainment gap, with additional investment of £41 million for local authorities to protect teacher numbers and to bring the number of teachers in Scotland back to 2023 levels.

We must equip children to be successful once they are in school, so we are investing more to enable the expansion of breakfast clubs across Scotland through our bright start breakfasts fund. That will enable us to deliver thousands of new places for primary school children. We are also expanding free school meals through an investment of £37 million. We will grow the programme to cover those in receipt of the Scottish child payment in primary 6 and 7, helping to provide healthy and nutritious meals to around 25,000 more children.

We are providing a further £14.3 million to support the school clothing grant, increasing that vital support for eligible families to at least £120 for primary school pupils and £150 for secondary school pupils.

All that I have mentioned so far is key to combating child poverty. It is needed, and it is making a tremendous difference every day to children all across Scotland.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): In the First Minister's opening remarks, he talked about the root issues, and one that he correctly identified is good jobs. Good jobs are fuelled by skills, and colleges are one of the key engines of skills in this economy. Why, then, has the Scottish Government cut the amount of resource expended in our college sector over this year and in previous years?

The First Minister: We must ensure that we are able to make the appropriate provision that is necessary for the size and scale of the population that requires to be educated in our colleges. That will vary from year to year, of course, depending on levels of employment within the economy. Crucially, with the budget that we are putting forward, I am confident that we have adequate

resources to support individuals' employability and skills journeys to enable them to move from economic activity into employment, and—for individuals who face challenges from the changes required because of decarbonisation in our economy, for example—to acquire the skills that they require to make progress in our economy.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The First Minister is setting out what is in the draft budget, but he knows from today's announcement that he will get that budget through. I am interested in whether the discussions now stop and in whether the First Minister's door is open, as we have many more ideas that we would like to include in the budget. What is his position now regarding discussion about the budget?

The First Minister: I take nothing for granted about the budget process. The discussions that have been constructively engaged in by the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, the Labour Party, Alba and the Conservatives will continue so as to ensure that there is a parliamentary majority for the budget. I am interested in taking as many members of the Parliament with me as possible in putting in place a unifying budget that will meet the needs of the people of Scotland. The contribution of Mr Rennie and his colleagues will be welcome in that process.

Just for the record, despite what may be said on "Good Morning Scotland", I will wait until I hear from the Presiding Officer that the Budget (Scotland) Bill has been passed at stage 3 before I will rest easy on such questions.

One of the key elements of the Government's budget is about maximising the interventions and actions that we can take to eradicate child poverty. One of the proposals that we have brought forward with determination is to take steps to remove the two-child limit, which has been a pernicious attack on some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Analysis from the Child Poverty Action Group estimates that abolishing the two-child cap in Scotland could lift 15,000 children out of poverty. Everyone in the chamber knows my preferred solution to that challenge: as an independent country, we should be able to take these decisions and have the economic and fiscal levers that other Governments should be exercising to tackle inequalities. However, where those actions are not undertaken, we will do all that we can with the measures that we have in place to address the issue.

In the coming financial year, we will commit £3 million to develop systems to mitigate the two-child cap in 2026. That is alongside other investments that we are making to mitigate United Kingdom Government policies such as the bedroom tax—

policies that should have been removed by a Labour Government but which continue to be a burden. This Government will stand alongside the people who need its support in addressing the impacts of child poverty.

The draft budget for 2025-26 prioritises wide-ranging action to eradicate child poverty now and in the future. It is a statement of our intent to deliver real and lasting progress for the children and families of Scotland. It is a budget of delivery and hope.

To address points that Mr Rennie has just put to me, I note that I am acutely aware that the Government operates in a minority position. However, the whole Parliament has supported legislation that puts in place targets to significantly reduce child poverty. We need to reach parliamentary agreement to enable us to make progress on those objectives and legislative requirements. I invite members of the Parliament, regardless of their politics and views on other questions, to recognise that at the heart of the budget is the most ambitious set of measures that we can put in place to eradicate child poverty with the resources that are available to us. If we are all going to be true to our commitment in legislation to eradicate child poverty, I invite members of the Parliament in all political parties to support the budget and to do everything that we can to eradicate child poverty.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the investments outlined in the draft Scottish Budget for 2025-26 that focus on eradicating child poverty as a national mission and the single greatest priority for the Scottish Government, including continued investment in key policies such as funded early learning and childcare, concessionary travel for those under 22, employability services and social security; further notes increased investment in the Affordable Housing Supply Programme and investment in breakfast clubs and to support the expansion of free school meals; recognises that the Scottish Government's efforts to tackle child poverty are being undermined by the social security policies of the UK Government; welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to spend £3 million to develop the systems to deliver the mitigation of the two-child cap in 2026; acknowledges analysis from the Child Poverty Action Group estimating that abolishing the two-child limit could lift 15,000 children in Scotland out of poverty; recognises that the measures in the draft Scottish Budget 2025-26 will help to drive progress towards this national mission, and calls on the UK Government to match the ambition of the Scottish Government and abolish the two-child limit and benefit cap at the earliest possible opportunity.

15:17

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): Everyone here wants to reduce and, we hope, eradicate child poverty. What we are debating is how best to achieve that, which is where we differ. John Swinney and Anas Sarwar, who is not in the chamber today, believe in the big state approach:

high taxes, central control, rules and regulations, layers of bureaucracy and spending ever more taxpayers' money. The trouble is that that approach has been tried and it has failed. It has been the Scottish National Party's approach for 18 years and, before that, it was Labour's.

The old left-wing approach has not worked. Poverty has not been reduced, our economy has not grown stronger, people do not feel better off, prosperity has not been spread across the country and opportunities to get ahead remain far too limited. The old approach of the SNP and Labour too often managed only to keep people stuck in poverty.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Is Russell Findlay genuinely trying to get the rest of the chamber to agree that he, as an ardent supporter of Liz Truss, should be trusted on how to support and grow the economy and lift people out of poverty? Is he genuinely asking us to take him seriously on that point?

Russell Findlay: Paul O'Kane should know better. Liz Truss was in power for 50 days. This lot have been in power for 18 years. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome. That is why my party believes that a different approach—

The First Minister: Will Russell Findlay take an intervention?

Russell Findlay: I will—yes.

The First Minister: If Mr Findlay will not address the Liz Truss issue, will he say whether he considers that the agenda of austerity that was pursued consistently from 2010 to 2024 by the Conservative Government helped or hindered the battle against poverty?

Russell Findlay: John Swinney has squandered countless millions, if not billions, of pounds through his absolute incompetence. That is why my party believes that a different way is not only possible but necessary for Scotland. We believe that the way to tackle poverty is with a hand up, not a hand out. The safety net of social security is essential, but it should help people back on to their feet and not keep them trapped in benefits.

We believe that the fundamental starting point in tackling poverty is through provision of a good education. Education opens the door to opportunity and is the gateway to well-paid employment and a better life of prosperity. Under this Government, Scotland's once world-leading education system is failing.

In Scotland today, too little value is placed on aspiration, ambition and success. Those who create jobs and wealth are treated with disdain and sometimes even with hostility. We must create

the right environment: one of universal good education, opportunity for all and the championing of aspiration. We believe in giving people the tools and platform to succeed by their own efforts. I believe that the smart, creative and industrious people of Scotland are capable of that, if given the opportunity.

John Swinney, Anas Sarwar and the left-wing parties at Holyrood do not seem to share my faith. Too often, their answer is to throw yet more money at the problem in the hope that it will all go away. They seek to take control of people's lives and to take ever more of people's hard-earned wages to squander on ineffective governance. The SNP and Labour hold the mistaken belief that Holyrood knows best. They do not seem to realise how little difference the Scottish Parliament has made to people's lives and do not appear to grasp that their ideology has held back—not helped—the people of Scotland.

Take the criminal justice system. Under-25s are told that they are unlikely to be sent to prison. According to Police Scotland, that results in some young people, especially in areas of deprivation, being lured into a life of crime. Detective Superintendent Andy Patrick said:

"Organised crime groups are exploiting this policy. They are coercing young and vulnerable people to carry out some of these crimes because they're under reduced risk of imprisonment."

It is no wonder that so many people across the country have concluded that Scotland's political establishment just does not get it. People have lost faith in politicians and lost trust in politics. They feel that no one represents them any more and that nothing will change, because those inside Holyrood rarely deliver what they promise.

Today, John Swinney tells us yet again that he wants to eradicate child poverty. That is a bold and ambitious goal, but he has been making such promises for almost two decades. He was the education secretary who promised to close the poverty-related attainment gap between the richest and poorest pupils, but he did not keep that promise and the attainment gap is as wide as ever. Today, he vows to eradicate child poverty, but that is also a promise that he will not keep. Just as he did not close the attainment gap, he will not eradicate child poverty.

Yesterday, John Swinney spoke of his Government's budget being "a turning point". He has been in power for 18 years but is only now at a turning point. Is he turning away from all his years of failure or is he trying to turn away from the SNP's pitiful record on education, opportunity and the economy? The 18 years of SNP rule have got Scotland into this state and driven people to lose faith in Parliament's ability to get things done.

Anas Sarwar is not much better. He spoke yesterday of setting a new direction, but his party already promised to change and then broke its promises not to raise taxes. Raising national insurance is not a new direction—it is crippling businesses, many of which are struggling to survive. When those businesses go under, people will lose their jobs. That is more of the same old approach that has failed Scotland for decades. Labour's supposedly new direction looks exactly the same as the past 18 years of SNP rule. Labour members mostly nod along with everything that the SNP does with social security, just as they backed Nicola Sturgeon's dangerous gender self-identification law and Humza Yousaf's hate crime act. They are really only offering more of the same.

Holyrood must do things differently. Instead of focusing on inputs, we must focus on outcomes. Rather than throwing money at problems, we must better spend what this Parliament takes from taxpayers and we must take less of it so that people can decide what is best for themselves, their families and their communities.

People in the real world want politicians to show some common sense for a change—common sense on education, by making our schools safe and giving pupils the space to thrive; common sense on the economy, so that we can encourage business growth to create more jobs; and common sense on social security, so that the safety net is there while we ensure that work always pays.

That is what my party represents—a different approach and a bolder one than is taken by the SNP or Labour. We will not make promises that we cannot keep, unlike John Swinney, and we will not offer change and then do more of the same, unlike Anas Sarwar. We will tell it straight, keep our word, say what we mean and deliver on what we promise. We will proudly champion the values of mainstream Scotland: decency, aspiration, fairness and opportunity. We will offer a Scottish Conservative way to reduce poverty by reducing regulations and bureaucracy in business, so that it can create more jobs; by taking less in tax, so that people have more control over their lives and have the means to get ahead; and by strengthening our education system, with a strict focus on higher standards. That is the change that my party stands for and it is the different way that Scotland so desperately needs.

I move amendment S6M-16003.4, to leave out from “the investments” to end and insert:

“that the Scottish Government has failed to reduce child poverty during 17 years of Scottish National Party administration; recognises that the poverty-related attainment gap between the most and least deprived pupils has grown according to the most recent statistics and that the Scottish Government will fail to meet its previously stated target of closing that attainment gap by 2026;

acknowledges that Scottish Government policies, which seek to take a more lenient approach to young offenders, have contributed to vulnerable young people in deprived communities being targeted by organised gangs to carry out criminality; believes that the draft Scottish Budget 2025-26 will continue to harm Scotland's economic growth, which is desperately needed if the country is to tackle child poverty, and calls on the Scottish Government to rethink the draft 2025-26 Scottish Budget by providing workers and businesses across Scotland with a tax cut that will help induce the economic growth that Scotland needs.”

15:26

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Deputy Presiding Officer, I take this opportunity to wish you and colleagues across the chamber a happy new year.

I begin, as I always do in such debates, by stating again that tackling child poverty should be a priority across the chamber and in all spheres of government and that we should take an approach to tackling child poverty that has consensus—*[Interruption.]*

I am being heckled from the Government front bench when I am trying to speak about consensus. It may help if the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture listens to the point, because consensus is important and it is also the spirit in which the First Minister began his speech.

Tackling child poverty is a vital mission, and many of us agree and expect that all children, no matter their background, should have security, stability and opportunity as they are growing up. Many of us in this Parliament aspire to that and want to find a renewed constructive partnership to work towards it. I welcome, as I have done previously, the continued new, constructive relationship between the UK and Scottish Governments and local government on the issue. It is important that we put that on the record and call for it to continue.

We may be at the start of a new year, but this is not a new challenge or a new debate.

The First Minister: I am anxious to engage with Mr O’Kane on the question of agreement across the parliamentary spectrum. One of the points that I made in my speech is that Parliament has agreed on and legislated for child poverty targets, and we all believe that it is important to achieve them. Does Mr O’Kane recognise and accept that there is an obligation on all members of Parliament, whether their parties are in government or in opposition, to contribute constructively to assist Parliament to achieve the objectives that Parliament has legislated for, almost considering them as not the property of the Government but the property of us all, as members of Parliament?

Paul O’Kane: Of course it is the Parliament’s responsibility to hold the targets in our hands. It was agreed across the chamber—prior to my being here—that they should be put into law, so it is important that we all work to deliver them. I will say more on the targets and my concern about the Government’s leadership on them, given that the Government has the tools, the powers and the levers to drive much of that, as I progress in my speech.

The First Minister: Will Mr O’Kane take an intervention?

Paul O’Kane: If Mr Swinney allows me to make a little progress, I will allow him back in.

The point that I was moving on to make is about the length of time that we have spent looking at the issues. The Government has set its motion in the context of the budget. For many months, the First Minister and his front bench sought to project the budget as though it was the first budget of a new Government. However, in 2025, we enter the 18th year of the SNP Government being in power. Indeed, the current First Minister started passing budgets when I had not long left secondary school. He has had those wide-ranging levers of power for almost two decades, including as finance secretary, as education secretary and as Deputy First Minister before he came to the office that he now holds.

We must consider that, despite the three First Ministers in my short time in this Parliament and four across the SNP’s almost 20 years in Government all stating that child poverty is the top priority, the most recent estimates show that 30,000 more children are in poverty now compared with when the SNP came to power in 2007.

On the First Minister’s point about the legally binding targets, alarm bells are ringing with regard to where he has had the power to make changes. Indeed, in its report last year, the Poverty and Inequality Commission said that progress has been

“slow or not evident at all”

and it predicted that it is now

“improbable”

that those legally binding child poverty targets will be met.

