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Thursday 9 January 2025

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 9 January 2025

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time. In order that we can fit in as many questions as possible, I would be grateful for short and succinct questions and responses.

Glasgow Low-emission Zone (Taxi Drivers)

1. **Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what support is available to taxi drivers in Glasgow to help them comply with the low-emission zone. (S6O-04177)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Comprehensive support has been provided to help the taxi trade to adapt to low-emission zones. In the Glasgow region, £3.4 million has been provided through the LEZ retrofit fund for taxi operators to upgrade their existing vehicles. More than 400 taxis have been retrofitted to the LEZ emission standard as a result.

The LEZ support fund also provides a cash scrappage grant for microbusinesses. More than 700 vehicles in the Glasgow region, many of which are taxis, have been disposed of through the scheme. The switched-on taxis loan has provided more than £5.5 million in interest-free loans since 2016 to support Glasgow based hackney and private-hire operators to purchase new and used electric taxis.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Taxi drivers in Glasgow are keen to play their part in the transition to net zero, but at present they struggle to access some support to comply with the low-emission zone in the city, particularly with the liquidation of Vehicle Repowering Solutions, one of only two companies that offered retrofits under the clean vehicle retrofit accreditation scheme.

I previously wrote to the cabinet secretary to raise taxi drivers' concerns, but the issue remains. Will she meet me and representatives of the taxi industry to address their concerns?

Fiona Hyslop: As the member knows from previous correspondence, we proactively dealt with those taxi drivers. When the problem with the supplier occurred, taxi operators who had a retrofit grant offer for liquid petroleum gas conversion were given the option to change to an alternative taxi retrofit supplier. Some operators have already taken up that offer.

The Energy Saving Trust wrote to all affected operators and invited any taxi operators who faced losing a deposit to contact the trust if they were unable to reclaim their deposit. However, none did so. Glasgow City Council also offered affected taxi operators further time-limited exemptions to LEZ enforcement.

If there are continuing issues, notwithstanding what is already happening, I am concerned. If Pam Duncan-Glancy writes to me with illustrations of those continuing issues, we will be able to identify the best resolution and set up a meeting if necessary. However, as I said, the Energy Saving Trust and Glasgow City Council have done proactive work on the issue.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Last month, Glasgow City Council announced a consultation that could, ultimately, lead to the current cap on cab numbers being scrapped, retained or reviewed. Considering the fact that the LEZ has already undermined Glasgow's late-night economy, does the cabinet secretary accept that a reduction in cab numbers might further damage that sector?

Fiona Hyslop: Clearly, the licensing of taxi drivers is an issue for local authorities. I assume that the Conservatives do not want to centralise that.

There is an issue on footfall. Earlier in 2024, it was recognised that there had been no reduction in footfall in Glasgow. Any subsequent reduction in footfall might have happened as a result of cost of living pressures or other issues. However, unlike the local authorities for other major cities in Scotland, Glasgow City Council does not have an age limit on taxis and, as a result, there is a higher proportion of older, non-compliant taxis in the Glasgow fleet for a variety of different reasons.

There are different experiences in different cities. Those issues are best addressed by Glasgow City Council, but I recognise Sue Webber's concern in raising them.

Local Government Services (Banffshire and Buchan Coast)

2. **Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reported calls from constituents to save local government services, in light of reports that some services across Banffshire and Buchan Coast are under threat of closure. (S6O-04178)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): The Scottish Government has increased local government funding to record levels. If the Scottish budget is supported by Opposition parties and passes, Aberdeenshire Council will receive its formula share of more than £1 billion of additional

funding for local government. That would deliver an increase for the council of 7.4 per cent, which would help it to maintain services across Banffshire and Buchan Coast without the need for big increases in council tax. However, local authorities have their own powers and responsibilities, and it is for locally elected councillors to make decisions on how best to utilise the total funding that is available to deliver services for their local communities.

Karen Adam: I welcome the extra investment for our public services.

Before Christmas, it was a pleasure to work with community activists in Banffshire and Buchan Coast to fight the proposed closures of libraries across the north-east. Initially, we were delighted when the Conservative administration of Moray Council announced a U-turn on its proposed closure of Cullen library. Only hours later, we were crushed when the council U-turned on its U-turn.

Libraries are more than just buildings: they are a lifeline for many. What more can we do to ensure that essential public services such as libraries are protected?

Ivan McKee: The Scottish Government places great importance on public libraries and we believe that everyone should have access to library services. Although it is for locally elected councillors to manage their day-to-day business and decision-making processes, any decision about public libraries must be considered extremely carefully. Local authorities should continue to work in partnership with communities to explore new ways of delivering essential front-line services based on local needs.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland (Lab): A number of my constituents in North East Scotland, including in Banff and Buchan, have contacted me with concerns about the impact of local government funding changes on local services. In particular, the issue of library closures in Aberdeenshire has been raised repeatedly with me in response to reports that branches may close due to supposed reduced footfall.

I cannot stress enough to the minister how crucial public libraries are to our communities, and that they must be protected. Does the minister agree that meaningful public consultation is vital before any decisions are taken on library closures?

Ivan McKee: I absolutely agree with the member about the critical importance of public libraries. I recognise the value that they add to the local community in my constituency in Glasgow, and I agree that ensuring that the community has been adequately consulted is an essential part of any changes that local authorities might want to make to the provision of library services.

Planning Regulations (Nuclear Power)

3. Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to reform planning regulations to enable the construction of new nuclear power stations. (S6O-04179)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): The Scottish Government's position on traditional fission nuclear energy is clear: we do not support the building of any new nuclear power stations in Scotland under current technologies. New nuclear power would take years, if not decades, to become operational and would come at a high cost. Instead, the significant growth in renewables—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: When the cabinet secretary is responding, I would be grateful if members listened, as a matter of courtesy.

Gillian Martin: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Instead, the significant growth in renewables, storage, hydrogen and carbon capture provides the best pathway to net zero by 2045 and will deliver affordable, resilient and clean energy supplies for Scotland.

Stephen Kerr: What a dreadful answer that was. We really need a Scottish Government that sees nuclear energy as the crucial clean energy technology that it is—not a Government that denies science—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: I recently listened to young Scots apprentices in the nuclear sector. They were a highly impressive group of young people. They said that they were going to have to move away from Scotland and take their skills to other parts of the United Kingdom if they wanted to pursue their careers. Why is the minister prepared to say goodbye to these highly skilled young people, and how is any of her characteristic negativity on the issue in Scotland's national interest?

Gillian Martin: Nuclear workers in Scotland are highly skilled people who have extremely transferable skills that will be indispensable for the energy sector as a whole in Scotland. However, I think that we can be assured that they will not be moving to Hinkley Point. Originally estimated to cost £18 billion and to be complete in 2017, it is now estimated to cost £46 billion and is expected to be complete in 2031 at the earliest. That is hardly an advertisement for nuclear power.

Rural Pharmacies (Investment)

4. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to invest in front-line primary

healthcare to support rural pharmacies. (S6O-04180)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): The Government continues to support community pharmacies, including rural pharmacies, by delivering the largest-ever increase to funding for two years in a row. That has delivered a total of £422 million in guaranteed funding for community pharmacies across Scotland in this financial year.

In addition, there is a guaranteed minimum target income for essential small pharmacies, most of which are rural, and a pharmaceutical needs weighting payment, which acknowledges both demographics and the deprivation that is associated with a patient's postcode. Those measures help to support rural pharmacies by ensuring that they are not disadvantaged because of their location.

Finlay Carson: Many operators in my constituency say that their reserves have been wiped out because the medicine tariffs that are paid by NHS Scotland have failed to keep pace with the rapidly increasing costs of medicine, resulting in pharmacists having to, in effect, subsidise national health service medicines out of their own pocket.