We must reflect on that, because we are almost at the 20-year mark of the SNP having the levers that I spoke about. We have to be honest: one budget is not going to provide the change of approach and direction that is required to meet the scale of the challenge before us.

I put on record Scottish Labour’s pride in and clear support for the UK Labour Government’s

ending the era of austerity and ensuring that there is additional money coming to the Scottish Government. The investment of £5 billion into the Scottish Government’s budget is vitally important and should be recognised. I am disappointed that the Scottish Government did not see fit to recognise that in its motion.

There have also been other welcome down payments on tackling child poverty at a UK level, which I will speak about after I have taken an intervention from the First Minister.

The First Minister: I am grateful to Mr O’Kane for giving way for a second time. I point out to him that we will only have 20 years of an SNP Government if we win the 2026 election, which I fully intend to do.

On a point of consensus, I welcome that we are in an improved position on the public finances because of UK Government decisions. I accept that point, but does Mr O’Kane not have to accept that the madness of 14 years of austerity, which essentially reversed the very good work that was done by the previous Labour Government in reducing child poverty, has contributed to making our challenge a great deal harder?

Paul O’Kane: First, I say to the First Minister that it feels longer—like 30 years, perhaps—that the SNP has been in power. Perhaps I should have paid more attention in the maths classes that I attended as he was setting out his first budgets.

On his substantive point about Tory austerity in those 14 years, I campaigned against that ardently. I did not want the Conservative Government to be elected, and I did not want Russell Findlay’s support of Liz Truss and others over that 14-year period to be brought up here today and lectured about as though it was some kind of triumph.

However, it is clear that work to fix the foundations and make a change has begun and will continue under the Labour Government.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Paul O’Kane: I will, in a moment.

I was coming on to speak about the down payments that have been made to tackle those issues at the UK level: the raising of the minimum wage, the introduction of the biggest upgrade of workers’ rights in a generation, and the change to the debt repayment levels for people who are on benefits, which will ensure that those who are struggling with debt keep more universal credit payments and is part of the wider work of the UK child poverty task force and the strategy across Government. I hope that all those interventions are supported by the First Minister and the Government. As I have said, I am disappointed

that there is no cognisance of them in the Government's motion.

I give way to Stephen Kerr.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Be brief, Mr Kerr, please.

Stephen Kerr: Does Paul O'Kane accept that many economists—in fact, the majority of economists—predict that, because of the national insurance increases that are being brought about by Rachel Reeves, there will be increased business failure and rising unemployment? How on earth does that help with any aspect of poverty—least of all, child poverty?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr O'Kane, please start to bring your remarks to a close.

Paul O'Kane: I will, Presiding Officer.

Given that, clearly, Russell Findlay has some kind of idea that we, on this side of the chamber, should all be listening to about how to reduce child poverty, deal with the issues and invest in public services, perhaps Stephen Kerr and colleagues might tell us how they would pay for and support public services, because they did not do so as they drove them into the ground during their 14 years.

Presiding Officer, I am very conscious now that I have taken a number of interventions, and I will bring my remarks to a peroration. It is clear that we need to take action across our public services in order to reduce child poverty. It is clear that health, education and housing are all issues in which the Scottish Government has, after all that time in Government, failed to make the substantive changes that are required to tackle the root causes of poverty. It is clear that we must take a rounded view of poverty in all its facets.

It cannot be for just the social security system to support people. It has to be about good work, well-paid jobs, support to get into work, a national health service that is there when people need it, and the family support that people require through social work and other council services. All those things are important, and they need to be backed up by a strong social security system that is there when people need it.

One budget will not make the difference—that is clear—and the opportunity to take a new direction on those issues has not been and will not be taken by this Government. Only a new Government in 2026 can provide that.

I move amendment S6M-16003.3, to leave out from first "notes" to end and insert:

"agrees that child poverty should be a national mission for the Scottish Government and more widely across the Parliament, but deeply regrets that, after almost 18 years of a Scottish National Party (SNP) administration, there are

30,000 more children in poverty; acknowledges that child poverty rates across the UK have risen under the economic mismanagement of the previous UK Conservative administration; recognises that Scotland has its own legally binding child poverty reduction targets, which the SNP administration is likely to miss, despite successive First Ministers declaring action on child poverty to be a priority; acknowledges an additional £5 billion of investment in Scotland as a result of the UK Labour administration's Budget; regrets that the SNP administration has had to use its draft Budget for 2025-26 to correct many of the mistakes that it made in its Budget for 2024-25; is deeply concerned by the Scottish Government's decision to cut measures that act as barriers to poverty; agrees that there is a need to take a multi-faceted approach, and therefore welcomes the work of the UK Labour administration to strengthen workers' rights, review universal credit, build a fairer social security system, and deliver a pay rise for 200,000 of the lowest-paid people in Scotland with a genuine living wage; welcomes the establishment of a cross-government Child Poverty Ministerial Taskforce by the UK Government; encourages the Scottish Government to work collaboratively to tackle the root causes of poverty across Scotland, and recognises that, to end poverty, action needs to be taken to get the economy moving, to get public services working, and to create more, decent well-paid jobs."

15:35

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The Scottish Government's motion describes child poverty as its "single greatest priority" and as a "national mission". All political parties agree that it should be such a mission, but it is completely legitimate to debate, as do the amendments, whether the Government's actions match the rhetoric, and every political party has a choice in how we take part in that debate. Do we really advance that debate purely by making party political points? We all do that, and there is nothing wrong with making party political points in a debate like this, but solely doing that, without also offering positive, constructive ideas of our own, does not advance the debate, move it forward or achieve change in the real world.

Whether in budget debates or at any other time, Greens have always sought to make a difference for people in the real world. Far too many others appear to have no interest in doing that. Some seem to have little interest in reality. The Conservatives' dismissal of pretty much everything that the Government is doing was bizarre enough, but their leader's suggestion that the one thing that was wrong with Liz Truss was that she was not in power longer seemed even more bizarre. There was also their failure to recognise the UK Government's track record—the impact of tax giveaways to high earners and a brutal approach to social security—as well as the familiar ideological debate that we have had before, and will have again, on growth.

The record of even just this country's economy is that there have been periods of high economic

growth while whole communities have been put on the economic scrap heap. Economic growth on its own, without sustained and serious state intervention to ensure redistribution, does not create a trickle-down economy; it creates a Hoover-up economy, empowering the wealthiest to further exploit the work of those on lower incomes.

Labour, on the other hand, seems determined, in the early stages of its term in UK Government, to disappoint. I will give credit where it is due: I really welcome the action that has been promised on the minimum wage, especially if Labour follows through on the commitment to abolish the discriminatory age bans. That will be a significant step. I give credit where it is due—but Labour does not seem willing to do the same. Anas Sarwar's comments yesterday were dismissive of the Scottish child payment, saying that

“we have this pretence in Scotland that somehow welfare is the only route out of poverty”

and that the Scottish Government

“wants to pretend that one single benefit or payment has the answer.”

Neither I, nor anti-poverty organisations, nor the Scottish Government, have ever claimed that it was the answer, but it is the single most effective intervention from either Government in recent years. If Labour was willing to learn from what has worked, it would be copying that policy throughout the rest of the UK, not undermining it here. If the Labour UK Government had that ambition but, for party political reasons, did not want to copy what the SNP had done, it would at least reverse the worst Tory decisions, such as the two-child limit, but it will not. If Scottish Labour had that ambition, it would use the budget process to negotiate for positive, constructive change, but it does not do that either. It also refuses to back progressive tax changes, which can very easily begin to redistribute wealth from the richest to the rest.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): In relation to the policy decisions that have been made by Labour, I note the fact that a handful of Labour MSPs are in the chamber for this debate about eradicating child poverty. I would like to think that their colleagues are maybe down at Westminster, trying to mitigate and remove the bedroom tax, the benefit cap and the brutal cut to the winter fuel payment, as well as the national insurance payments that have been increased.

Patrick Harvie: I have sympathy for some of what the member says, but that intervention might be more appropriate on a Labour member's speech than on mine.

I want to address the fact that the wider life circumstances that people face are hugely important, whether they be in health, education or skills, and in the inequalities there. Those are both

the causes and the consequences of poverty. Putting more money into the pockets of people who need it is and always will be a vital part of the response to poverty and inequality. There is nothing to be embarrassed about in saying so. The political right is never embarrassed about demanding tax breaks for the wealthiest in order to put more money into their pockets. Progressives should never be embarrassed about the positive role that social security has to play in putting money into the pockets of those who need it. Cutting the costs that people face in their lives is another critical intervention. Progressive taxation is needed to pay for both forms of action.

The Scottish Government's motion could be criticised for being a wee bit self-congratulatory, but, frankly, every Government does that—I might even have done it once or twice myself in the past few years. There is nothing surprising there. However, Parliament and the parties represented in it should criticise policies by advancing positive ideas, and that is the Greens' track record. There is now more progressive taxation in this country; the Scottish child payment has been increased; there is free bus travel for young people; peak rail fares were scrapped, at least for as long as that scheme lasted; school meal debt has been abolished, which has cut the cost of the school day; there has been investment in energy efficiency; and we have seen an emergency rent freeze. That is our positive track record of action. Our current proposals aim to keep the critical elements of the Housing (Scotland) Bill so that we do not continue to impose above-inflation rent increases even in circumstances that justify the maximum action. We are also pressing ahead with the proposed heat in buildings bill. If we get that right, it will cut not only emissions but people's energy bills and so cut costs for households.

On the budget that we face in the weeks ahead, the Government knows that we are pressing as hard as we can for capping bus fares at £2, to cut costs for people getting about in their daily lives, and for accelerating the roll-out of free school meals. I wish to goodness that Labour colleagues were negotiating hard for such positive changes, or their own priorities, in the budget process. They seem determined only to come up with yet another new way to achieve nothing out of that process.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Harvie, please bring your remarks to a close.

Patrick Harvie: Those are simple, affordable, straightforward areas where action could be taken right now to cut the cost of living, tackle child and family poverty and ensure better health and wellbeing for people who, today, struggle to meet those costs.

15:42

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): It breaks me every time that I see symptoms of the fact that a child is living in poverty. Many of us will have seen those when we do our weekly door knocking or advice surgeries: a cold, damp home; clear signs of hunger and desperation; the fact that such children are deprived of the opportunities that others are afforded quite easily; drug or alcohol misuse, which disrupts families and causes enormous damage; and signs of poor health in young people that last for the rest of their lives.

That is why the issue of child poverty is really important. It is not so much a political issue as one of human rights and child rights. There has been consensus on that all the way from the beginning of the Parliament. Back in 1999, Wendy Alexander set an ambition to defeat child poverty within a generation. In 2017, the Scottish Government set a legally binding target of bringing down the level to 10 per cent by 2030. It is due to our collective failure that, over those 25 years, although there have been fluctuations, the level of child poverty is broadly the same as it was when we started that programme.

Of course, over time, the level has changed because of a variety of factors. From the recession to financial restrictions, and from the pandemic to the energy crisis, we can point to a whole load of reasons that have influenced it. A variety of approaches have followed from the political persuasions of those in Government, whether here or at Westminster—the Liberal Democrats and Labour, from that time, or the Conservatives, Lib Dems and the SNP. There have been fluctuations because of all those factors.

However, we have a collective responsibility to accept that we have not really nudged the dial that much. The targets are breathing down our necks. We are supposed to be meeting the interim target now, but we are nowhere near getting it down to 18 per cent. Of course, with the child payment, we have made some progress, but we are supposed to bring it down to 10 per cent by 2030 and it is around the mid-20s just now. We have a huge way to go and my fear is that we are not really focusing on long-term, lasting solutions. I am supportive of the child payment—do not get me wrong about that. It is important that we see a direct impact today on children when we go around our constituencies. I do not want children to wait a day longer in poverty. However, if that impact is going to last and it is not just a sticking plaster, we have to deal with the root causes.

To be fair, the First Minister set out in his speech that we need to address a much wider range of issues, which I will come to in a second. However, my fear is that sometimes in this Parliament we celebrate the child payment as if it

is the end of the process. I know that that is not what the First Minister believes but I am afraid that too many in this place just talk about the game-changing child payment and then do not go on to the rest of it. That payment should be the bridge to the further changes that we require to make sure that we are not back here in another 10 years or 20 years. We need to deal with the root causes.

The First Minister: I agree entirely with Mr Rennie's point that the Scottish child payment contributes, but it is not the whole story. The whole story has to be about the alignment of Government policy to support those objectives. That is why one of the other priorities in the Government's budget has been to put in place a real-terms increase in the local government core grant to enable local authorities to strengthen the services upon which many of the individuals that Mr Rennie refers to would depend to help them on their journey out of poverty, in addition to the other measures that I mentioned in my speech. I give him that reassurance that that point is accepted and is at the heart of the Government's approach to the child poverty strategy.

Willie Rennie: I am grateful to the First Minister for that. I will talk about some of those issues, because it is important to air them.

My concern is that the Government seems to think that it has made progress on the poverty-related attainment gap, but, when I look at the figures, they have broadly flatlined. There is some improvement at primary level; at secondary level, it is broadly the same as before. The Government is nowhere near closing the gap by 2026—nowhere near it—and we have to accept that.

I know that the Government will argue that the target was to substantially close the gap rather than completely close it, but we are nowhere near meeting the clear ambition to close the poverty-related attainment gap that Nicola Sturgeon set out. Before, education was the centrepiece of the Government agenda. We need to accept that it has slipped and the Government needs to refocus. Take nursery education for two-year-olds, which is something that I used to plague the former First Minister, Alex Salmond, about repeatedly—almost weekly. The take-up of that opportunity is minuscule. We know that there are variations between one local authority and another but we are nowhere near getting it up to the levels that they have got to in England. Why is that? I believe that education is a route out of poverty, particularly for two-year-olds, before habits can be formed, when we can give them a good education to lift them up for the future. We need to make sure that the take-up rate increases.

I am running out of time. On the topic of health, mental health and physical health issues prevent people from getting back to work. The level of

economic inactivity in Scotland is way too high—much higher than it is in England. Why is that? Why have we got that gap and what are we going to do to close it?