Community pharmacies provide a vital service, with increasing demand in remote and rural areas. They are hugely valued public services that are operated by private contractors, and they have been underfunded consistently in recent years. Many face an accumulative £20,000 to £30,000 a year increase in operating costs as the new minimum wage and national insurance rates kick in, with no internal mechanism to absorb the increases.

In the light of those funding pressures, will the minister set out what support the Scottish Government will provide to community pharmacies? Will the Scottish Government consider the option of the NHS exemption for national insurance contributions being applied to NHS contractors?

Jenni Minto: Before I respond to Finlay Carson's question, I thank community pharmacies across Scotland for the work that they do in their communities all year round but especially at this time of year. They are an integral part of supporting people through the winter from a preventative care perspective and by providing a wide range of pharmaceutical services.

I meet Community Pharmacy Scotland regularly, and the issue of payments is always on the agenda. I have undertaken to write to NHS National Services Scotland with regard to Community Pharmacy Scotland's frustrations about receiving payments. However, as I pointed

out in my original answer, over the past two years, the funding settlement from the Scottish Government for community pharmacies has been very good.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I recognise that addressing issues in rural primary care is a key priority for the Scottish Government. Will the minister outline how primary care services such as pharmacies will be supported through the upcoming Scottish budget? Will she join me in encouraging colleagues from all parties to support the budget to enable plans to come to fruition?

Jenni Minto: I agree whole-heartedly with Jackie Dunbar's final point. It is important to point out that the Scottish Government is investing record amounts in primary care and is on track to deliver our commitment to increasing primary care funding by 25 per cent. Our 2025-26 budget includes more than £2.2 billion of investment in primary care services, and plans for reform across the sector will take into account service needs in rural and island communities. We remain committed to investing in the national centre for remote and rural health and care.

As I indicated to Finlay Carson, our on-going negotiations with Community Pharmacy Scotland will ensure that the needs of rural community pharmacies are taken into consideration in future settlements.

Ferry Fleet

5. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to strengthen Scotland's ferry fleet over the coming year. (S6O-04181)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The ferry fleet will be strengthened with the delivery and deployment of six new major vessels from early 2025, starting with the Glen Sannox. We will also progress the procurement of seven new electric vessels and will retain a resilience vessel to cover planned and unplanned outages. Those improvements form part of the spend of more than £530 million to operate, maintain and enhance our ferry networks, as set out in the 2025-26 draft budget.

Sue Webber: It has recently been revealed that more than £7 million has been spent on the MV Caledonian Isles since it went into dry dock last year, and it will not be back in service until March. The vessel is 32 years old. Does the cabinet secretary think that it is acceptable that we still have to rely on these old creaking vessels, bearing in mind the fact that the long-promised new ferries continue to be delayed?

Fiona Hyslop: The fact that we have six new major vessels entering service and that seven new electric vessels are being procured demonstrates

that we know that we need to provide greater resilience in the fleet with new ferries, which is what we are doing. That does not include the additional procurement that will be undertaken in the second phase of the small vessel replacement programme—SVRP 2.

Those vessels are important to our islanders. We have set out an investment of £530 million in the draft budget to secure and maintain our ferry networks. I hope that that will give people confidence that we are investing and that we are supporting our island communities. That is in the draft budget, and I hope that the Conservatives can bring themselves to support it.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary give us the most recent progress update on the MV Indaal, MV Claymore and MV Lochmor? What specific improvements will those new vessels make on the routes that they will serve, and how will their addition to the fleet improve the ferry network as a whole?

Fiona Hyslop: The latest update from Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd has indicated that delivery of those vessels from the Cemre yard is expected to follow in four-monthly intervals after the delivery of the first vessel, the MV Isle of Islay.

Those vessels will be deployed on the Islay and Little Minch routes over the coming years. Along with the on-going port improvement works that we are investing in, the vessels will significantly improve services for island residents, visitors and businesses. The increase in capacity—in particular, heavy goods vehicle capacity—on the Islay route will ease current pressures and help to sustain economic growth. The additional vessel on the Little Minch routes during the summer period will increase capacity and enhance cover for the wider fleet during the winter overhaul period.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Although the additional funding in the draft budget for ferry services in Orkney is welcome, it falls short of what will be needed to allow the procurement of new ferries in Orkney. Will the cabinet secretary provide an assurance that she will lend her support to efforts to get that shortfall made up so that the new ferries that are desperately needed in my constituency can be procured?

Fiona Hyslop: When I visited Orkney as a minister, I was made well aware of the issues and concerns surrounding the council-run ferry service and the importance of supporting that. The member will be aware that, in recent years, the Government has increased support on the revenue side for the servicing and maintenance of that fleet, but it is clear that Orkney Islands Council faces big challenges. I am interested in

lending my support, where I can, to ensure that the council can progress the improvements that it needs to make to ensure that it has a resilient ferry fleet.

Employer National Insurance Contributions

6. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the impact of the increase in employer national insurance contributions on the public and third sectors in Scotland. (S6O-04182)

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): On 20 November last year, the Scottish Government published estimates of the impact of the increase in employer national insurance contributions on the public sector in Scotland. Those estimates indicate that the combined impact on the public sector and commissioned services is more than £700 million. If the United Kingdom Government's reported allocation is all that is provided, that will mean that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be short-changing services that the Scottish public depend on by more than £400 million.

Kevin Stewart: Labour's employer national insurance hike is a tax on jobs, and it will have a major impact on the delivery of services. Third sector organisations face massive bills. VSA in Aberdeen is having to find a whopping £468,000 to cover its additional national insurance bill. Has the UK Government given any indication that it will cover all the additional national insurance costs of the public and third sectors in Scotland, or is it content to let jobs and vital services wither on the vine?

Ivan McKee: The Treasury must fully fund the actual costs for Scotland's public sector and not just give a much lower-value Barnett share of the spending in England. We have a range of public sector employers, including the national health service, the police and local authorities, which need clarity on the matter to inform their spending decisions.

On 3 January, the First Minister and the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities—supported by 48 public and voluntary sector organisations—wrote to the chancellor to raise concerns about the impact of the increase in employer national insurance contributions and to seek clarity on funding.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I will do something rare and agree with Kevin Stewart in his condemnation of Labour's broken-promises tax on jobs.

However, as negotiations continue with the Treasury on compensation for national insurance liabilities, will the minister commit to ensuring that, whatever deal is reached with the Treasury, a full,

fair and proportionate amount is passed on to Scottish local councils and that they are not short-changed by the Scottish National Party Government all over again?

Ivan McKee: The member recognises that there is a gap of around £400 million. If and when we receive full payment from the UK Government, the local government allocation will form part of that and we will work with COSLA to ensure that, should the full £700 million be allocated to the Scottish Government, local authorities will receive their necessary share.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general questions. Before we move to First Minister's questions, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery the Hon Om Birla, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Parliament of India. *[Applause.]*

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Budget 2025-26

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): John Swinney said this week that, if his budget does not pass, we are playing

"right into the hands of Elon Musk."

Yes, you heard that right. The Scottish National Party budget will cause misery to hard-working Scots and struggling businesses, but, in the mind of Scotland's populist First Minister, that is a price we must all pay to defeat the shadowy forces of populism. Was it John Swinney's new year's resolution to distract people from his failings by making ludicrous claims such as that one?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I can see the shadowy face of populism right in front of me just now.

I say that a budget that protect businesses from a challenging trading environment, delivers a real-terms increase in local government funding, invests to reform and improve the national health service, gives a huge boost to housing investment, takes steps to eradicate child poverty and invests in a clean, green transition for the Scottish economy and environment is a budget worth supporting. Mr Findlay should come to his senses and vote for the Government's budget.