On building more homes, the previous Government policy—although there is an indication that the Government is changing that policy—contributed to the emergency housing situation that we have now. I am pleased that we are seeing some signs of change in that so that we can get more warm homes for those children to make sure that they are living in better conditions.

My final point is about my intervention earlier. My party and I have a lot more ideas about things to include in the budget to deal with many of these fundamental issues. The routes out of poverty lie in the foundations of the economy, the health service and the education service. That is the way that we need to deal with the issue in the longer term, for future generations, and I am pleased that the First Minister's door is open so that we can have those discussions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise members, for their information, that speeches from back-bench members should be up to six minutes, except for SNP back benchers, who will be able to speak for up to four minutes. I advise members that there is no time in hand.

I advise the First Minister that that was decided with the agreement of the party's business manager and the Presiding Officer—a point of clarification that will, I am sure, be of interest to all members in the chamber.

15:50

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I take the opportunity to wish you, Deputy Presiding Officer, and everyone at the Parliament a very healthy and happy new year.

I speak in support of measures in the draft budget to tackle child poverty and inequality. Eradicating child poverty is not just the morally right thing to do; in the years that follow, it will be paid back in increased wealth generation from a greater number of skilled and creative young workers, and in savings across public services, from health to policing, given that there are long-term costs to public services associated with child poverty. Children in poverty are more likely to have poorer health outcomes, and children in the lowest-income households are four times more likely to experience mental health issues. It is right, therefore, that we step up to meet the challenge of eradicating child poverty.

Despite its restricted powers, the Scottish Government has kept thousands of children out of

poverty by taking considered and significant action, yet we recognise that rates remain too high and that there is a real child and family behind every number. The Scottish Government has, therefore, set out a budget with clear action to tackle child poverty and inequality. In education, the budget will provide £120 million to headteachers to support initiatives that are designed to address the poverty-related attainment gap. The Scottish Government will also work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to expand free school meals to primary 6 and 7 children from low-income families.

The budget will also invest significantly in social security benefits in 2025-26, putting money directly into people's pockets and ensuring that benefits rise by inflation. As the First Minister put it,

"Some argue that investment in social security is the wrong choice for us to make. But we know that inequality is bad for our health, bad for our communities and bad for our economy".

That contrasts with the views of Labour and Tory politicians, who apparently believe that providing such vital support amounts to giving handouts. Such stigmatising language has no place in the Parliament or as part of a modern and compassionate social security system. Scrapping the two-child cap; increasing investment in the affordable housing supply programme; investment in breakfast clubs; and the expansion of free school meals will all help to tackle child poverty. Those policies are good for everyone. The Scottish Government's decision to scrap the two-child cap—an inhumane and cruel policy—has been welcomed by many, including the Fraser of Allander Institute and the Poverty Alliance, and CPAG estimates that abolishing the two-child limit could lift 15,000 children out of poverty.

The Opposition lacks credibility, criticising levels of child poverty while supporting keeping in place the policies that are the biggest drivers of it. To continue with those policies makes children the victims of austerity. In their book "Social Murder? Austerity and Life Expectancy in the UK", David Walsh and Gerry McCartney of the University of Strathclyde show the astonishing impact that UK Government austerity has had on life expectancy and mortality rates. On Labour and the two-child limit, they say:

"worryingly, the Party has publicly stated that they will not reverse the two-child benefits cap ... —a policy seen in many ways as emblematic of austerity".

It is clear that Labour is letting the people of Scotland down. Labour in Scotland has no influence, as Labour HQ is not listening one bit to the Labour colleagues who are sitting opposite me in the chamber, not on the two-child policy, not on universal credit, not on the winter fuel payment

and certainly not on the WASPI women—women against state pension inequality.

The spectacle of Anas Sarwar's disingenuous belated call on the Scottish Government to mitigate his own party's two-child policy illustrates that so well. Maybe Labour's plan to abstain on the budget shows that it is struggling to articulate a vision for Scotland.

The draft budget is a chance for Labour—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): You need to conclude.

Marie McNair: —to take a new direction, and I urge Labour members to get behind it. Being in poverty makes everything more difficult, and everything good less likely. This budget—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to—

Marie McNair: —looks forward with hope to a future—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You do need to conclude. I am going to have to call the next speaker.

Marie McNair: —in which we end child poverty in Scotland.

15:54

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Paul O'Kane started by saying that he felt that he had been listening to the First Minister since he was in secondary school. To be quite frank, I feel that I have been listening to him since primary school.

I wish members a happy new year and I thank the organisations that provided useful briefings ahead of today's debate.

In the time that I have today, I will highlight three areas where opportunities to tackle child poverty are being missed. I hope to bring positive solutions to the chamber this afternoon.

The first area is child literacy levels. One in four Scottish pupils are still not achieving the literacy levels that are expected at their age. The post-pandemic levels of literacy are still a major concern, so it is clear that we need a change in approach. That figure does not take into account the record levels of absenteeism in Scottish schools.

Although there have been marginal improvements in trends, it is concerning that programme for international student assessment—PISA—data analysis suggests a decline in education performance, especially in maths and sciences.

What can we do to address child literacy rates? I have spoken to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills about the fact that we need a

renewed focus on reading within the curriculum for excellence. One in 10 children in our country do not have access to books at home. That has to change, and that is why I have been impressed with the Little Free Library movement that has been building in recent years, and by the free libraries for children that have started to pop up outside schools in Edinburgh, such as the one outside Craiglockhart primary school. There is an opportunity to provide young people, regardless of their background, with access to free books. I hope that we can engage with ministers to see how that work can be taken forward and developed across the country, so that we can provide free books across the country and outside every primary school.

As other members have already mentioned today, there remains an issue with regard to the free school meals policy. In its briefing for the debate, Barnardo's stated that it has not had clarification on the delivery of universal free school meals. I hope that the cabinet secretary, in her closing speech, will outline to Parliament when that policy will be delivered and whether it will be delivered by the end of this parliamentary session.

I have consistently raised the issue of children being stuck in temporary accommodation because of the homelessness crisis in the capital. Over Christmas recess, those of us who represent Edinburgh have seen how live and challenging that issue remains. If ending child poverty is genuinely a cross-Government priority, housing needs to be placed at the heart of that. The number of children living in temporary accommodation has reached more than 16,000. The First Minister listed a number of housing policies in his speech, and I welcome them. However, we need to look towards a presumption against placing families with children in temporary accommodation, because many temporary accommodation facilities are inappropriate. I have raised the issue previously with the Minister for Housing, and I hope that, with COSLA, ministers will look towards amendments around that issue. It is clear that, for many children, being placed in temporary accommodation is the end of their journey to a safe home. We need to make sure that that changes, and I hope that the Government will look towards lodging an amendment to the Housing (Scotland) Bill on that issue.

The final issue that I will raise with ministers is access to healthcare. The First Minister did not mention it in his speech, but Willie Rennie touched on it. That is really important, because it is not always the main issue that springs to mind when we are debating child poverty. However, post-pandemic, access to healthcare for children is an issue that is becoming more and more concerning, because there are poor outcomes similar to those that we are seeing for adults.

Last March, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health published its report “Worried and waiting: A review of paediatric waiting times in Scotland 2024”. It demonstrated deeply concerning increases in waiting times for children who are accessing care. The percentage of children in Scotland who are waiting more than 12 weeks for medical care increased by 49.8 per cent, and the total number of paediatric waits currently sits at 10,512, which is a 114 per cent increase. The time that children are waiting to access healthcare needs to be reviewed, and we need the health secretary to come to Parliament to make a statement specifically on that issue.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has put forward a number of key suggestions and recommendations, which I think can be taken forward by Government. I hope and ask that ministers review the current waiting times scandal.

I believe that there is still cross-party consensus on working towards eradicating child poverty in Scotland. However, as Russell Findlay stated, over the past 18 years, SNP ministers have been good at creating processes. Our education system, housing sector and health services are full of them. Ministers have not been good at delivering on outcomes, so we need the Parliament to focus on those outcomes. The Scottish Government is not making the progress that it promised. Indeed, the situation for young people in education, health and housing is often getting worse for the most vulnerable children in our society.

I support the amendment in the name of my colleague Russell Findlay.

16:00

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Happy new year to you, Presiding Officer, and to members across the chamber.

The Scottish budget is redistributive—unashamedly so. It will deliver reduced taxation for more than half of Scots, with lower-earning taxpayers paying 2 per cent less of their income in tax than folk south of the border. By reducing the burden of taxation on the many, the budget will put more money in the pockets of ordinary Scots so that they can support themselves, their families and, especially, their children.

However, progressive taxation is not enough, so the budget also delivers progressive spending. The Scottish child payment is a key policy that will be supported by the budget. The payment has been a game changer in reducing child poverty, and its continued support will provide much-needed financial assistance to families.

However, the Scottish child payment is not enough by itself. One of the biggest drivers of child poverty in the UK is the UK Government’s two-child cap. Ending that despicable UK policy in Scotland is a major part of the budget, and its removal could lift more than 15,000 children out of poverty. By taking that first step, we are sending a clear message that every child in Scotland deserves a fair start in life.

The Government is also prioritising early learning and childcare, with almost £1 billion being invested to ensure that all staff in the sector are paid at least the real living wage. That investment will support the provision of 1,140 hours of affordable high-quality early learning and childcare to all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds. That will give our children the best possible start in life while allowing parents to re-enter the workforce, build their careers and improve their children’s lives.

However, the support does not end there. The Government is investing in the future of our nation by investing in the education of our children. The budget will deliver a 3 per cent uplift in spending on education and skills to maintain teacher levels and invest in school infrastructure. That includes £120 million for headteachers to support initiatives that are designed to address the poverty-related attainment gap, because we know that education is one of the keys to breaking the cycle of poverty.

The budget includes plans to expand free school meals to primary 6 and 7 children from low-income families, which will ensure that all children have access to nutritious meals. What is more, there is also funding for the new bright start breakfasts programme, which will deliver more breakfast clubs in primary schools. I know from my past in local government, when we introduced breakfast clubs in Aberdeen at an early stage, the difference that that makes to a child’s ability to learn, because hungry children find it difficult to learn in classrooms. The policy will help to ensure that no child starts the day hungry.

However, it is not just education. Housing is another critical area that is addressed in the budget, and I am glad that £768 million will be provided to boost Scotland’s affordable housing programme.

Given the news in the budget and the measures that I have outlined that will help to tackle child poverty, I call on everyone in the chamber—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Kevin Stewart: —to put party politics aside and to support the budget.

16:04

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): It is my view and my party's view that the overarching priority of the Scottish Parliament should be to tackle, reduce and eradicate child poverty. Child poverty is a huge challenge that our country faces. It limits the opportunities of children in every town and deepens the inequalities that already exist in our society from the second that a child is born.

It should shame us all that child poverty remains as prevalent as it is in our country today. Week in, week out, we discuss the modern, inclusive and progressive Scotland that we think exists, so it is shocking that, in reality, according to some of the most recent estimates, hundreds of thousands of children in Scotland grow up in poverty.

The End Child Poverty coalition briefing indicates that,

"In the period 2020 to 2023, 1 in 4 children in Scotland were growing up in poverty."

I have made it clear before, and I make it clear once again, that I deplore the previous Tory Government's attack on working-class people. The Tories are the friends of the rich and show no interest in redistributing wealth to those most in need. The approach that Tory Governments have taken is to benefit those with the most wealth and power. In response to Russell Findlay's points, I say that the Tories do not seek to change inequality. In fact, they embed it within our society, to ensure that change never comes to those who are most in need.

After 14 years in Government, the Tories must accept their part in the poverty that is felt by our constituents today. I fully agree with the First Minister's point on austerity, which has decimated the communities that I represent. However, as I often say in the chamber, we must be honest about our responsibility here, in Scotland. John Swinney and First Ministers before him all promised to eradicate child poverty, yet those promises have been broken over the 17 years of SNP Government and SNP budgets. As we have heard, the reality, for young people and their families in Scotland today, is that the Government is set to fail yet again to meet its own targets on child poverty. Yet here it is, taking—I think that it is fair to say—an arrogant approach to today's debate. It is not seeking to genuinely debate what can be done here in Scotland; rather, it is taking to grandstanding to ensure that division continues.

The Scottish Government knows that my Scottish Labour colleagues and I are working with and seeking to influence the UK Government, yet rather than seeking to work with us on devolved issues, the SNP is looking to divide.

It is my view that we can work together. Let us take women's health and women's reproductive

health. There has been a good, collaborative approach between members of the Parliament, with all of us seeking to ensure that women can safely access health care. We are all included in discussions with the current women's health champion for Scotland, and I am glad that I can put on record my thanks to Jenni Minto, the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, for that. We need to do more of that and ensure that members and the Government can have genuine debate about how devolved government can work to benefit our constituents.

Earlier in this session of Parliament, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee held an inquiry into health inequalities. We sought honest answers to how to tackle the situation of people living in our most deprived communities, and we did so on a cross-party basis. It is essential that we recognise that as one of the most significant political issues to date that we should address in Parliament.

In a debate on child poverty, it is important to speak to the scale of the problems in health inequalities that we face. If we do not change the trajectory, children who grow up in our poorest communities today will see only increased disadvantage.

I remind members that, in Scotland, women from more affluent areas are more likely to attend screening appointments while women in our most deprived areas have significantly lower attendance rates. Suicide rates in our most deprived areas are higher than they are in our more affluent areas, as are cancer rates. The gap in life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas has widened. That is shocking and should worry us all. We are talking about areas of devolved responsibility, and we must spend more time in the chamber addressing those issues.

In researching for this debate, I came across a quote from a report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation:

"The patterns of inequality in life expectancy between different places are not a matter of chance or fate, but a reflection of the stuff of life itself".

To my mind, we are elected to ensure that society is fairer and that barriers to inequality are broken down. We cannot be a country where politicians are letting down its people and we cannot be a country where the poorest pay the price of neglectful government.

We all speak in this chamber of the root causes of poverty. Nowhere are their impacts more acutely felt than in life expectancy and health inequalities. That is why the Government must be more honest about its poor performance in early learning and childcare, the actual outcomes of its policies on the provision of free school meals and

affordable housing budgets and, of course, its poor record on local government funding. There can be real change only if some honesty is allowed to be part of the discussion.

I remind the Parliament that poverty and inequality are everyone's business. I ask members to reflect on working together on all the elements that can be used to change the direction of child poverty in Scotland.

16:10

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Here we are, in the first debate of a new year, which has been interesting—although clearly not for the Labour Party, as only four Labour members appear to be in the chamber at the moment. That is quite telling when we consider how important the issue is to people in our constituencies.

However, one of my new year's resolutions was to be nicer to everyone, and I am hoping to try to get through my speech while keeping that resolution—*[Interruption.]* Unfortunately, I have no chance, according one of my colleagues.

When Russell Findlay spoke in the debate, he spent eight of his 10 minutes talking about how doomed we are and how bad everything is—he never gave us one idea of what the Conservatives would do, and he was devoid of ideas and of any plan to make a difference to the lives of people in our constituencies. That shows us where the Conservatives are. They are appealing to a Farage-esque, Musk-type ideal in trying for a populist vote, but I do not believe that that populist vote is here, in Scotland. The people of Scotland want a plan. They want to see that the Government is actually going to do something for them, and they want a Government that supports them, not one that is going to leave them at the beck and call of the free-market economy, which would in effect create Thatcherism and Reaganomics on stilts.

The Labour Party is all over the place when it comes to child poverty. It seems to have no idea where it is going or how it will deal with that issue. This might be unhelpful, as I may have drifted off earlier in the debate, but I have not heard the two-child cap mentioned in any shape or form. That is an important issue that we need to deal with as the debate goes forward.

Out there, the people of Scotland want a plan and they want to know what we are doing. The Scottish Government, with its budget, offers a plan to deal with the here and now and build for the future. That is what people are looking for—not just the usual nonsense from the unionist parties, but the opportunity to debate the issue in more detail. The debate gives us an opportunity to

address an issue—child poverty—that cuts to the heart of our nation's values.

As many members know, tackling poverty in Scotland is a passion of mine, not just because of my background and where I was brought up—although those things are important to a lot of people out there in the real world who are still living in those communities—but because I want to see further progress being made in our communities.

There is no silver-bullet solution; there is no big idea. A collective of ideas and plans—a basket of measures—will always be needed for us to deal with child poverty. In order to achieve that, however, we also have to have the commitment to do something about it and the belief that we can.

The Scottish Government's budget for 2025-26 is not just a financial plan; it also shows the Scottish Government's values. It reflects the unwavering commitment of the SNP and our First Minister to eradicating child poverty and ensuring that every child in Scotland has the best start in life. We know that inequality damages our health, our communities and our economy. That is why the SNP Government is delivering hope for the future and practical solutions for the present, including the expansion of free school meals, the affordable housing supply programme and the ground-breaking Scottish child payment, which is designed to tackle poverty at its very roots.

I will end by saying that tackling child poverty is not just a policy choice but a moral imperative. The Scottish Government's budget represents hope, resilience and a brighter future for every child in Scotland. It is time for the Labour UK Government to match our ambition. If it does not, it must step aside. Let us get on with the work here, in Scotland, and create the future that our children deserve.

16:14

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): Tackling child poverty should be a moral imperative for any Government, but it is not about having good intentions; it is about real and lasting change. Sadly, the measures that the SNP proposes, although well meaning, fall short of delivering the transformative solutions that our most deprived communities desperately need. Poverty is not just about money; it is actually about deprivation, which is a deeper and more insidious issue that shapes a child's future. Deprivation means living without basic opportunities and facing barriers to quality healthcare, housing and education. Deprivation in communities locks families into cycles of disadvantage that financial handouts alone cannot break.

The SNP claims that eradicating child poverty is its single greatest priority, but is it really? Time and again, the SNP's true priority has been independence. The SNP asserts that independence is the magic wand for a better Scotland, but let us be honest: the economics simply do not add up. Independence would pile financial strain on families who are already struggling. The promise of independence as a cure-all is not just misleading; it is a dangerous distraction from child poverty rates in Scotland, which remain stubbornly high on the SNP's watch.

Since the SNP took power in 2007, almost a quarter of our children still live in poverty, with the figure at an estimated 240,000 every year between 2020 and 2023. Although social security measures are valuable, they are constrained by funding issues and administrative inefficiencies. Child poverty is not, as the SNP would have us think, simply about the income of the family; it is about so much more. The uncomfortable truth is that social security policies do not tackle the root causes of deprivation, wage stagnation, unemployment, poor housing and health inequalities.

Let me bring this closer to home. I have long advocated for better healthcare investment in the Drumchapel community in Glasgow. The Drumchapel health centre serves a population that faces significant deprivation and we need basic infrastructure to be put in. The population faces significant deprivation, poor housing, low incomes and high rates of chronic illness. As a general practitioner, I see the difference that primary care can make to local communities.

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): As the member is outlining some of the root causes of poverty and deprivation, will he do what his colleague failed to do and say whether he feels that the many years of Conservative Government and austerity have anything whatsoever to do with that poverty?

Sandesh Gulhane: That is incredible. The SNP have had 18 years in power and 18 years of being able to do something, yet Scotland is worse than anywhere else in the UK. Why is that? It is because of the policies of the SNP Government, and it is also because of how inept the SNP Government is.

The inverse care law—the principle that those who need healthcare the most receive the least—hits the hardest in places such as Drumchapel. In Drumchapel, overstretched services and administrative barriers mean that families struggle to access even basic care, and £25 a week will not fix the crumbling infrastructure. Deprivation is not just about money; it is about missed opportunities. In places such as Drumchapel, children grow up facing higher rates of preventable disease, mental

health challenges and educational underachievement, all because of where they were born.

Financial support can ease immediate pressures, but it does not build the foundation for a better future. For example, on housing, substandard homes do not just hurt children's physical harm; they harm children's education and mental wellbeing. Housing is entirely devolved to the Scottish Government, so why is the issue not a central focus in child poverty strategies? Why are almost 16,000 children living in temporary accommodation, as we heard from Miles Briggs?

We need to address the intergenerational impact of deprivation. A child growing up in poverty is more likely to face poor health, underachievement and lower lifetime earnings. We cannot afford to perpetuate that cycle. The SNP's approach feels like throwing money at symptoms while ignoring the disease. Child poverty cannot be eradicated through simple cash payments alone. True change demands addressing the systemic issues that hold families back.

The left in Holyrood thinks that it is progressive. Indeed, Patrick Harvie thinks that he is progressive, but he is not—he is regressive. He attacks small and medium-sized businesses and opposes anyone who makes money. He supports an oppressive tax on anyone who earns more than £28,000, and he squandered money when in government. That is how to make everybody poor.

The left-wing consensus in Holyrood believes only in creating a bigger state, with a greater social security budget, not in great-quality education that allows people to truly escape poverty not just for themselves but for the generations to come after them. University is not the be-all and end-all; colleges, learning a trade and apprenticeships allow for great lifelong jobs that pay very well.

We need to deliver lasting solutions to ensure that every child in Scotland, regardless of their postcode, has the opportunity to thrive.

16:20

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): In his speeches both yesterday and today, the First Minister could not have been clearer: there are too many children in Scotland living in poverty. The continuing effects of Westminster austerity, UK inflation, the pandemic and the economic fallout from Brexit mean that too many families are facing acute challenges.

Since 2010, UK Government welfare reform has been characterised by cuts. Any concept of a UK safety net has been systematically unravelled, and it is threadbare. In South Lanarkshire, where my

Rutherglen constituency is situated, the community planning partnership has noted sharp increases in cost of living costs, which have meant that more families sought help from their money advice service last year, more sought food bank referrals, and more faced homelessness.

Experiencing poverty in childhood is not just about families' immediate financial security; it is about longer-term damage. It brings a loss of human potential and an increase in demand for public services. Taking action to tackle poverty is not a zero-sum game; it is about Scotland's collective prosperity and wellbeing. The Scottish Government's budget is unwavering in its resolve to tackle child poverty head on. It drives forward investment in a range of activities to support three key drivers of poverty reduction: increasing income from social security and benefits in kind, increasing income from employment and reducing the cost of living.

To take just one of those measures as an example, the Scottish child payment puts money directly into families' pockets. Beyond the statistics on how the payment is lifting children out of poverty, we can see that it is making a real difference in people's day-to-day lives. I urge members to look at the changing realities project and to read Lisa's story about the real difference that the payment has made for her and her young son, allowing them to live with more dignity and self-respect.

Yesterday, Anas Sarwar got very cagey when he was pressed on his previous ambitions for the Scottish child payment, and he made vague noises about "new directions". That sounds eerily familiar from Labour: promising change without disclosing that it will be change for the worse. Labour members need to put their money where their mouth is and back a budget, rather than abstaining, to put money directly in families' pockets and to fund wider services that support them—actions that we agree are only part of the story.

South Lanarkshire Council was previously praised for its work in sharing best practice on reducing the cost of the school day. On a recent visit to St Bride's primary in Cambuslang, I saw how hard staff were working to ensure that every child was included in every activity in their busy festive calendar, with practical, sensitive support being provided where required. However, the Labour administration of South Lanarkshire Council has made some extremely short-sighted decisions: imposing huge price rises on grass-roots sports, pricing out families and children's participation; cutting and closing library services, despite being warned about digital exclusion and problems with early literacy; and slashing school bus services, directly hitting families in their

pockets. Constituents who have come to see me about those issues are very angry about the direct impact on their pockets, which was not fully explored or understood by the council.

Yesterday, the First Minister called on all parties in the chamber to come together and support the Scottish budget, and to agree to take further steps in eradicating poverty. Decisions taken in council chambers across Scotland, for better or worse, will have a direct impact on families' pockets and on the trajectory of children's lives. We should all be putting the case, in all spheres of government, to tackle child poverty.

16:24

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I thought that an appropriate contribution for me to make in this afternoon's debate on tackling child poverty through Scotland's budget was to bring to the Parliament, as I have done before, the lived experience of the direct detrimental impact of the UK Government's two-child benefit cap, which our SNP Government's budget—which will come before us in just a few weeks' time—will take action to finally begin to end. It will transform the real-life experience of many young people and lift 15,000 of them out of poverty. The difference on this occasion is that I no longer speak of the Conservatives' two-child cap; I speak, unfortunately, of the Labour Party's two-child cap.

In bringing such lived experience to the Parliament this afternoon, I once again thank Glasgow North West Citizens Advice Bureau, which has captured examples of lived experience and has advocated strongly for many of the Maryhill and Springburn constituents I am privileged to represent.

For instance, Glasgow North West CAB supported a woman who, when she separated from her husband, found herself and her children reliant on universal credit. Imagine discovering, on the breakdown of your marriage, when you need support the most, that the UK Government takes the view that only two of your four children will be supported financially. To put it bluntly, the family will deliberately not be given enough money to live on.

In another example, a father whom Glasgow North West CAB supported had to give up work in a well-paid job in the most tragic of circumstances. The dad had to somehow support four children aged between three and 12 when, sadly, their mum died. As a father, I can only imagine having to support children in such tragic and distressing circumstances. Finding himself in financial difficulty, the dad was supported to make a claim for universal credit. Imagine a UK Government

that, in essence, tells a grieving dad that it will not offer adequate support for two of his children. Do those children not count? Do they not have needs and rights?

A UK welfare system that financially penalises a child when they lose their mum is simply repugnant. Likewise, a UK system that will not support children who need support following a marital breakdown is surely inhumane.

Either way, it is now a UK Labour system that is simply not fit for purpose. Most disturbingly of all, it is not fit for purpose by design and not by accident.

I am aware that there is a struggle in the Scottish Parliament Labour group about whether to support SNP plans to mitigate UK Labour's immoral two-child cap. Several Labour members will agree with me—I know that they will. However, it would be better if, instead of angsting over whether to do the right thing, Scottish Labour stood up to the UK Labour Government and supported the SNP here, in Holyrood.

In the time that I have left to speak, I will talk about a couple of other matters in the budget. I am proud of the SNP's position on free school meals. Before I was elected to the Scottish Parliament, I was part of the campaign to change SNP policy to bring in universal free school meals. I wish that we had gone quicker and gone further. I say to the First Minister that I am looking forward to a re-elected SNP Scottish Government in 2026, and I see universal free school meals being provided in secondary schools as well as in primary schools.

I want there to be a breakfast club culture in schools across Scotland, not just to alleviate child poverty but for the additional benefits that breakfast clubs give young people.

I know that my time is up, so I will leave it at that.

16:28

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Deputy Presiding Officer, I wish you, everyone in the chamber and all those watching a happy new year.

I am pleased to speak in this debate on behalf of the Scottish Labour Party. Child poverty must be a national mission, not just for the Scottish Government but for all governments at all levels, because it holds people back, makes people ill and stifles opportunity.

As we start 2025, 30,000 more children are living in poverty than was the case when the SNP came to power in 2007. All across Scotland, children are paying the price for 14 years of Tory failure and 17 years of SNP failure.

Last year, the Poverty and Inequality Commission published a report that laid bare the fact that the SNP's progress on tackling child poverty has been

“slow or not evident at all”.

Despite the rhetoric and what I believe to be truly good intentions, the SNP Government has failed to lift children out of poverty. It has failed to deliver on key promises on child poverty and, despite receiving the largest settlement that any Scottish Government has received in the history of devolution, it has failed to take the opportunity to deliver a budget that will truly deliver better outcomes for the people of Scotland. It has slashed the affordable housing budget and the fuel insecurity fund. It could have committed to new employability programmes and given families the support that they need to boost their incomes. It says that it will end the two-child cap, but the funding that it has budgeted for that is insufficient to deliver what it says that it will do.

To truly lift people out of poverty, the Government would have to take transformative action across all public services—including housing, mental health care, employability and education—but the draft budget does not do that and does not offer the new direction that is needed.

Nowhere is that clearer than in education. I have said before in this chamber and elsewhere and I will say again that education is a great leveller. It is, as Nelson Mandela said,

“the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”,

and that includes our own world. Child poverty impacts education—we see that in the yawning attainment gap—but education can impact child poverty, too. Supporting schools, colleges and universities, those who learn there and the staff who work there in turn supports opportunities for children and young people and, in so doing, helps to tackle child poverty at the root, spreading opportunity for all.

Today, far too many in Scotland are missing out and there is an opportunity gap. Education can be the great leveller and it can open up opportunity, but it cannot do that when staff are overworked and burning out, when teaching is a precarious job and when the 40 per cent of pupils who have additional support needs are not having those needs met. I fail to see how less than £1 million of additional funding per local authority can change those outcomes.