Russell Findlay: It is really something to hear John Swinney, of all people, preaching against populism. He is the leader of Scotland's populist party—the party of blaming others, of sowing division and of fantasy promises of easy fixes. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney sounds like a serial arsonist suddenly warning people about the risk of fire. However, despite his ridiculous rhetoric, his budget will pass because of the votes of Anas Sarwar's Labour Party, so I ask John Swinney: what sweeteners did he have to give Labour in exchange, or did Anas Sarwar just hand him a blank cheque?

The First Minister: My speech on Monday was designed to set out the very serious issues that Scotland will face if the budget does not pass. We must have cool heads and a clear process to go through to secure agreement on the Government's budget, because all that I said on Monday will come to pass if there is no agreement on the budget.

A process is under way within the Scottish Parliament to agree that and we are engaging in constructive discussions with all parties. I made it clear on Tuesday that, despite the comments that Mr Sarwar made on the radio that day, I do not in any way take the passage of the budget for granted. That is why this Government will fulfil, under my direction, its duty to engage constructively with all parties to secure a parliamentary majority and to ensure that we can deliver progress for Scotland.

Russell Findlay: Who is John Swinney trying to kid? Labour have folded and the budget will pass. Everyone knows that and he must be absolutely delighted by the weakness of Scottish Labour. This has been the cheapest budget deal in 26 years of devolution and it is typical of Labour to help the SNP, just as it did with Nicola Sturgeon's gender law and Humza Yousaf's hate crime act. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: At least that means that John Swinney will not have to strike any damaging deals with the Greens, as he has so often done in the past. Can he now rule out any new taxes or extremist policies that the Greens demand?

The First Minister: I have made it clear, as the finance secretary did in the budget statement in December, that the Government's tax proposals will not change from what is in the budget and that there will be no further tax changes from this Government in advance of the 2026 elections. I hope that that gives some tax certainty, if Mr Findlay is genuinely seeking that clarity.

As for dialogue with other political parties, I go back to what I said in my previous answers. The Government's door remains open for dialogue about the contents of the Government's budget, because I want to have as much agreement as I can possibly construct in this Parliament to support the budget measures so that we can all work together, as we have a statutory duty to do, to eradicate child poverty in Scotland. The support of any member who is willing to help the Government in our efforts to eradicate child poverty will be welcomed by me.

Russell Findlay: The first part of John Swinney's answer sounded like bad news for Patrick Harvie, but the second part was a bit less clear, so we will have to wait and see.

After almost two decades in power, John Swinney also said this week that he wants his budget to be "a turning point", but what is it that he wants to turn away from? Is it all the times that he demanded to break up the United Kingdom? Is it the ferries that he wasted a fortune on? Is it the gender reforms that he backed? Is it the damage

that he did to schools, or is it Nicola Sturgeon's toxic legacy?

John Swinney was the driving force behind every damaging SNP policy for the past 18 years. This budget is not "a turning point". Is it not just more of the same divisive, populist nonsense from John Swinney and the SNP?

The First Minister: I think that the budget has touched a bit of a raw nerve with the Conservatives. I will tell Mr Findlay a few things about the Government's budget. Save the Children has encouraged

"all political parties in the Scottish Parliament to support the budget so children can benefit from the positive steps taken."

The Scottish Retail Consortium said:

"Whilst the proposed Scottish Budget is far from perfect"—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: I will start again so that the Conservatives can properly hear what the voice of business is telling us about the budget. The Scottish Retail Consortium said:

"Whilst the proposed Scottish Budget is far from perfect and has flaws, there is much in it that retailers can get behind."

It added:

"our hope is that ministers and"—*[Interruption.]*

Rachael Hamilton is now laughing at the voice of business in our Parliament. That is where the Conservative Party has now descended to. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: The Scottish Retail Consortium said:

"our hope is that ministers and MSPs can work collegiately to pass the Budget".

In addition, Shelter Scotland has welcomed the Government's investment in affordable housing, and local government has indicated that the budget represents a strong investment package.

There we have it. The views of child poverty organisations, business, local government and the housing sector in Scotland demonstrate that this is a budget for unity in Scotland. It is not a surprise that the populist Conservatives are having nothing to do with it.

National Health Service

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** In October, I warned of a winter crisis brewing in our national health service but, instead of taking action to

develop a plan to keep patients and staff safe, the Scottish National Party buried its head in the sand.

The result has been deadly chaos. Over Christmas, 1,642 people waited more than 12 hours in accident and emergency departments, ambulances were put on red alert, a flu wave piled even more pressure on our hospitals, and thousands of people waited for hours even to get their calls answered by NHS 24.

Dr Iain Kennedy of the British Medical Association said:

“The NHS as we know it will struggle to see out another year”.

That is the deadly consequence of John Swinney plunging our NHS into a permanent crisis. Is that not the clearest sign that the SNP is taking Scotland in the wrong direction?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The first thing that I want to acknowledge is that the national health service has been under the most acute pressure in the past few weeks. We saw that rising in December with the emergence of flu cases, which resulted in very high demand on hospital services. The number of hospital admissions as a result of flu nearly doubled from 708 in the week ending 15 December to 1,382 in the week ending 22 December. The number of admissions then rose further to 1,596 in the week ending 29 December. Those statistics are an indication of the severity of the crisis that we have seen because of flu in our country.

Thankfully, the number of hospital admissions fell by 36 per cent in the week ending 5 January, but the number of hospital admissions in the week ending 29 December was the highest in any given week—as recorded by Public Health Scotland—going back to 2010. I have said that to explain the severity of the situation that the NHS has dealt with, and I express my thanks to the clinicians, staff, ambulance personnel, NHS 24 staff, general practitioners and everyone else in the healthcare system who has given everything that they could during the past few weeks to address the situation.

The Government has always recognised that there was a need for winter planning. We did that and, despite the enormous challenges, the NHS has withstood the greatest level of pressure since 2010. I thank members of staff for everything that they contributed to achieve that objective.

Anas Sarwar: Our staff deserve praise, but they are being failed by the SNP Government, too. People across Scotland are living with the consequences of SNP failure.

Take the example of Robert, who is a retired policeman from Lanarkshire. He had to attend the accident and emergency department at Wishaw general hospital during the Christmas period due

to crippling abdominal pain. Due to a lack of beds, he was forced to lie on the floor—on the floor—in excruciating pain for five and a half hours before he was eventually given morphine and oxycodone. A nurse told the family that it could be worse: one patient had been waiting more than 50 hours for a bed.

Under John Swinney’s watch, Scots who have worked all their lives, such as Robert, are forced to endure painful, dangerous and humiliating circumstances. Robert’s distressed daughter summed it up best when she said:

“My dad gave his all for others in his career, but now I am genuinely scared that the next time something happens to him he won’t make it through because of the mess that the SNP have allowed the NHS to get into.

The SNP couldn’t run a bath, let alone the NHS.”

The First Minister: I begin by expressing my apologies to Robert and his family for the experience that he had in Wishaw general hospital. I accept that the pressure on the NHS has made the treatment of individuals very challenging and difficult. People will not have had the experience that they should have had when receiving hospital care. I acknowledge and accept that, and I make no attempt to deny it. However, I have to say two things.

First, the level of demand and the pressure on the NHS must be acknowledged, given the scale of the pressure that we face as a consequence of the flu outbreak that we are dealing with.

Secondly, members of staff have gone out of their way to do everything that they can—by extending shifts and contributing more than could reasonably be asked of them—to do their level best for patients. I accept that, in some circumstances, that will not be enough and will not have been good enough for individuals, but we have to acknowledge those two issues, which I put to Parliament. Demand has been colossal for the NHS and, in addition, staff have given their all to support individuals such as Robert.