Time and time again, the most disadvantaged children and young people bear the biggest burden. The attainment gap at higher exam level is now the biggest that it has ever been, which

contributes to an ever-widening opportunity gap in later life.

Teachers are key to all of that. They do not just educate; they care, they support and they nurture. They help young people to flourish, regardless of background, and they give them the tools to stay out of poverty by equipping them to harness the opportunities that Scotland has to offer. However, instead of the promised increase in teacher numbers, the SNP Government has overseen a reduction. Now, it does not say that it will increase teacher numbers at all—it says only that it will maintain them. With a workforce that is on its knees and no workforce plan, it is not clear how the Government will even do that.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The member will recognise that the draft budget proposes an additional funding settlement for local authorities to help to increase teacher numbers. Why is the Labour Party abstaining on that increase to improve the number of teachers in Scotland's schools?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The cabinet secretary knows fine well that that is not how the budget process works and that it is not a case of picking and choosing individual parts of the budget. The cabinet secretary is hiding behind the fact that her Government said that it would increase teacher numbers when, in fact, it has reduced them, and it now only intends to maintain them.

On free school meals, the Government once said that it would roll out universal provision for all primary school children, but that is now stopping at primary 5. The First Minister said that he had written off school meals debt but, on 7 November last year, the cabinet secretary admitted in an answer to me that, at that time, no funding from the school meal debt fund had been issued to local authorities.

It is not just schools that matter: colleges are crucial, too. That is why it beggars belief that the budget delivers a real-terms cut to colleges. Those colleges support the people who are furthest behind. They provide accessible education and skills development, create pathways to employment and boost incomes in the most disadvantaged communities. They equip students with the skills that they need and support people into the well-paid jobs that are key to reducing child poverty.

Colleges have told the Education, Children and Young People Committee that, in the absence of sustainable funding for colleges, the range of opportunities for the poorest learners will be further reduced and that communities will be left further behind. We see the impact of that in falling retention rates in universities and colleges for the

most deprived people and those from the poorest backgrounds.

Lastly, we know that childcare is crucial to lifting families and children out of poverty, but discretionary funding through the higher education childcare fund has been cut.

None of that is inevitable. We can and must change direction and close the opportunity gap for young people in Scotland. We cannot allow our focus, ambition and action to narrow to one-off solutions or, worse still, to promises that are never delivered.

Children deserve better than that. That is why Labour members know that we must act—and the UK Labour Government is acting—to tackle child poverty at its roots, with a new deal for working people, a pay rise for more than 200,000 Scots and help to drive down energy bills. Child poverty must be a national mission for the Scottish Government and more widely across Parliament—on that, we agree—not because of targets, but because young people in Scotland deserve to thrive and live up to their potential.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final speaker in the open debate is Collette Stevenson. You have up to four minutes, Ms Stevenson.

16:35

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I welcome the fact that our first debate of 2025 is on tackling child poverty and inequality, which is the Scottish Government's key priority. The SNP Government's draft budget marks a turning point, offering delivery in the present and hope for the future. As well as record investment in vital public services such as the national health service and local government, the budget will support the Government's aims to eradicate child poverty, grow the economy and tackle the climate emergency.

Scotland has faced a challenging few years, with the pandemic alongside a triple whammy of Westminster-created harms— austerity, Brexit and the cost of living crisis—and challenges remain for many households. Living standards are not good enough for far too many, and rising energy costs continue to put pressure on people. However, Scotland's economy has shown resilience, and people in Scotland recognise the SNP's commitment to a strong social contract. The budget will deliver on sharing the wealth of our nation more fairly and ensuring that economic growth benefits everyone in our country.

The SNP Scottish Government's draft budget will, if passed, ensure that we see continued investment in policies to continue tackling child poverty, including the 1,140 hours of early learning

and childcare, concessionary travel for under-22s, employability services and social security. The game-changing Scottish child payment will continue and it will rise with inflation from April. That will mean a payment of more than £27 per week per eligible child in low-income families. The Scottish child payment benefits about 325,000 children in Scotland, including about 4,400 in East Kilbride, and it is one of the unique payments being delivered through the Scottish Government's social security system.

Taken together, the Scottish Government's policies are estimated to be keeping 100,000 children out of poverty. However, the SNP Government will not stop there. The previous Tory UK Government introduced the abhorrent two-child cap and rape clause. That policy has caused thousands of children to be living in poverty. Sadly, despite Labour's promise of change, Keir Starmer's Labour Government is keeping that cruel measure. Scotland's SNP Government will scrap the Labour UK Government's two-child benefit cap in Scotland, lifting more than 15,000 Scottish children out of poverty and ending a major driver of deprivation.

In the face of Westminster inaction, Scotland's Government is taking the decisive action that is needed to ensure that our country is fairer in the present and ready for the challenges of the future. The SNP's draft budget sets out investment right across the board. I know that people in East Kilbride will be particularly pleased about the increased investment in the affordable housing supply programme. Thanks to Scottish Government funding, we have seen many new houses and flats built across the town in recent years but, with on-going demand, people in East Kilbride will welcome the investment of more than £767 million to deliver even more affordable homes.

The SNP Government's draft budget marks a turning point, offering delivery in the present and hope for the future. It will support Social Security Scotland to increase the support that it provides through disability benefits and the game-changing Scottish child payment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Collette Stevenson: The draft budget will also lay the groundwork to scrap the cruel two-child cap in Scotland. Save the Children is calling on Parliament—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Collette Stevenson: —to back the budget. I ask members to support it.

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

16:39

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am pleased to close this afternoon's debate on this important issue on behalf of the Scottish Greens.

As we have heard, the draft budget includes important provisions that are intended to help the thousands of children in poverty across Scotland. However, cold and hungry children cannot wait. They cannot wait for Rachel Reeves and Sir Keir Starmer to decide that their self-imposed fiscal conditions have been met, that their friends in the City of London are comfortable enough or that their focus groups and spin doctors are edging towards common decency.

The evil—I do not use that word lightly—two-child limit must be abolished now, with immediate effect, not at some hypothetical point in a theoretical future. Every day that the UK Labour Government fails to act represents a stain on the Labour Party's history, a betrayal of its founding principles and a callous act of treachery towards the children of the UK and the families who struggle to keep them safe.

Therefore, it is entirely right that the Scottish Government, faced with such brutality, should act to mitigate the two-child limit and protect the children of Scotland from this cruel and unusual punishment simply for being the third child, or later, to be born in a family. This is essential, life-saving work, which the Scottish Greens support with whole hearts and urgent endeavour.

However, it will not come soon enough for the families who need help now, and that is why more action is needed, as highlighted by many members this afternoon and by organisations such as Save the Children, Barnardo's, the Poverty Alliance and others. Children in Scotland need targeted support, and the Scottish Greens are proud of our role in making the Scottish child payment the transformational measure that it is so widely recognised as being. That payment must be increased to £40 per week as soon as possible, as those organisations and others are calling for.

Child poverty is family poverty—and, overwhelmingly, the poverty of women, as Carol Mochan highlighted. The End Child Poverty coalition points out that families in poverty need holistic support that is financial but also practical and emotional. Finding and keeping good work—work that is secure, with decent pay and conditions, and that aligns with the responsibilities of family life—is difficult for all parents, but especially for single mothers. Combating child poverty means recognising those difficulties and

properly funding organisations and projects that provide expert support.

The First Minister and others have spoken about the wide range of social security mechanisms that we use in Scotland. It is my hope that there will be progress on the minimum income guarantee, on the path to a universal basic income, this year.

However, as other members have highlighted, we need more than just social security. We need policies and measures that address every aspect of family life and every source of strain on the family budget. It is no good giving with one hand what we take away with the other. We need a systemic and holistic approach.

That means, fundamentally, making sure that families have a safe, secure and healthy home to live in and that they can stay there for as long as they need to. The work on affordable housing is very welcome but, again, it does not yet go far enough. Families will continue to live in private rented accommodation, and they must be protected from unconscionable rent rises. If the Scottish Government is serious about child poverty—and I believe that its intentions are serious—it must reconsider its Housing (Scotland) Bill amendments. Robust rent controls are essential tools in dismantling child poverty, and I say to the Scottish Government, “Do not let the landlord lobby persuade you not to use them.”

The approach that I mentioned also means easing the financial burdens of ordinary life—the costs that accumulate day by day, weighing increasingly heavily on the family budget, the parents’ sleep and the children’s diminishing happiness. That is why, although it might seem trivial to privileged car owners, a £2 cap on bus fares, which the Scottish Greens are calling for, can mean the difference between accessible transport and impossible choices—the difference between saying yes to that job, course or kids’ activity and saying sorry, but, again, the answer is no.

That is also why the roll-out of universal free school meals really matters—for the families who do not get them now but need them, on whose wellbeing the burden of public debt is an insupportable burden, but also for those children who qualify now for free school meals but for whom the pain of stigma is as sharp as the pain of hunger. Promises to children matter; we should not discard those promises when they are inconvenient.

Let us not forget those children who are too often forgotten: those whose families are branded with the cruelty of no recourse to public funds. We must ensure that local authorities and organisations that support migrant families, including those seeking asylum, have the

resources that they need to help those who are threatened with utter destitution. Indeed, we have a moral responsibility to do so, because human rights do not stop at borders or beaches.

My hope for the new year is that we can find a new co-operation between all levels of government—Holyrood, Westminster and councils—that we will see an end to the divisive rhetoric of the lowest common denominator and that, together, we can seed the ground upon which all our children will thrive, because poverty and inequality are bad for everyone.

16:45

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I begin my closing speech by wishing the Deputy Presiding Officer and all colleagues around the chamber a happy new year. I thank colleagues for the debate that we have had this afternoon.

There was much value in the First Minister’s opening speech. His contention was that the core issue of child poverty turns around a broad range of issues that cannot be addressed by one policy, two policies or three policies, and that it is about choice in relation to the totality of our politics, together, and the positions that we take on a wide variety of issues. I agree with that very strongly.

Willie Rennie made the same point very well. I have to say that he very much echoed much of the language of the speech that was made by Labour leader Anas Sarwar at the University of Glasgow yesterday.

The Scottish child payment is absolutely vital and has our very strong support: however, it alone is not enough, so more must be done. That is clearly what the First Minister said in his speech. Of course, I do not think that his speech was exactly the one that he perhaps intended yesterday to deliver in this debate, because he now knows that the budget will be passed, which is a good thing.

There have been very legitimate discussions on the budget among parties. Those discussions, which all the parties have been party to, do not facilitate populism and the rise of the far right, as the Green Party claimed in the press yesterday. I was interested in Patrick Harvie’s reportage, given my discussions with Scottish Government ministers. He told us what had happened in those rooms—but they were very amicable discussions. However, if he perhaps still has a key for the room and was hiding behind the curtains, he did not hear exactly the tone of the discussions or what happened. They have been amiable and constructive discussions.

Patrick Harvie was also keen to know what constructive proposition we had brought to the

discussions. I say to him that it was about £5.2 billion that has, in the words of the First Minister, given some hope that the budget will be one that has the potential to change the lives of people in Scotland. I would say that it has that potential.

Patrick Harvie: I think that perhaps we should both check my speech in the *Official Report*, because Michael Marra seems to have heard a very different speech from the one that I delivered. However, perhaps he can simply clarify this: what is the budget concession that the Scottish Labour Party has successfully negotiated in exchange for its commitment to abstain?

Michael Marra: In the discussions—*[Interruption.]* In the discussions that we have held with the Scottish Government, we have asked for Scotland to set a new direction and to use that £5.2 billion. Our belief on the position that the Government has taken is that does not go far enough in that direction, but we have to say that we think that it is a budget that does no harm. At the moment, it just asks the question.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No thank you, sir.

The other part of the First Minister's formulation, alongside hope, is, of course, delivery. Rightly, what the bulk of today's debate has focused on is the question whether we can deliver against our duties. The first of three duties that I will set out is that we have a legal duty with regard to child poverty that was set out in 2017, by far prior to the arrival in Parliament of some colleagues. Paul O'Kane set out the concerns of many experts, including the Poverty and Inequality Commission, who have said that progress on tackling child poverty has been slow or not evident at all under the Scottish National Party Government. This budget, although it will do no harm, will not change that trajectory, because it lacks the new direction that Scotland needs.

Secondly, we have an economic duty, which is not only to produce an economy that deals with child poverty but to recognise that the potential of any person who is lost to the lifelong impact of such poverty is reduced, or is squandered in relation to our whole country and their own community. At a time when Scotland has an ageing population and a shrinking birth rate, that is more important than ever in relation to the future of our country. The cost of child poverty is becoming ever greater.

Finally, we have a moral duty to recognise the innate equal value of every child. That demands that we ask broad questions about the shape of our economy, our community and all our Government policy.

Willie Rennie was right to raise drug deaths and addiction, which are huge afflictions in my home city of Dundee. However, I cannot agree with what he said about Labour's track record on child poverty amounting to a fluctuation or a nudge of the dial; it was far more profound than that. During our previous time in Government, our approach transformed lives. However, that trend was halted in 2010, since when no Government, either at Westminster or here at Holyrood, has been able to match it or reverse what is happening.

We must deal with the broad causes that many members have highlighted in the debate. The First Minister must recognise that the gap in attainment has not been closed, let alone abolished. It is at a higher level and is the greatest it has ever been.

We also have a national housing emergency, with 10,000 children waking up on Christmas morning—just days ago—in temporary accommodation. Furthermore, our housing completions are at a historical low. The First Minister must recognise all those issues and deliver solutions.

I look forward to the meetings on the budget that will take place in the weeks to come. Scottish Labour believes that, so far, the budget has failed to set the new direction that we require for Scotland, which can now come only from a new Government in 2026.

16:51

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I begin by recognising the consensus that has been expressed by members across the chamber—that tackling child poverty absolutely must be a priority.