Anas Sarwar: There is no clearer sign that the SNP is taking Scotland in the wrong direction than its woeful record on the NHS. We need faster access to general practitioners, but instead patients are forced to go to accident and emergency, plunging it further into crisis. We need to tackle long waits for treatment, but under the SNP nearly one in six Scots are stuck on a waiting list, with more than 100,000 people waiting for more than a year. We need to tackle the number of bed days that are lost to delayed discharge but, instead, thousands of people are stuck in hospital because, although they have been cleared to leave, they are unable to get a care package.

John Swinney has no plan, and his incompetence is risking the very existence of our

NHS. Is it not the case that a change of direction for our NHS cannot come from John Swinney and the SNP? It can come only with a change of Government in 2026.

The First Minister: It is interesting that the people of Scotland were promised change by the Labour Government in July. What the people of Scotland have endured is, for example, the Labour Party utterly reneging on its commitment to compensate the WASPI women—women against state pension inequality. For pensioners, the change coming from the Labour Party is the removal of the winter fuel payment, when temperatures in this country are plummeting. The Labour Party's promise of change is an absolute farce in front of the people of Scotland.

What this Government will do is concentrate on its plans to invest in and reform the national health service by ensuring that the measures in the budget are supported to improve the quality of care for people in Scotland: so that we have an expansion of frailty units to strengthen our accident and emergency capacity; so that we can expand hospital at home, which has been a huge asset to us in dealing with the winter pressures; so that we can support general practice with an extra £13.6 million; and so that we can strengthen investment in preventative measures to ensure that people are able to follow the advice—which many people did—to get the right care in the right place in advance of the winter pressures that we have faced.

All of that is contained in the Scottish Government's budget, and I am delighted that it looks as if the Labour Party has at last come to its senses and realised that this is a budget that has strong measures to support people in Scotland.

However, Mr Sarwar needs to get off the fence. It is time for Mr Sarwar to vote in favour of lifting the two-child limit. It is time for Mr Sarwar to vote to reintroduce winter heating payments for pensioners. It is time for Mr Sarwar to get off the fence and back the Government's budget.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD):** I remind the chamber that, before being elected to this Parliament, I worked for eight years for the children's charity Aberlour Child Care Trust.

To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-03675)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Cabinet will next meet on Tuesday.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Before entering politics, I was a youth worker, and I vividly remember the first time that I saw a medical device known as a Tummy Tub. They are essentially buckets filled

with body-temperature water, which simulate the womb in order to comfort babies going through withdrawal. They are needed because some babies are born addicted to drugs.

Since 2017, at least 1,500 babies have been born with neonatal abstinence syndrome, in which they show signs of drug addiction, such as uncontrollable trembling, hyperactivity and distressed crying. Aberlour wants to open more residential beds for mothers and babies—new intensive perinatal services. However, as things stand, all the funding for that ends next March.

Does the First Minister agree that those interventions require more Government money and more certainty? Scotland desperately needs world-leading drug services, because we need to stop people dying and because we need to do more to help those babies who spend the first days of their lives addicted to drugs.

The First Minister: Over the Christmas and new year period, I saw the material that Mr Cole-Hamilton published on this important issue. I acknowledge the seriousness of the point that he puts to me. No newborn baby should be born dependent on substances, and mothers should be able to get the help that they need, free from judgment and stigma. That principle underpins the Government's approach to tackling drug issues in our society, and more will be announced and demonstrated about that in the next few days.

I welcome the points that Mr Cole-Hamilton has put to me today. We can discuss those issues further to determine what assistance the Government, in its financial provisions, can make to honour my commitment that no newborn baby should be born with any form of dependence on substances. I am happy to discuss those issues with Mr Cole-Hamilton, and I am sure that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care will be able to take those discussions forward. We commit to addressing the legitimate points that Mr Cole-Hamilton has put to me today.

Energy Bills (Support)

4. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister, in light of recent freezing temperatures, whether he will provide an update on what steps the Scottish Government is taking to support low-income households with their energy bills. (S6F-03687)

The First Minister (John Swinney): This winter, we are forecasted to invest more than £65 million in our three winter heating benefits, which will provide vital support to more than 630,000 people with their energy bills. Additionally, we have increased investment in our warmer homes Scotland scheme by a further £20 million, taking the total investment to £85 million this financial

year. That will help around 1,500 additional households to save an average of £400 a year each on their heating bills, thereby helping to tackle fuel poverty. We have also invested an additional £20 million in the Scottish welfare fund—no national equivalent of which is available elsewhere in the United Kingdom—to enable councils to provide more vital support to people in crisis this winter.

Clare Haughey: The Labour UK Government promised change. It promised to cut each household's energy bills by £300 a year. Instead, since it came to power, we have seen not one energy price hike but two price hikes and an average fuel bill increase of £470 a year. That is on top of the effects of a cost of living crisis that was caused primarily by Westminster policies. Shamefully, the Labour UK Government removed the winter fuel payment from millions of pensioners; it gave no warning of its plans to do so before the election. Will the First Minister outline what steps the Scottish National Party Government is taking to bolster low-income household budgets, over and above helping directly with energy costs by restoring universal support next winter?

The First Minister: This year, we are committing more than £3 billion to policies that tackle poverty and, as far as possible, protect people during the on-going cost of living crisis. That commitment is an essential part of the Scottish Government's work. This year alone, we are spending £154 million on activities to mitigate UK Government policies through schemes such as discretionary housing payments and the Scottish welfare fund, which provide vital support to households.

Given the agenda for change that was supposed to come from a Labour Government, we might have expected that many of the issues that we were previously mitigating because of the previous Conservative Government's callousness would have been removed, but they have just been carried on. Indeed, on winter fuel payments, they have been made worse. People in Scotland will realise that it is the SNP Scottish Government that will act to protect those who face difficulty and that they will not get such support from a Labour Government.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Pensioners across Scotland have faced freezing temperatures this winter, and they will continue to do so over the coming weeks. The SNP is shamelessly trying to hoodwink pensioners by pretending that it has brought back the full winter payment for next year when it has not done so. Only the Conservatives have provided the full winter payment to pensioners—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Balfour.

Jeremy Balfour: It has not been the SNP, and it has not been Labour. Does the First Minister accept that both the SNP Scottish Government and the Labour UK Government have let thousands of pensioners go cold this winter, rather than provide the support that they deserve and require?

The First Minister: Here we have it. A member of the Conservative Party, front-bench members of which want me to cut public expenditure by £1 billion to enable us to afford a tax cut, wants me to spend more money on winter fuel payments. That is what is being put to us today: demands for a £1 billion spending cut from Conservative front-bench members and for £155 million of expenditure from a back-bench member. There is absolutely not a scrap of cohesion in the nonsense that comes from the Conservative Party each day. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: As things stand, it appears to me that the people who are most likely to vote against the Scottish Government's budget, which will include provisions to restore the winter fuel payment that was removed by—[*Interruption.*]. Mr Hoy is shouting at me, "Not this year." I say to him that, in about six or seven weeks' time, Parliament will face a vote on the budget, which will include the provision of winter fuel payments for all pensioner households in 2025-26. Will the Conservatives vote for that? Will they do so? The Conservatives want a winter fuel payment, but, in a few weeks' time, they will have a choice—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: In six weeks' time, will the Conservatives vote against a winter fuel payment for pensioners or will they not? From all that I can—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: I think that it is fair to say that we are probably all having difficulty hearing the only person who has been called to speak. Let us treat one another with courtesy and respect.

The First Minister: From what I can deduce, the Conservatives will turn their backs on pensioners in Scotland in six weeks' time. [*Interruption.*] What pensioners in Scotland can rely on is the Scottish National Party Government.