The Scottish child payment has been a good policy, and there is sufficient evidence to prove that it is working. However, it is by no means a panacea that will solve all the ills that affect us. Nonetheless, it has been an effective policy—as has been shown by good evidence to the Finance and Public Administration Committee and the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, that it is reaching those who are most in need. The take-up rate for the Scottish child payment is good and is rising, and it is quicker and easier to administer than several other social security benefits. Scottish Conservatives had no problem at all supporting it in January 2022 and February 2024. However, as my colleague Stephen Kerr rightly said, as did Willie Rennie, in relation to jobs and education respectively, it is not the panacea that will solve the current problem. We really must tackle the root causes of child poverty, because that is what the issue is all about.

It is interesting that, although groups including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Poverty Alliance and Save the Children are keen on the

policy that underlies the Scottish child payment, they point to the fact that it will never be able to solve the current problem. I make that point because I believe that, fundamentally, the Scottish Government must judge policies on their effectiveness. It must ask what is working and where the evidence is to show that.

The First Minister: I very much welcome what Liz Smith said about the impact of the Scottish child payment: that point is beyond dispute.

However, I have been left a bit bewildered by the attack that her party's leader levelled at our social security expenditure. At the heart of Mr Findlay's charge to me were several suggestions about areas in which reductions in expenditure should be undertaken. I just do not follow how it is possible for Liz Smith to tell me that the policy on the Scottish child payment is, according to the evidence, working but for Mr Findlay simultaneously to argue that we should reduce social security expenditure.

Liz Smith: If the First Minister had listened to what I was saying, he would have heard that it is about not just the evidence but the costings—it is about the effectiveness of the policy plus the costings.

Our point is that the Scottish Government has put an awful lot of its eggs in one basket in terms of addressing the social contract with the people of Scotland. The key argument that the Scottish Government is making is that the centrepiece of the budget is the Scottish Government's proposal that the social contract matters more than anything else. Our perspective is that that social contract can be properly paid for only if there is an economic policy behind it that provides sufficient revenues to allow the Scottish Government to deploy the policies.

The problem that we have just now, which comes through in all the evidence that we get from the Scottish Fiscal Commission and Audit Scotland—the Auditor General was at the Finance and Public Administration Committee this morning—is that we cannot continue to bear the burden of social security costs unless we are able to bring in far greater revenues and develop our economic growth.

The First Minister: I thank Liz Smith for giving way again, but she ignores the fact that, since we have held office, the Government has consistently balanced the budget and lived within the resources that we have had available to us. It is our obligation and our duty to put to Parliament a budget that is perfectly sustainable in the financial year, and we have done so.

Therefore, I struggle to understand how the Conservative position can have any logic to it, because the Government is living within its means

and is supporting people to overcome the negative effects of child poverty. Liz Smith and I agree that child poverty needs to be tackled, but her leader wants to slash expenditure.

Liz Smith: The Scottish Government has a legal responsibility to balance a budget. The Scottish Conservatives' analysis is based on the position of many economic analysts who point out—quite correctly—that we cannot go on delivering the same size of social welfare budget without extra money. We simply cannot do it. I would have thought that, because of the First Minister's reputation in the financial sector before he came to Parliament, he would surely understand the basic economics of that. *[Interruption.]* It is important. It is not me saying it; it is what all the analysts are saying. That is why we have a problem with the size of the welfare benefit system.

My fundamental point is that if we are to make progress, we must be able to judge which policies are working and which are not working so well, and that needs to be based on evidence. At the moment, I do not think that the Scottish Government is providing sufficient evidence that the social contract that it has built with the people of Scotland will deliver all the priorities that it would like to settle on without that fundamental basis for the economy.

I think that I have a minute left. I have not said anything that I was going to say, but it is important that I have addressed those points.

I will finish on the point that the Auditor General raised with us at the Finance and Public Administration Committee this morning. It has been raised several times—in that committee and in lots of other committees in Parliament. The Scottish Government is getting itself into an awful lot of trouble because it is trying to address policy issues by using short-term fixes. We are told time and again that those short-term fixes will not work because there is no medium-term and long-term planning for financial sustainability. That is a very important message. We will not be able to tackle the root causes of child poverty unless we have fiscal responsibility. On that point, I will finish.

16:58

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I welcome all the contributions that have been made as we discuss the importance of the Scottish Government's mission to eradicate child poverty.

The budget is unashamedly optimistic about bringing forward the investment that will put people on a more prosperous, sustainable footing that is fairer for all. It is a budget that once again shows that this Government has placed the

highest possible priority on delivering action that will help to eradicate the scourge of child poverty in Scotland. It commits more than £6.9 billion for benefits expenditure—almost £1.3 billion more than the UK Government gives to the Scottish Government for social security. Within that, £644 million of our package of benefits is available only here in Scotland. That is essential support such as the Scottish child payment, which puts more money directly into the pockets of low-income families. We know that the cost of living crisis is still with many families and people in communities the length and breadth of the country.

However, we know that eradicating child poverty will not be solved by social security alone. Clare Haughey and others pointed to the three drivers of poverty that the Scottish Government mentions in our “Best Start, Bright Futures” delivery plan, which is exactly why the budget does so much more than focus on social security in looking at the eradication of child poverty. For example, there is the extension of the budget for fairer futures partnerships, which, in essence, look to bring about the systemic change in public services that we need if we are to deliver services better, and more effectively and efficiently, to promote family wellbeing and to maximise incomes. There is also the £90 million investment in devolved employability services and the continuation of the delivery of free bus travel to more than 2.3 million people, including all those aged under 22 and disabled people.

Liz Smith: Many of those measures are welcome. Would the cabinet secretary recognise, however, that there have been cuts in successive budgets to areas such as employability and enterprise in the economy budget? Colleges, which were mentioned earlier, are so important for social mobility in Scotland through ensuring that people have better-paid jobs. Will the Scottish Government at last turn its focus to that aspect?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The investment in employability services has been protected this year, and the 2025-26 budget sees an uplift of more than 2 per cent on the 2024-25 budget for the college resource allocation, in recognition of the importance that colleges play. Indeed, investment in education is important overall, whether it is in early learning and childcare, the school clothing grant, the further expansion of free school meals or the expansion of breakfast clubs. I absolutely recognise the importance that we must continue to place on education, for our youngest citizens all the way up to our adult learners.

Overall, the budget continues to commit more than £3 billion a year to measures that will tackle poverty in our country. In reflecting on some of the remarks from members today, I begin on a point of consensus with Paul O’Kane—I hope to carry that

on as much as possible in 2025, but we shall see. He was right to point out that there are now better relationships with the United Kingdom Government. To be fair, there was a low bar, given where we were, but we have demonstrably better relations.

Nevertheless, we should be clear about the practical implications of the UK Government’s approach for the budget. There is only a 1 per cent real-terms increase in the resource expenditure in 2025-26, so that is the context that we are in. At the same time, we see the devastating impact across the public sector and the voluntary sector, and across the economy in general, of the increase in employers’ national insurance contributions. Yes, there have been improvements, but it would be fair to say that there has been some disappointment as well.

Patrick Harvie may have already won best intervention of 2025 with his intervention on Michael Marra. However, he also pointed—quite rightly, I think—to the fact that the Scottish child payment is the single most effective policy for tackling child poverty. That is what the evidence has shown, and the UK Government should be learning from what has happened in Scotland.

I also agree with Willie Rennie—and we have made this point in the chamber previously—that the Scottish child payment, although it has had an impact, needs to be a bridge to further changes and to challenging other parts of Government to also help to eradicate child poverty. He said that he had more ideas—he mentioned some in his speech, and we are keen to hear from him.

Miles Briggs and others pointed to some other ideas and suggestions. I say to all colleagues that, while the budget has not passed and we take nothing for granted, we should be honest about the cost of what is proposed. I also say, with the best will, that the Conservative members who made contributions today should be a little embarrassed in coming to us for more money to be spent on public services at the same time as their leader is asking for £1 billion-worth of cuts to public services because of tax cuts.

The First Minister’s speech yesterday, in which he talked about delivery and hope, set the tone for not just this budget but the direction of the Government—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): One or two colleagues have forgotten the new year’s resolution not to have conversations in the chamber. I would be grateful if all members could do the cabinet secretary the courtesy of listening.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The First Minister said that it is important to make the biggest difference now but also to lay the foundations of a hopeful future. I contrast that with the genuinely

disappointing and disturbing new direction from Scottish Labour. I am not sure whether the disappointment with some of the remarks led to the poor attendance in the chamber today, but it was quite stark. We are now at the point where the Labour Party is talking not about social security being an investment in the people of Scotland but about handouts. That was a phrase that was used in many Conservative contributions today, and I would expect that, but to hear it from a Scottish Labour leader is desperately sad. The Scottish child payment is a lifeline to people in Scotland. It is not a handout but an investment in and lifeline to people. That is why, when we had that meeting yesterday, in which the First Minister and Cabinet talked to stakeholders, it was important that we listened to their priorities. The budget will deliver on those priorities.

Paul O’Kane: The cabinet secretary spoke again about the hope-filled approach to the budget, as though it is this Government’s first budget. Where has she been for the past 17 years of budgets, which have often decimated sectors in Scotland and have been particularly problematic for our local government? Let me be absolutely clear, because I think that she is being a little disingenuous. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr O’Kane.

Paul O’Kane: The cabinet secretary pointed out to me that we have debated this issue many times. We support the Scottish child payment, but we are clear, as everyone has been in this debate, that it cannot be the only lever that we use to challenge poverty in this country.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mr O’Kane asked where I have been—I have been delivering the Scottish child payment as our way forward to the eradication of child poverty. I have been delivering solutions within the devolved situation. What a disappointment that I am now mitigating the impact of a Labour Government rather than a Tory Government. That is exactly where I have been, Mr O’Kane.

Labour sets out its new direction, and I am exceptionally concerned about that direction. I am also concerned about the fact that it seems to have changed. Within 24 hours, the Scottish Labour Party has gone from saying that it would vote for the budget if we spent less on social security to saying that it would vote for it if we spent more money and spent it quicker on social security. There seems to be a lack of any direction, rather than a genuinely new direction.

We will get on with delivering the mitigation for the two-child cap. It requires legislation both here and at Westminster, and it requires systems to be built. That work has already begun and, if it is possible, we will accelerate that timetable. The

Scottish child payment is an example of how we have done exactly that in the past.

This budget is very important. The First Minister has laid out the implications of its not passing, and we take nothing for granted. Many members have, rightly, said that tackling child poverty should be an overarching mission of this Parliament. We have to take part in constructive and costed discussions, and then we have to do what Save the Children Scotland has said that MSPs should do, which is support the budget. Sitting on the sidelines and leaving it to others to reintroduce the universal pension age winter heating payment and mitigate the two-child cap will not cut it.

The Presiding Officer: You must conclude, cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Members need to vote for the motion, vote for the Scottish Government and join the Scottish Government’s mission to eradicate child poverty in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on tackling child poverty and inequality through the Scottish budget.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:08

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-16026, on committee membership. I call Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Stuart McMillan be appointed to replace James Dornan as a member of the Public Audit Committee.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:08

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-16003.4, in the name of Russell Findlay, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16003, in the name of John Swinney, on tackling child poverty and inequality through the Scottish budget, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:09

Meeting suspended.

17:12

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-16003.4, in the name of Russell Findlay. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

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

Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)

Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-16003.4, in the name of Russell Findlay, is: For 30, Against 92, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-16003.3, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16003, in the name of John Swinney, on tackling child poverty and inequality through the Scottish budget, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)

Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-16003.3, in the name of Paul O'Kane, is: For 20, Against 102, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-16003, in the name of John Swinney, on tackling child poverty and inequality through the Scottish budget, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysof (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-16003, in the name of John Swinney, is: For 72, Against 50, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the investments outlined in the draft Scottish Budget for 2025-26 that focus on eradicating child poverty as a national mission and the single greatest priority for the Scottish Government, including continued investment in key policies such as funded early learning and childcare, concessionary travel for those under 22, employability services and social security; further notes increased investment in the Affordable Housing Supply Programme and investment in breakfast clubs and to support the expansion of free school meals; recognises that the Scottish Government's efforts to tackle child poverty are being undermined by the social security policies of the UK Government; welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to spend £3 million to develop the systems to deliver the mitigation of the two-child cap in 2026; acknowledges analysis from the Child Poverty Action Group estimating that abolishing the two-child limit could lift 15,000 children in Scotland out of poverty; recognises that the measures in the draft Scottish Budget 2025-26 will help to drive progress towards this national mission, and calls on the UK Government to match the ambition of the Scottish Government and abolish the two-child limit and benefit cap at the earliest possible opportunity.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-16026, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Stuart McMillan be appointed to replace James Dornan as a member of the Public Audit Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Diabetes (Access to Technology)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business this evening is a members' business debate on motion S6M-13791, in the name of Foysoyl Choudhury, on the importance of medical technology for patients with diabetes.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the vital importance of medical technology, especially real-time continuous glucose monitoring (rt-CGM), for patients with diabetes; notes the Stanford University study that highlighted that type 1 diabetics, and those who use insulin to manage their condition, make about 180 more decisions each day about their health than those without diabetes, and that access to diabetes technology helps to reduce this burden; welcomes the recent SIGN guidance to improve the accessibility of such technology to patients via NHS Scotland; understands that many patients are not able to access rt-CGM or are being forced to switch to a product less suitable for their needs; is concerned about the impact that changes to product use and a lack of access to medical technology is having on patients and the potential impact on diabetes complications; recognises what it sees as the value of sustainable multi-year funding and lifecycle cost benefit analysis in diabetes care, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to consider what action can be taken to protect patients, including those in the Lothian region, and maximise the availability of cost-saving medical technology.

17:20

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): It is an honour to open my members' business debate. I thank all members who have signed the motion and everyone who has chosen to attend today to discuss this important issue. I offer special recognition to the campaigners and type 1 diabetics who are watching in the public gallery and online, and I thank them for their hard work.

Some 36,000 Scots live with type 1 diabetes, a chronic condition that cannot be prevented and that must be managed 24 hours a day. People with type 1 must constantly adjust their insulin levels on the basis of what they have eaten or how much physical activity they have done. At least 42 different factors affect blood glucose levels, and too much or too little insulin brings about a number of health issues, including hypoglycaemia, heart disease and blindness.

Diabetes technology, which refers to technology for administering insulin, checking blood sugar and general management, can be transformational in improving the quality of life of people who live with type 1. The most effective form of diabetes technology is the hybrid closed-loop system, which involves an insulin pump combined with a continuous glucose monitor that automatically doses insulin. It means less finger pricking, no more injections and no more planning one's life

around one's condition. It is the closest thing that we have to a cure, but, sadly, that life-changing technology is unavailable to many.