Hikvision Closed-circuit Television

5. **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is regarding the latest reported concerns on the use of Hikvision CCTV

devices by local authorities in Scotland. (S6F-03677)

The First Minister (John Swinney): We are aware that there are CCTV cameras across local authorities that could be designed by Hikvision or include Hikvision components. Any decision on security cameras in local authorities is for councils to make. Although local authorities may choose to follow the Scottish Government's lead in decommissioning all Hikvision cameras in the Scottish Government estate, they are under no obligation or duty to do so. We encourage all organisations to follow National Cyber Security Centre supply-chain security guidance when selecting a technology supplier. The guidance clearly sets out the security standards that suppliers should meet and the considerations that organisations should make during the procurement process.

Liz Smith: The First Minister is well aware of previous concerns, including in the Scottish Government, about Hikvision technology being used for Chinese state surveillance, including in detention camps in Xinjiang, and of the fact that, because of Chinese intelligence law, companies such as Hikvision can be compelled to hand over material to the Chinese Government. As a result, three of our local authorities, including Stirling Council in my region, confirmed that they would not use Hikvision CCTV anywhere in their local authority. However, that is not the case for the majority of councils, nor is it the case for Police Scotland, which uses such cameras. There is therefore a concern about the surveillance of public spaces, including schools.

If ministers are to adhere to the advice of the Scottish Biometrics Commissioner that due diligence is essential with regard to the current use of Chinese Hikvision technology in Scotland, will the First Minister outline what decommissioning has taken place of Hikvision cameras and what remains in place? There is a question about full public transparency here, so I would be grateful if the First Minister clarified that.

The First Minister: As I indicated in my earlier answer, the Scottish Government decommissioned all Hikvision cameras across its estate last year. Liz Smith asks me for a further audit of that activity. She will appreciate that I can explore that issue in relation to Scottish Government activity. In relation to my ability to explore that in independent organisations such as local authorities, I suspect that the power for me to compel such an exploration does not exist; however, I could invite them to do that.

I will take away Liz Smith's points and explore whether there is more that the Government can do to better align the activities of all public authorities in Scotland to address the legitimate points that

have been accepted by the Government and that she has put to me today.

National Planning Framework 4

6. Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on the effectiveness of the national planning framework 4 principles in creating sustainable places across Scotland that enhance human and environmental wellbeing. (S6F-03691)

The First Minister (John Swinney): National planning framework 4, which was published in February 2023, was a turning point for planning in Scotland. The Scottish Government has since monitored its impact and the delivery programme was last updated in October 2024. It showed that there has been positive progress in delivering NPF4 strategy principles and national planning policies. Planning decisions are for local planning authorities in the first instance, and we continue to work with them on applying NPF4 policies and practice.

Emerging local development plans will also reflect NPF4 in each part of Scotland. The Minister for Public Finance leads on that work, with a sharp focus on improving planning authority capacity and performance. That is a key part of our response to the housing emergency, including on-going work to unlock stalled sites for development.

Maggie Chapman: Just before Christmas, the Scottish Government chose not to call in Aberdeen City Council's decision to approve plans to build on the last remaining green space in Torry, St Fittick's community park. There is no local consent for the development, but there is overwhelming local and national opposition to it. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency has objected to the proposals on flooding grounds—and that flooding will only worsen. Torry has already borne the brunt of an unjust energy transition, losing all Torry to oil and gas infrastructure. The incinerator and sewage works loom over the city. People who live in Torry have a life expectancy that is 10 years lower than that of people in the rest of the city.

Torry should not lose its park to a corporate land grab. Will the First Minister explain to the people of Torry how the excellent principles in NPF4, which are designed to protect wellbeing and build healthy futures for our communities, are being upheld in that case?

The First Minister: I will make a few points to Maggie Chapman. I understand the importance that she and the community attach to the question, but, as it involves a live planning application that rests with Aberdeen City Council, I cannot comment in any specificity on it.

However, further to my first answer, I know that Aberdeen City Council will have to be mindful of the contents of national planning framework 4 in determining its decision on the application. On the point that Maggie Chapman puts to me, NPF4 has an effect on the consideration of the application.

Finally, I know that Ms Chapman wrote to the Minister for Public Finance on the issue and that, earlier this week, he responded by pointing out that the assessment report relating to the notification to ministers on the subject is publicly available on the Government's website. Those issues can be considered in that context.

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

Child Sexual Abuse (Mandatory Reporting)

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I know that the First Minister will be aware of the work of the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, having had regular supportive engagement with the group in his previous roles. He will also likely be aware of recent work on mandatory reporting, and of a round-table discussion on the matter that was held in the Parliament a couple of months ago, which I chaired in my position as convener of the group. Clearly, there is now a strong coalition of support for that measure from a broad range of survivor agencies and, crucially, from survivors themselves in Scotland.

In the light of the news this week that the United Kingdom Government will now introduce mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse across professional bodies, what further consideration has the Scottish Government given to adopting that approach in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I commend Mr MacGregor on his leadership of the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. He is correct that I have had a great deal of engagement with the group and with that area of policy in my previous roles in the Government.

I take the issue of child abuse extremely seriously. It is abhorrent and, as is a matter of record, the Government has taken a number of actions, including the establishment of the inquiry that is led by Lady Smith, to examine and confront the issues.

The Scottish Government absolutely accepts the point that Mr MacGregor makes about the importance of the issue being addressed by professionals. I want to be very clear in saying that, in Scotland, professionals already have a professional duty to report child abuse. A practitioner's failure to do so could constitute a

breach of their employment contract, lead to disciplinary action or give rise to a claim for civil damages. Practitioners could also be struck off social work, teaching or medical registers for gross misconduct.

We are, however, considering the United Kingdom Government's proposed planned approach to mandatory reporting, and we will consider all relevant recommendations that come out of the independent Scottish child abuse inquiry that I referred to.

RAAC-affected Homes (Aberdeen)

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Devastated owners of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete-affected homes in Aberdeen face being out of pocket, out of their homes and out of options when Aberdeen City Council purchases their homes at post-RAAC valuation rates. Claims for compensation from the Torry RAAC campaign group have seen the council point at the Government, the local MP point at the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government point at the council. Will the First Minister step in to help the residents or will he, too, duck responsibility and point at someone else?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Kerr will appreciate that the issues are complex and that there will be interaction between private and public interests. The Minister for Housing has met council leaders and has been in discussion with the city council about the issues, because leadership on the question is vested in it.

I am certainly happy to take away the question that Mr Kerr has raised about whether more dialogue would help to provide a solution for individuals, and I accept that distress and uncertainty are being caused for members of the public. I will ask the Minister for Housing to look again at the questions and to determine whether there is anything further that the Government can do to assist dialogue on the matter.

Autism Assessment and Support

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Yesterday, the National Autistic Society Scotland and Autistic Knowledge Development published a report on the embrace autism programme, which examines the benefits of having post-diagnostic support for people who receive the assessment of having autism. The results of the programme were extremely positive. For example, the number of people reporting having no purpose in life fell from one in four to one in 10, and understanding of autism rose dramatically. Unfortunately, in the current pathway, diagnosis is, essentially, an end point, whereas for people it is a starting point for their understanding of autism.

Although we know that, in 2019, 9,700 people in England and Wales were awaiting assessment, with the number rising to 78,000, we do not have comparable numbers for Scotland. Does the First Minister agree that we need to look at putting in place post-diagnostic support for people who receive such an assessment? Furthermore, before we do that, can we at least have accurate numbers on people awaiting assessment for autism and for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder?

I remind members of my diagnosis.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I accept the importance of the points that Mr Johnson puts to me. I read the report yesterday: obviously, the weakness in data is a matter of concern. I will take the point away and see whether there is more that we can do to strengthen the data that is available.

We have provided support to assist in this area through a couple of channels—the general allocation to health boards around mental health and psychological service support and, specifically, our adult autism support fund. However, I would be the first to accept that the type of assistance that Mr Johnson is talking about is unlikely to be met by the size of the resources that are currently available.