In October, I hosted a round table on diabetes technology at which I heard from health practitioners and people living with type 1. The stories that I heard included that of a woman whom we will call Jane, who described a constant battle to keep her blood sugar at the right level. She said that she would wake up every night, sweating and drowsy with low blood glucose. Her diabetes affected her hobbies and her ability to drive her car. Indeed, one day she was forced to do eight injections and 16 finger pricks, and she described her situation as a "never-ending cycle of despair".

Given that people with type 1 diabetes make, on average, 180 more decisions each day than those without, the impact of technology in lessening that mental burden and improving wellbeing is massive. Jane, however, does not have access to a closed-loop system. Like so many others, she has faced the twin battles of long waiting times and a shocking lack of choice in how their care is delivered. The waiting time for an insulin pump is over a year in every national health service board, with the longest wait coming in at over five years. The number of people referred to NHS Lothian for diabetes technology is projected to grow to 1,200 by March this year. That alone should be alarming. Even after being seen, diabetes patients are being failed.

There is no single treatment for diabetes. Diabetes devices have different algorithms and features for managing blood glucose. For example, some devices have a "follow me" function that allows parents and carers to track their child's glucose levels using their mobile phone. That is essential if a child is to go out to play or to compete safely in sports.

Choice in technology is explicitly recognised by the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network guideline "SIGN 170: Optimising glycaemic control in people with type 1 diabetes", which states that adults should be offered

"a choice ... based on their individual preferences, needs"

and

"characteristics".

In Scotland, however, that guidance is not followed, and many national health service boards offer only one device.

Jane was told that the pumps that she needed to manage her condition were "too expensive". Users are being moved to less suitable options, which is putting them at risk. The safety and the needs of users must come first. In England, people are given a choice. Type 1 diabetes does

not change once someone crosses the border, so why should type 1s in Scotland miss out and receive worse care on the basis of where they live? We must see action to ensure that SIGN guidelines are followed by all clinical teams.

Last year, the Scottish Government pledged up to £8.8 million to increase the provision of diabetes technology. Improved funding is welcome, of course, but despite that new funding, NHS Lothian states that diabetes technology remains a "significant financial pressure". It has been found that treating complications from diabetes costs the NHS approximately 10 per cent of its whole budget, while the University of York has found that diabetes results in a productivity loss to the UK economy of £3.3 billion. Diabetes technology is genuinely preventative care that will save the NHS money in the long term, and we should be doing far more to ensure that it is widespread.

England has a five-year plan to ensure that 90 per cent of children and 50 per cent of adults with diabetes get such technology. The Scottish Government should be as, or more, ambitious, with a long-term plan to get every adult and child the technology that they need, adequate multiyear funding and full implementation of SIGN guideline 170 to guarantee choice in devices.

I finish by asking members to place themselves in the shoes of someone with type 1 diabetes, who knew that, although the technology that would change their life was available, there was no political will to ensure that they got it soon. I ask members to imagine the frustration that they would feel day by day. We cannot tell people just to wait. People with type 1 diabetes should not have to fight for their care.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I ask for back-bench speeches of up to four minutes.

17:28

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Foysol Choudhury on securing this debate on diabetes tech. I thank Diabetes Scotland and the Insulin Pump Awareness Group—IPAG Scotland—for their briefings ahead of the debate and for all the work that they do to support people and families living with diabetes.

I remind members that I am a type 1 diabetic and use a hybrid closed-loop system myself. I was diagnosed on my 12th birthday, which was not yesterday. Two of my sisters and my mum have type 1 diabetes, too. I got my first pump 25 years ago, when I lived and worked in Los Angeles, which is where Medtronic pumps are manufactured. Given my professional background as a nurse, I joined the cross-party group on diabetes in 2015, before I was even elected to this

place, and I am now co-convenor of the group along with Paul O’Kane.

Members might think that I would be a total expert in managing my own blood glucose, counting carbohydrates, managing exercise and doing all the balancing that is needed, but I am not. The work environment that we have in the Parliament does not make it easy. Diabetes is relentless; it is part of life 24/7, and there is no opportunity to take the day off without facing some consequences. At this point, I want to thank my diabetes team in NHS Dumfries and Galloway for their support—and especially for their non-judgmental support. That lack of judgment is vital.

However, this is not a “woe is me” debate. There are already 33,452 people in Scotland who are living with type 1 diabetes, along with the physical and mental health problems that are caused by the demands of managing diabetes daily, coping with diabetes-related complications and worrying about future complications.

Diabetes-related complications place a substantial burden on the NHS in the UK. As Mr Choudhury has mentioned, the UK spends about £10 million annually on diabetes, 80 per cent of which is spent on treating complications. I have raised that point many times at the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee in the current session of Parliament, and I did so at the Health and Sport Committee in the previous session.

Ensuring that people with type 1 diabetes have access to the right technologies to manage their condition is a priority in the Scottish Government’s “Diabetes Improvement Plan: Diabetes Care in Scotland—Commitments for 2021-2026”, and I welcome that. We know that demand for closed-loop systems and for the artificial pancreas is increasing, and many people with type 1 diabetes are expected to benefit from those systems in the future.

The motion mentions that people who live with type 1 diabetes make an extra 180 decisions every day, and I read the same information in a Stanford Medicine blog post, which focused on avoiding hypoglycaemic seizures during sleep. That is a particular issue in paediatrics, which is why the technology to help parents monitor their weans’ blood glucose overnight is fantastic.

It is valid to reflect on the burden of having to make any number of extra decisions. Managing diabetes for optimal blood glucose control requires decisions to be made on managing blood glucose levels and on dietary intake; working out how many carbs and how much protein and fat are on your plate; deciding whether the carbs are low or high glycaemic index carbs and how exercise will interfere with glucose levels; and ensuring that you have back-up or replacement supplies in the car,

at home or in the office in case the pump cannula becomes dislodged or is even pulled out.

Just as we were sitting down for the debate, my continuous glucose monitor alerted me that the cannula needed changing. That means my blood glucose will not be monitored for the next hour, until I get up to the office. Using the tech minimises manual interventions, simplifies decision making and eases the burden of the mental workload; in fact, it has been described as absolutely transformative in the self-management of diabetes.

However, as we have just heard, the tech is not equally available across Scotland, and I note what Mr Choudhury said about the specific challenges faced in Lothian. Indeed, we have heard about that at the CPG and at the recent diabetes event that I hosted in Parliament. We know that there are many complex reasons for the disparities in availability, but there is no doubt that funding plays a part.

I am aware of the work of Healthcare Improvement Scotland’s Scottish Health Technologies Group and its recommendations for the closed-loop system, and I highlight again the SIGN guidelines. I ask the Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health to continue to work on implementing the diabetes improvement plan and to work with health boards to ensure that all those who can benefit from diabetes tech have the opportunity to do so.

17:33

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I thank my colleague Foyso Choudhury for bringing the debate to the chamber on behalf of those across Scotland who are living with type 1 diabetes. I also thank Emma Harper for sharing the story of her own journey with type 1 diabetes.

The debate focuses on the importance of medical technology and, more specifically, on how important diabetes tech is—as we have heard—for individuals in managing their diabetes. According to Diabetes Scotland, diabetes tech aids people in monitoring their blood sugar levels or taking insulin, and includes insulin pumps, continuous glucose monitors and hybrid closed-loop systems, which connect a continuous glucose monitor with an insulin pump that adjusts insulin levels automatically in many instances. That tech spares people who are living with diabetes from having to do painful finger-prick tests regularly. Given that the technology is a vital part of the lives of people who live with type 1 diabetes, proper funding is essential in ensuring that their needs are met.

Last summer, the Scottish Government recognised that with its £8.8 million commitment to improving access to diabetes technology, which is

very welcome. The same commitment was meant to align with the Scottish Health Technologies Group's recommendations and with the SIGN guidelines, which are designed to give young people and children access to technology in such a way that they can exercise choice.

Despite that positive commitment, however, concerns remain regarding accessibility and choice. For example, numerous families feel that their needs are not being met, because, although central funding covers insulin pumps and glucose monitors for those under 18, their options are still quite limited. That can contribute negatively to people's quality of life, which is already impacted by managing their diabetes. According to IPAG Scotland, managing type 1 diabetes means—as we have heard—that an individual has to make an extra 180 decisions every day. Accessible technology that provides real-time information can significantly improve that daily challenge.

However, the challenges remain on-going, so we need to consider what can be done to address them. Fortunately, organisations such as Diabetes Scotland and IPAG Scotland have spelled out some recommendations with that goal in mind. They have advocated for regular reviews on how funding is used, promoting greater access to hybrid closed-loop systems and tailoring approaches for paediatric-specific needs such as remote monitoring. Moreover, they have pressed for ensuring that guidelines are followed by all health boards and clinical staff to ensure safety, and that patients and their families are informed of all available choices in diabetes tech so that they are empowered through making their choice.

There are currently 36,000 people across the country who are living with type 1 diabetes, and it is clear that there is a need to address shortcomings in respect of the diabetes technology that could help them to lead better lives. I join campaigners in welcoming the financial commitment that the Scottish Government made last June, but also in believing that that is only one part of a long-term approach.

I look forward to working with members on all sides of the chamber to help to make that goal a reality, and I am eager to see what positive changes we can bring about in 2025 for people who are living with diabetes.

17:37

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank my colleague Foysol Choudhury for securing the debate; his motion could not be more timely. The progress that has been made on diabetes technology illustrates the very best of human ingenuity. Before 1921, a diabetes diagnosis was a death sentence. Now, just over 100 years later,

we have modern technology—such as the hybrid closed-loop system, which can monitor and administer insulin without any input from the patient—that allows those with type 1 diabetes to live longer lives and to eat what they want, and even to win Olympic medals. Diabetes no longer has to be the burden that it once was. The technology is incredibly effective. It can fundamentally change a patient's life and can bring blood sugar down to safe levels, thereby avoiding further complications.

The problem is, however, that the tech is not making its way to patients quickly enough. I constantly receive correspondence from constituents who are simply unable to access that life-changing technology. My own freedom of information request revealed that there are almost 1,000 people who are sitting on waiting lists for an HCL system in NHS Lothian. It is incredibly disappointing that, even in our own capital city, we are unable to make progress on rolling out HCL systems at the scale that is needed. It is vital that we invest in that technology, and we must not let the up-front costs of such tech cloud the massive impact that it has both on patient outcomes and on the NHS more widely.

We all know that our NHS boards are under immense pressure and that staff are doing their best in challenging circumstances. However, if we could roll out the technology faster, the benefits to our NHS would be extraordinary. The statistics that I was given by Dexcom last year show that diabetes costs NHS Scotland £1 billion a year, £800 million of which is spent on treating avoidable complications associated with diabetes. That is why investing in the tech is vital: it saves money and capacity across the NHS.

I appreciate the minister's collaborative approach to the issue and I have corresponded with her on many occasions, but we need to keep pushing for action, because patients do not feel that they are getting the support that they need. One of my constituents thought that he had been on the waiting list since 2021; it was only on inquiring that he found out that he had not been added to the list until 2023. Another constituent has been unable to get access to the HCL system, as only one manufacturer offers the device in Scotland.

Yet another constituent of mine was on a trial for the HCL system and was amazed at how life changing it was. Her haemoglobin A1C levels dropped, and she saw vast improvements in her glucose levels. On completion of the trial, however, she was told that she would not be able to keep the HCL system, and she had to revert back to her previous system instead.

Those with diabetes already have greater pressures placed on them, whether it is the extra

financial cost of ensuring that their snacks and emergency glucose are always supplied or the pressure—which both Emma Harper and Foysol Choudhury mentioned—of having to make 180 extra decisions a day. Access to diabetes tech is not just about people’s health; it is about giving people a much greater quality of life.

We must keep working on the issue together, and I hope that the Scottish Government continues to work constructively with members and with health boards to ensure that the tech is rolled out as soon as possible, because it cannot be right that people in Lothian who are on low incomes are less likely to be able to access diabetes tech. It is life-changing tech: it keeps people well and healthy and enables them to be economically active. In addition, it is an investment that will pay back and will save our NHS money. We therefore need those patients who could benefit from such tech now to receive it as soon as possible.

17:41

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the member on securing the debate.

I take members back to a time when the only method to manage diabetes—indeed, it is still the case for too many—was the constant pricking of fingers to obtain a blood sample, checking it and then having to inject insulin to redress falling blood glucose levels. That had to be done not just once in the course of a day—a person’s type 1 diabetes dictated their daily life.

I have had colleagues, and I have family members, with type 1 diabetes who were once required to use that system. Often, it was only when they became aware that their levels were falling that they tested their glucose levels. If the level had gone too far, there was the danger of a hypo, with all the health problems that would follow. That was a particular worry for children with diabetes.

Today, there are very welcome technical devices—I am not good on technicalities, so I will tread warily. For example, there is the flash glucose monitor and there is the continuous glucose monitor, and there are hybrid variations thereof. With a CGM, as I understand it, a person’s latest sugar levels show up on their device or mobile phone automatically, transmitted by Bluetooth. With a flash glucose monitor, it is only when they wave or scan their device over the sensor—the little white button on their arm—that they get their sugar readings. I have seen that in operation with a family member, who has also added to it an automatic pump for insulin. That is what I mean by talking about hybrid variations.

Those systems have to be tailored to the individual; it is not simply a matter of the NHS handing over the devices. First, they must be clinically recommended, and then an individual must be taught how to use them and must feel confident in their use. However, it makes such a difference to everyday living, as I have observed with my family member. Managing diabetes becomes an everyday thing, without a constant and inhibiting concern about blood sugar levels. With experience and the right technical device, the technology takes care of itself. As I said, I have seen that with the experience of my family member, who has—as I explained—a hybrid flash device plus the automatic pump, which is very discreet. For parents and carers of children, it is a godsend. As members will appreciate, the technology can be accessed and monitored by a parent or carer, including overnight, when worries may grow.

Last year, the Scottish Government provided Scotland-wide funding of £8.8 million for the expansion of access to diabetes technologies to support the purchase of new kit, although that funding is not allocated directly to NHS boards but is, as I understand it, part of their overall support. I very much welcome the investment, not only—as others have mentioned—as preventative spend, but, more importantly, because it releases those who are living with diabetes from the worry and travail of the old methods.