I assure Mr Johnson that we will explore the questions. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care will be happy to do so. I know that Mr Johnson will have engaged with the health secretary on those points, because I know how much of a contribution to parliamentary proceedings he has made on the subject.

I assure him that the Government will explore what is possible on whether there is more that we can do to address the findings in the report.

The Presiding Officer: Many members wish to put questions. Concise questions and responses will give more members the opportunity to do so.

Lockerbie Inquiry

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Following the recent publication of Dr Jim Swire's book on Lockerbie, and its subsequent serialisation on television, and given the resistance of the United Kingdom Government—even after 30 years—to requests to release documents relating to the atrocity, and the remaining concerns of some people, including me, about the credibility of the conviction of Abdelbaset al-Megrahi, would the First Minister support a UK inquiry?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, let me express my sympathies to those who lost loved ones on board Pan Am flight 103 and in the town of Lockerbie. I remember the event vividly. It

was terrifying for the community in Dumfries and Galloway and for all the families who were affected by the atrocity.

Members will be aware that an on-going criminal case is under way in the American courts, so I would prefer not to speculate on possible inquiries while criminal investigations and judicial processes remain open. Of course, it is a matter of fact that the Lord Advocate has been very closely involved in the preparation for criminal proceedings in the United States.

Illegal Release of Lynx

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Yesterday, the illegal release of two lynx south of Aviemore was spotted by local gamekeepers. Gamekeepers then worked with the police and the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland to safely recapture the animals, which I am pleased to say are now safe in care.

Will the First Minister join me in condemning that illegal release and in thanking all those who were involved in the capture of the animals without harming them? Will he also ask the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands to meet me to discuss the genuine concerns that were caused for my constituents by what was a very serious wildlife crime?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I agree with Mr Mountain's comments in relation to the illegal release of the two lynx. It should not have happened—it was an illegal act, and I join him in condemning it.

I am enormously grateful to everybody who contributed to the safe capture of the lynx. They have been captured by the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, which is one of the great and wonderful assets of our country. I am aware that a number of other parties assisted in the process, including Police Scotland officers and local gamekeepers.

I am certain that the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands will be happy to meet Mr Mountain to discuss his question.

National Galleries of Scotland (Art Works Project)

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): In committee evidence, National Galleries of Scotland stated that the lack of investment in its estate is increasing to "a critical level" the risk of a "catastrophic incident" in the gallery buildings. The largest project to mitigate that risk—the art works project in Granton, north Edinburgh—has yet to get off the ground. Will the Scottish Government do all that it can to expedite progress on the project? Can the First Minister assure us that no national galleries will close their doors?

The First Minister (John Swinney): In my previous answer, I made reference to the great assets of Scotland. National Galleries of Scotland is another of Scotland's great assets, and we are determined to support the galleries. The Government budget includes a record £34 million uplift for culture, and National Galleries of Scotland received a 9 per cent increase in its overall budget. I hope that that data reassures Mr Choudhury of the importance that the Government attaches to nurturing and supporting our cultural assets.

As a country, we are enormously fortunate to have our national galleries and the collections that they nurture on our behalf. The Government will engage constructively with the national galleries to ensure that they are well supported through the challenges that lie ahead.

I come back to my key point, which I made to Mr Choudhury before—or, maybe, around the time when—the Government's budget was set out, which is that we need votes to get the Government's budget through. In that answer, I promised him that there would be a big settlement for culture, and I have delivered on my word. All that he needs to do now is vote for the Government's budget, then we will all be happy.

Non-surgical Cosmetic Procedures (Public Consultation)

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome the launch of the public consultation on non-surgical cosmetic procedures, and I want to ensure that as many people as possible have the opportunity to respond to it. Will the First Minister join me in encouraging people to respond to the consultation? Their input will help to shape the action that the Scottish Government will take to improve client safety in that growing industry.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am grateful to Mr McMillan for his question and I pay tribute to the campaign work that he has undertaken on the issue for some time.

The consultation to which he refers has been brought forward by the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health in order to develop proposals for robust and effective regulation. The consultation closes on 14 February, so I encourage anyone who wishes to express a view to contribute to formulation of the approach to the issue.

National Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Research and Surveillance Unit (Closure)

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have been contacted by constituents who are concerned at reports that the national CJD

research and surveillance unit, which is based in Edinburgh, might close in March. The unit has done significant work for the past 34 years, including the identification in 1996 of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. The unit is funded through the UK Government, and I have written to the UK and Scottish health secretaries about the matter.

Can the First Minister comment on the potential closure of the unit and on concerns that no guarantee has been given about retention of the data, samples and evidence that have been accumulated over decades? Does he agree that it is vital that that work be retained and made available for current and future research?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am not familiar with the situation that Mr Ross has mentioned, but the contents of what he has put to me sound very significant. I will discuss the issue with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and explore Mr Ross's substantive points, because I understand the importance of supporting data and research. I will write to Mr Ross with a substantive answer.

Business Confidence

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): The latest Bank of Scotland business barometer shows that business confidence in Scotland rose 13 per cent in December. What assessment has the First Minister made of the findings? Can he outline how the budget will support business and thus help confidence to rise further?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Growing the economy is central to delivery of all our priorities—in particular, our agenda of eradicating child poverty and investing in our public services. The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic and I are engaged actively in supporting investment. Yesterday, the Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy and I were present at the announcement of an £800 million investment in battery energy storage activity in Scotland by Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners. That is an indication of the openness for business that Scotland represents.

The budget includes investment of £321 million through our excellent enterprise agencies, a £200 million investment in the Scottish National Investment Bank and a £15 million fund to help start-ups to grow. Those are all more reasons why the budget should be supported, so that we can all contribute to supporting growth and development of the Scottish economy, which will bring benefits to us all.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. There will be a short

suspension to allow people leaving the chamber and the gallery to do so.

12:45

Meeting suspended.

12:47

On resuming—

Scotland's Connectivity

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I ask members who are leaving the chamber and our visitors who are leaving the gallery to please do so quickly and quietly as we move on to the next item of business. Thank you for your co-operation.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-15883, in the name of Ash Regan, on expanding Scotland's connectivity from Edinburgh and beyond. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the importance of enhancing connectivity for communities, economic empowerment and Scotland's global competitiveness; welcomes the reported ambition of Edinburgh Airport in seeking US preclearance status to streamline international travel and support economic growth; notes the view that there is a pressing need to address reported current access congestion by creating a second entry via Gogar, to ensure that the airport remains accessible and fit for purpose; further notes the view that it is urgent to ensure that Glasgow, as a major city, is not left behind due to a lack of an integrated and efficient transport system; notes the calls for strategic investment in developing port infrastructure in Dundee, Aberdeen, Gourock and Leith to enhance maritime connectivity and economic opportunities; further notes the view that there is a need to upgrade major road routes, including addressing critical safety and capacity issues on the A9 in the Highlands, and notes the calls for the Scottish Government to prioritise sustainable and inclusive infrastructure development that connects Scotland internally and to the world, supporting growth and opportunity for all.

12:47

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): I am delighted to announce to members that this is my party's first members' business debate. I have chosen to use it to address the future of our great nation's connectivity by air, rail, sea and road. When we enhance our connections within Scotland and outwardly to the world, we secure economic empowerment and the prospect of opportunity for all, with no community left behind.

I will begin with the skies. Edinburgh airport is one of our key gateways to the world, and it has set its sights on obtaining US preclearance status. That is more than just a stamp on a piece of paper; securing preclearance would put Scotland on a par with some of the world's most advanced travel hubs and smooth international departures while sparing travellers the delays and uncertainties that can stifle tourism and business growth.

Removing administrative barriers showcases Scotland as an open and outward-looking nation that is ready to seize global opportunities. However, ambition alone will not suffice, and we need to ensure that access to Edinburgh airport remains unimpeded. Currently, congestion at certain times can bring parts of our capital city to a standstill, which risks our losing out on the benefits of growth.