I know that issues remain with the supply of pumps and associated technologies, as others have mentioned, so I will check again with NHS Borders the position for 2025, and I await the minister’s comments in her summing up. Enabling access to such technologies seems to be the right and decent thing to do for people with type 1 diabetes, and it will prevent more serious health issues in the mid to longer term.

17:44

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I, too, congratulate my colleague Foysol Choudhury for bringing the debate to the chamber. Most people know that I have a long-standing interest in health technology generally and in diabetes specifically. Emma Harper and I co-convened the cross-party group on diabetes in the previous parliamentary term, which is when I began to really understand the importance of technology in the treatment of diabetes, and the cross-party group pushed hard for the adoption of such technology.

I have a specific interest because I used to coach somebody with type 1 diabetes. Along with him, I had to learn how to manage his condition while he was training. He would do a finger-prick test when he arrived at training to understand his blood sugar level, which he would manage with a

certain fizzy drink. He had to do finger-prick tests throughout the training session to continually manage his blood sugar level. He was very successful—he medalled at Scottish level in the 1,500m. As members are aware, I am an advocate of managing health with exercise and diet, and I feel that being a sportsman gave him an incentive to manage his condition as well as he could using that method.

I also have a friend whose daughter was born with type 1 diabetes, and she had to do the pin-prick test on her stomach. I tear up every time I think about the fact that my friend used to pin-prick his stomach at the same time, so that it was a shared experience—he is a wonderful parent.

Back when I was co-convener of the cross-party group on diabetes, about five or six years ago, we were pushing the issue and the Government provided money for a trial of the technology. As members have said, the positive impact on people's quality of life is obvious. For example, parents do not have to wake their children in the middle of the night to test their blood sugar level. It means that much more normality in life is possible.

As has been said about the cost to the NHS, something like 10 per cent of the Scottish health budget is spent on treating diabetes and its complications. We could take all that money and reinvest and reinvest and reinvest. We need a programme that pushes the approach further upstream, so that we get to a stage where those who suffer from type 1 diabetes specifically have access to this technology. It is such an obvious thing to do, and it worries me that it is taking this long. Here we are, still talking about the issue five or six years on from my time as co-convener of the CPG.

I will move to a slightly different area and mention type 2 diabetes. Exercise, diet and changing behaviour can, in many cases, not only prevent type 2 diabetes—it can certainly prevent it from deteriorating—but even put it into reverse. That is important because saving money that is spent on treating type 2 diabetes will release even more money in order to develop a cure and treatments for type 1 diabetes.

I will stop there. I again congratulate my colleague Foyso Choudhury on bringing the debate to the chamber, and I thank him for allowing me to speak on diabetes once again.

17:49

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Foyso Choudhury for bringing the debate to the chamber. I was really interested to see it on the agenda and to hear from members tonight.

We have spoken previously in the chamber about diabetes and diabetes care, so I know that there is enthusiasm among members for advancing the issue, and I know that some members bring expertise to the debate. I hope that Emma Harper knows that I have great respect for the work that she has done on the cross-party group and the way in which she tells her stories.

From a previous role, I, too, have some experience of working with people who have diabetes. I spent many years working as a dietician in the NHS and, in my early career, I covered diabetic clinics along with a specialist diabetic nurse and other members of a multidisciplinary team. Diabetes is a condition that patients manage and live with, and I learned much about the adaptability, resilience and humour of people following the diagnosis of such a life-changing condition.

The work also gave me a lifelong admiration for the dedication of NHS staff in building up relationships with patients who have enormous hurdles to overcome in their many years of treatment. I would like to give a big shout out to all those staff, including those who work in the background in research and medicine development and, as we are discussing tonight, medical technology.

In a previous debate, we spoke about insulin and its relationship to diabetes and we all agreed that it is one of the greatest medical breakthroughs in history. It changed the lives of many millions of people by ensuring that the diagnosis of type 1 diabetes was no longer a death sentence and by enabling them to have a life worth living. I still think about our responsibility to make life all that it can be for people and how, as medical technology advances, we must make sure that it works for those who need it most.

As we have heard from members, and in the words of the motion, the Parliament recognises

“the vital importance of medical technology”.

Tonight, we are focusing on real-time continuous glucose monitoring and how it can transform the lives of those who use insulin and help them to manage their condition.

Other members have mentioned the research that is being done at Stanford University, and we understand that people who have diabetes make about 180 more decisions each day about their care and health than those without it. Access to diabetes technology can and will help to reduce that burden. If we want people to live full lives, we have a responsibility to use the technology. Foyso Choudhury explained that eloquently when he shared Jane's story.

Managing lifelong conditions can take its toll on individuals and their families, so it is important that, as parliamentarians, we acknowledge our role in fighting for services and for having every possible advantage made available to people as quickly as possible, so that they get maximum benefit—and, of course, for those services being made accessible to all.

There are many elements that we could bring to tonight's debate, including diabetes diagnosis, treatment and life with diabetes in general, but this short debate gives us the chance to raise only one or two issues. In the time that I have left, I want to talk a little bit about tackling the inequalities around diabetes care, particularly the link between inequality and diabetes outcomes.

From years of research on the realities of living with diabetes, particularly for those who come from a more deprived background, we know that those who live in the most deprived homes are up to twice as likely to develop complications from diabetes as those who live in the least deprived homes. The stark figures show that, for many, the reality is that where they were born unfairly lays out their future, particularly when it comes to health and health outcomes.

Technology can play its part in tackling health inequalities. So, as we fight for those technologies to become part of mainstream care, I want us all to reflect on the availability of and access to medical care, treatment and technology. Let us ensure that technology in diabetes care is at the forefront of reducing health inequalities and that it helps to improve the lives of many of our constituents.

17:54

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank my Lothian colleague and friend Foysol Choudhury for securing the debate this evening. It is an important debate, and I welcome and support the campaigning that he has been doing on the issue for some time. For those of us who are lucky enough to represent Lothian and constituencies that are covered by NHS Lothian, this is an important issue, and I hope that the minister will hear my call for action this evening.

I welcome the constituents who are in the chamber with us. The service levels that are being provided in Lothian are falling way below what any of us would expect, and that has to be addressed by ministers. I have spoken to many constituents who have now given up on the idea that the technology will be available to them in their lifetimes—other members have raised that issue—and that has to change.

The Government has said that it wants the technology to be made available—I have several letters from ministers that say just that—but those

of us who attend NHS Lothian briefings know that that is not the case. The financial situation that the health board faces, with a projected shortfall of £133 million, means that it has looked for cost savings in this area—now, only pregnant women and children will be able to access the technology. We need that to change, and I hope that ministers are acutely aware of the situation in Lothian and the need for that issue to be addressed. In its diabetes improvement plan, which was published in February 2021, the Government said that it was committed to providing the technologies to improve the quality of life for people living with type 1 diabetes.

It was interesting to listen to some of the stories, because one of my good friends from school had type 1 diabetes. We worked in a pub together, and I was just thinking of the way in which she went about her working life in the pub. I was in the kitchen with her at the time, and she would test and grab a drink and then go back to work.

The technology that we now have can transform lives. I welcome Emma Harper's advocacy—she is living proof of the technology's use, and we should all want our constituents to have access to it. It is estimated that the technology can add another 10 years to people's life expectancy. However, it is about not just life expectancy but potential cost savings, because we know that diabetes can lead to additional accident and emergency department admissions, and blindness, and those of us who visit hospitals—I previously had the health portfolio—have talked to patients who have had amputations because of their type 1 diabetes. Therefore, we know that the issue will cost the NHS even more in the future.

I hope that the debate has presented the opportunity for, as the Diabetes Scotland charity has called for, the Scottish Government to consider matching the actions that are being taken in England, where a five-year implementation plan has been funded and the roll-out of the closed-loop systems has been announced. It was put to me that, if this was a drug, not a piece of technology, there would not be discrimination in different health boards, especially in NHS Lothian, in my region. I hope that ministers will take that on board. If the technology is to be provided, it must be provided on an equitable basis across our country. There is a lack of provision of the technology for my constituents in Lothian. In fact, it has been suggested to me that it is likely that only 30 adults will receive a pump in the next two years. The waiting list currently stands at 1,200, so we need action.

I hope that the debate has presented the opportunity for ministers to hear our concerns, especially those of Lothian members, and that, in the minister's summing-up speech, we will hear

exactly what the Scottish Government intends to do.

17:58

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I, too, thank Foysoil Choudhury for bringing the motion to the Parliament. He has reminded us clearly of the daily challenges that people who are living with diabetes face and how technology can transform their lives.

I thank colleagues across the chamber for their contributions and for sharing their experiences of living with diabetes or supporting people who do. I always think that it is helpful when someone who does not live with diabetes shares their experiences, so I thank Brian Whittle for that.

It has been a very informative debate, and I have been heartened to hear that members across the chamber recognise the importance of expanding access to diabetes technology. I thank all those who have travelled here tonight, those who are watching and those who have generously shared their stories with me and colleagues. I also thank Carol Mochan for raising the importance of not forgetting about inequalities and for setting out how diabetes can impact on different areas of Scotland.

It remains the Scottish Government's ambition to make diabetes technology available to everyone in Scotland who would benefit from it. The Scottish Government has committed to doing that for all children and young people, as well as to working towards universal access for adults. I regularly hear from people who are living with diabetes about the importance of continuing to work towards making the technology available to all.

I would like to reflect briefly on where things were just one year ago. Many members told me of the considerable waiting lists that constituents were facing and that many of them had a sense of hopelessness about the lack of protected funding. Miles Briggs, Foysoil Choudhury and Sarah Boyack all talked about the situation in NHS Lothian. I am aware of that situation and I am pleased that my officials are working very closely with NHS Lothian. We discuss that issue a lot.

I recognise that there is more to do, and I am under no illusion that the job is complete. Before I touch on some of the key issues that have been raised, I would like to outline the significant progress that we have made since last year. However, before I do that, I thank the local services and give them credit for their unwavering commitment to the programme. The process has been no mean feat, so I highlight the work that each and every diabetes team has had to put into it. As Emma Harper did, I also thank the staff for

the non-judgmental support that they provide to people who are living with diabetes.

This year, we entered a new phase of delivery by establishing a national programme. The primary aim of it was to remove the postcode-lottery elements of care that many people were experiencing. The programme began in May last year, with an initial investment to support 2,100 individuals to receive an insulin pump or a continuous glucose monitor, or both, and to create a hybrid closed-loop system. That was on top of the £29 million that we have invested in diabetes tech since 2016.

The initial focus of the programme has been to provide a closed-loop system to all children and young people who want it. As it stands, 64 per cent of children who are living with type 1 diabetes have access to a closed-loop system, and we expect the figure to be around 80 per cent by the end of this financial year. Some health boards have already exceeded that target. We know that access for young people in Scotland is catching up with the situation in the rest of the world. I reiterate how life changing that will be for many families, which Christine Grahame spoke about.

One reason why we have been able to do that at pace is that we commissioned a new national onboarding service. That team is comprised of highly experienced diabetes clinicians and, which is most important, peer-support staff, who all help people to learn to navigate living with their new normal, which is their living with a closed-loop system.

Although I am proud to outline to members the significant progress, I also recognise the challenges that remain for many people. As others have said, more than 35,000 people are living with type 1 diabetes in Scotland, and demand for diabetes tech currently outstrips the capacity in the system.

I will respond to Annie Wells's concerns about brand choice for children. I am aware that there is growing concern that children cannot access the most appropriate technology for their needs, but I reiterate that the national programme has provided adequate funding to allow all local services to provide any of the CGM brands that are available on the market. However, it is important to note that a prescribing clinician might feel that they can maximise access to the kits, while providing safe and effective care, by using more cost-efficient brands. I cannot discuss the cost details, but there are significant differences. Our clinicians may offer a lower-priced brand to allow more of their patients to access the technology, although individuals and families should continue to have conversations with their clinician team. I again reassure members that the national programme is

committed to supporting brand choice for children and young people.

Mr Choudhury and others asked about the plan. Although other nations have published strategies and targets, we were fortunate in Scotland to be able to kick-start a significant roll-out programme as soon as funds were released. We have also found that negotiating with suppliers to secure bulk national deals has allowed us to secure the best deals; setting targets for the numbers might have prevented us from achieving the current prices.

We are also able to work with officials to secure appropriate investment year on year and to ensure that it reaches as many people as possible. I reassure members that, although we do not have a formal publication, we are rolling out at pace, which is, I am sure, what matters to most people who are living with diabetes.

Brian Whittle's comments allow me to talk about the preventative side and the work that we are doing on the population health framework with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and in collaboration with Public Health Scotland, directors of public health and key local, regional and national partners. I look forward to working closely with Mr Whittle and others on a clear focus on prevention of type 2 diabetes. I completely understand that different approaches are required for people living with type 1.

Christine Grahame: People with type 2 diabetes are sometimes blamed for their condition, with people saying that it is a lifestyle issue. That is wrong. I know perfectly well that that is not the case, because a member of my family who is as fit as a fiddle and who has a handicap of 2 at golf was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. I just want to put that on the record. There is a blame game attached, sometimes.

Jenni Minto: I agree with Christine Grahame. I have a close friend who lives with type 2 diabetes, which I would suggest is nothing to do with her lifestyle.

I will close by mentioning the continued push for a faster and firmer commitment to diabetes tech. I want to be clear that the Scottish Government continues to strive for universal access but, unfortunately, neither the system nor the finances can support that happening overnight. Advances in technology are frequent, and we want to be ready to pivot to any opportunity to provide support at pace. I am unable to confirm the expansion rate for the next financial year, but we continue to work with all stakeholders to understand what support is required to do that. However, the funding that we set aside in May is continual.

I reiterate my thanks to the type 1 community across Scotland, which has enabled this

transformational change, and I hope that we can continue to work together to support access to tech for all.

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I know that Jenni Minto is closing, but can she confirm that that funding is recurring? Is that correct?

Jenni Minto: Yes—the £8.8 million is recurring.

As Sarah Boyack has asked for, I will continue to work collaboratively with members from across the chamber and with health boards to ensure that we give those who are living with type 1 diabetes the right support at the right time.

Meeting closed at 18:07.

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

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