When people cannot reliably get to and from the airport, that is a problem. We need the second access point via Gogar, which is essential not just as transport infrastructure but as a statement about our forward-thinking approach to planning—planning that accommodates the needs of residents who live in that area, businesses and visitors, and that provides a solid foundation for the next generation of Scots to build on.

We should also continue to invest in the Edinburgh tram line. It is not simply a novelty; over the past few years, it has become a reliable lifeline for many residents across our city and tourists by linking the airport to the heart of our capital city and, I hope, beyond. Extending and upgrading that system would make our capital city more accessible and more dynamic, and it would appeal to investors when they decide where to land their next venture. The Edinburgh tram line can be a model for sustainable, integrated city transport.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Where would Ash Regan like the tram line to be extended to?

Ash Regan: The member is probably aware that a number of future lines have been proposed. I am most keen—as he might understand—on the one that would come into my constituency, which would go to the Edinburgh royal infirmary.

On rail, Glasgow—one of the world's great cities—should not be left behind, either. The city lacks the direct airport connectivity that most other major cities enjoy. The Glasgow airport rail link should be more than an aspiration; it is a necessity. That was understood more than 50 years ago when the Clyde metro was first discussed in the 1970s. The link would spur increased tourism and economic development. A traveller should be able to disembark a flight and board a train that carries them swiftly and efficiently into the heart of Scotland's largest city. Glasgow, with its growing reputation for hosting major sporting events, should be hamstrung no longer by the lack of integrated transport systems that we all expect in a modern major city.

Equally important is the Edinburgh south suburban rail line. That project could elevate the quality of life for thousands of residents, expand the city's liveable footprint and promote balanced

development that does not rely purely on car-based commuting.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I agree whole-heartedly with Ash Regan's comments about the connectivity of Glasgow airport. Does she agree that work involving the Glasgow metro going as far out as Glasgow airport and taking in the Queen Elizabeth university hospital must be done at a much faster pace, so that we get connectivity across the city?

Ash Regan: The member makes a good point.

Meanwhile, the west Fife rail link has the potential to revitalise local communities and amplify the region's economic prospects while creating a back-up line between Dunfermline and Glasgow.

We also live in a world that is increasingly driven by digital convenience. It is crucial that we integrate our rail networks with modern technologies such as Apple Wallet and Google Wallet. That is not a minor detail; it is a strategy that will allow for a seamless modern experience in order to attract new generations of public transport commuters. If we want residents and visitors alike to choose our public transport, we must meet them increasingly where they live. That is, as we know, on their smartphones. We must make every journey as frictionless as possible.

Scotland's ports also hold immense untapped potential and serve as natural gateways to maintain maritime trade and tourism. I refer to Leith, Gourock, Rosyth, Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen. Cruise passengers can be a valuable resource for local economies if they are well managed. Enhancing port infrastructure could catalyse new business opportunities and create job growth in urban centres and remote coastal areas. By reimagining and revitalising those sites, we would again signal to the world that Scotland is open for business, whether by cargo ship or cruise liner.

We must also urgently address our road network, particularly in the Highlands and in the south of Scotland. Too often, safety concerns and limited capacity on routes such as the A9 and the A96 hinder the flow of goods and people and create a barrier between our rural communities and the advantages of wider economic participation. Upgrading those critical corridors is not only a matter of economic convenience but about fairness, equity and the dignity of living in any part of Scotland without feeling disconnected or being overlooked.

Then, there is the Forth road bridge—a structure that has immense potential. Currently, it has only a supporting role, alongside its newest neighbour, but I think that we need a fresh vision for that iconic structure, whether it is as a dedicated route

for electric and commercial vehicles, a venue for innovation or a catalyst for modern tourism. By transforming what might be deemed to be surplus into a valuable asset, we demonstrate the innovative thinking that keeps Scotland at the forefront of progress.

My call to the Parliament is clear: we need to think bigger by investing strategically, sustainably and inclusively in our infrastructure. Let us realise that every airport upgrade, port improvement, rail link and road expansion is a promise to our people that we believe in them and in Scotland as a competitive force on the global stage.

My debate today is not just about improving travel times or building better transport stations; it is about the kind of country that we want Scotland to be in the 21st century: open, confident and prepared to lead. Let us champion connectivity as a national priority by uniting our urban and rural communities and forging new global links that allow our people to flourish. In doing so, we will honour our responsibility to foster growth, open doors of opportunity and showcase to the world the very best that Scotland has to offer.

Let us send that clear message to the people of Scotland and the world, which is summed up well by paraphrasing the inspiring words of the MSP who reconvened this very Parliament: stop the world—Scotland is getting on.

12:56

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I warmly congratulate Ash Regan on bringing this topic to the chamber. Improving connectivity is largely reliant on the delivery of strategic transport projects. Over the past four years, there has been, in my view, no other area of devolved policy in which so much has gone wrong at such exorbitant cost and so frequently as the maladministration of our major transport projects. I say that with great sadness. That is in contrast to the records of previous Administrations of different hues.

We have seen the motorway network around the west of Scotland being made about as good as anywhere. The Forth crossing is a national icon of international standard. The Aberdeen western peripheral route and the Borders railway have improved lives immeasurably for those communities. As for Edinburgh, well, as we heard, they decided to choose the trams.

The past four years have seen vital projects flounder and fail. That includes the A9 dualling, which was promised to be completed this year, but which, we are now told, will require 10 more years. That is just not acceptable, as a delegation made clear to the First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Transport last June, when we asked for the work to be accelerated. It also includes the

equally long-promised dualling of the A96. Some £90 million has been spent on that project so far and not one metre of tarmac has been laid. A freedom of information request for the detail of that project has been denied because of the exemption that relates to internal candour or discussion. The justification for that is to maintain

“high quality policy and decision-making”.

If that is high quality, what does poor quality look like?

I want to be positive. I have always tried to offer constructive criticism, even though it seems to have fallen on deaf ears. We need a fresh approach to strategic project delivery—a *tabula rasa*, as they might say. I will briefly set out four components of an entirely fresh approach, which I can talk about only at a very high level.

First, we must take the partisan party politics out of our approach. There is consensus among the main parties, so let us negotiate and work with the main parties and not pander to our absent wine bar revolutionaries.

Secondly, put local community people, who know their communities best, in charge and involve them at all times in decision making—not just in some synthetic and bogus consultations, especially in the Hebrides with regard to Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd and Caledonian MacBrayne. I recognise the work that Brian Wilson has done on that and the various salient points that he has made.

Thirdly, there should be far more reliance on industry and civil engineering experts, and there should be more collaboration. Let such experts, independently of Transport Scotland, advise, probe, quiz, challenge and question projects—not as paid consultants in the pocket of quangos but as independent experts who know far more than politicians about what they are doing.

Fourthly, there should be candour and accountability and an end to the secrecy of the freedom of information regime. Sadly, whether it is CMAL on ferries or Transport Scotland on roads, these quangos, which should be quasi-autonomous, have become almost fully autonomous—the “quasi” has gone and there is no accountability. Everybody can see it, and it really must change, and change radically.

I am afraid to say that, for my constituents, the past four years have been wasted years. However, the cabinet secretary—who, I know, has the best of intentions—has one year left before the next election to put things right. I urge her to do so.

13:01

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Ash Regan on securing enough support to hold this debate. I might be wrong about this, but I may have been the first member to support her motion. It is certainly one of the most comprehensive motions that I have seen in some time—Ms Regan covers a lot of bases in it. I will not cover them all but will concentrate my remarks on aviation and the Clyde metro, which will impact on the region in which I live and that I represent.

The cross-party group on aviation's February 2023 report argued for a policy regime that is "supportive of aviation", with

"Stronger engagement around route development and airline support".

The inbound and outbound aviation and tourism sectors are crucial enablers for the Scottish economy. Outbound travel is worth more than £3.6 billion a year to the Scottish economy and supports the employment of more than 30,000 people across Scotland. Research conducted by Edinburgh Napier University found that air links are the most influential transport factor in the location decisions of most overseas-based businesses that invest in the United Kingdom. Aviation matters to the local and national economies, and Scotland being connected to the world matters to us all.

The motion mentions the ambition of Edinburgh airport to have a US preclearance facility such as Dublin airport has. That means that we will have to work closely with the US Government and President Trump to persuade them that they should fund such a base here, in Scotland. The boost to the economy would be fantastic and, clearly, Edinburgh airport would benefit hugely. Having flown to America through Dublin, I can tell members that it is massively more convenient to clear customs on this side of the Atlantic than it is on the other.

I wish Edinburgh airport well, but I also want Glasgow airport to thrive. There is no doubt that Glasgow airport would do even better if the transport links to and from the airport were improved. Talk of a light rail link to the airport has gone on for too long. I can think of no other major airport anywhere that does not have better connections, and fixing that for Glasgow must be a priority.

It appears that that issue might be addressed through the ambitious but, as yet, quite woolly Clyde metro project. The programme-level business case for that network is expected by 2026, and it is estimated that timescales for the project could be as long as 25 years, which is way too long.

Having an integrated transport system in the Strathclyde region is too important to be kicked this far down the road. We need Governments to commit to it. It is too big for local government to fund, and we need to get moving. We know that a region with strong connectivity will enjoy increased levels of trade. The development of Glasgow airport represents a unique opportunity to drive economic growth and prosperity in that region.

Lastly, aviation needs to decarbonise. Scotland should be at the forefront of making the new fuels of the future, but we are not at the races yet. There was an event in Parliament last night looking at sustainable aviation fuel, and we really ought to be making sustainable aviation fuel here, in Scotland. I have spoken about that many times, and the cabinet secretary knows that. We need to do better. Transport can be the engine of growth, but too often it is the opposite.

I thank Ash Regan once again for allowing the chamber to discuss these matters.

13:05

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I, too, thank Ash Regan for lodging the motion. It is incredibly important, and I was pleased to be one of the signatories to it, because it makes points that need to be made in the chamber more often. Not only am I happy that she lodged the motion, but I do not disagree with a single word that she said in her speech, nor do I disagree with any of the contributions thus far.

I say that so forcefully because the motion makes the important point that transport is not detached from the rest of public policy but is central to it. I made that point at a reception that I hosted on behalf of the Road Haulage Association. Transport is the economy—it is the fundamental connective tissue. That is true of any economy, but it is particularly true of the Scottish economy, given that what we make and produce in remote places—whether we are talking about the energy industry in the north-east, the whisky industry, which has distilleries in the Highlands and Islands, or the aquaculture industry—is so important to what makes our economy distinctive. Those places with productive capacity that make our economy distinctive and give it a competitive edge must have links with places in the central belt.

Let us take whisky, for example. It is distilled in remote parts of Scotland, but it is often bottled in the central belt. We export 43 bottles of whisky a second, and 1.5 billion bottles are produced every year. Fergus Ewing is right to talk about the importance of the A9, because the problems with that road are not simply an inconvenience. When there is a lane closure on the A9, that creates the

mother of all bottlenecks and the flow of whisky that is so important to our economy gets interrupted.

It is not only the whisky industry that is affected. All industries need transport links. I believe that, fundamentally, the economy is about moving things from point A to point B. Whether we are talking about getting supplies from suppliers to places of business or finished products to customers, goods need to be transported. If we want workers to be able to get from where they live to where they work, we need to ensure that transport is available. Transport is the lifeblood and the fundamental foundation of the economy, and we need to start talking about it as such. It is not a peripheral topic or just another policy area; it is the foundation of the economy. That is especially true in Scotland, where we have so many remote areas of production.

Of the comments that Ash Regan made, the one that I support the most is her point about the link between urban and rural. We must end the practice of talking about the urban economy or the rural economy and start talking about the urban economy and the rural economy. Our economic advantages rely on urban and rural working together, and the issues with transport get in the way of that.

I recognise that I do not have much time, but I make the point that we need to have a renewed conversation about roads. Again, far too often, we talk about roads in binary terms—we say either that roads are good or that they are bad. We should not. Roads are vitally important in providing transport links between urban and rural areas. That involves delivering the major transport projects—Fergus Ewing is absolutely right to highlight the issues with those projects—but it also involves getting the basics right.

The other night, I was talking to a haulier who told me that he is spending £30,000 a month on tyres, which wear out more quickly on the outside because we are not cutting back vegetation at the sides of our roads and our roads are not wide enough. He also said that there are not enough secure resting places for drivers.

We should have a renewed debate about transport, stop talking about roads in binary terms and get the basics right, as well as delivering strategic projects.

13:10

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland)
(Con): I congratulate Ash Regan on securing today's debate and commend her for the wording of the motion, which provides something for everyone in terms of location, by mentioning Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen, and in terms

of connectivity, by including road, rail and air while also highlighting how important connectivity is to our economy and communities.

That infrastructure is just as important as energy infrastructure, which is why it is disappointing that the Government does not bring those topics forward for debate in Government time. I can understand why the Government did not want to talk about subjects such as air travel and roads when it was shackled to the Greens, but the anti-growth, anti-aircraft, anti-car extremists have been ditched from Government, so those subjects should be at the top of the agenda again.

Infrastructure connections are the veins of our economy, spreading life and jobs to all corners of Scotland and allowing all areas to grow and prosper. That was known by the devolved SNP Government of the past, but the situation has changed completely and I am not sure why. Fergus Ewing pointed out that the Government used to do that but that the situation has changed completely in the past four years.

Let us take Aberdeen as an example. We have seen a huge private investment of £300 million in Aberdeen south harbour. It is a brilliant deepwater facility, but the planned infrastructure improvements to the city have not kept pace to maximise its economic potential. The SNP promised that £200 million would be spent on rail improvements to reduce journey times between the city and the central belt by 2026, and that project was backed by the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce because it would boost economic growth. However, the SNP abandoned that pledge and has supplied only 8 per cent of the funding. We have improved port facilities at Fraserburgh and Peterhead, and there was an SNP promise to dual the roads from Aberdeen to those places, but that project has also been dropped. Fraserburgh and Peterhead have no rail links, so they deserve decent road infrastructure.

There is to be a freeport on the Cromarty Firth to support the renewables sector, and much of the supply chain and skills for that will be in Aberdeen. The A96 was meant to be dualled by 2030, which would help to maximise the economic potential of the freeport, but that is another broken promise from this SNP Government. As has been said, the A9 was meant to be dualled by this year, but that improvement will now be at least 10 years late, which is another broken promise that means that more economic benefit will be lost. People in North East Scotland have had enough of the SNP's spin and broken promises. They want to see commitments being delivered.

We are in budget season, and improvements to road, rail and air hardly get a mention, but connectivity is important to the economic growth

that will create jobs and deliver increased revenue for us all to spend on public services.

Ash Regan was right to highlight the lack of integrated travel. It is an embarrassment that Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen airports are not connected to the rail network—something that is even more frustrating when we consider how close to those airports the railway lines are.

I have a final point to make about airports. Some years ago, the Scottish Government was looking to get air passenger duty devolved but seemed to bottle it when the Greens started pulling the strings. The devolution of APD would surely be a great opportunity to make Scottish airports more competitive and would be a lever that we could use to boost economic growth.

I thank Ash Regan for securing a debate on a topic that is vital to Scotland's future prosperity, and I urge the Government again to allocate Government parliamentary time to transport and energy infrastructure, so that we can debate those topics fully.

13:14

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): I, too, thank Ash Regan for bringing the debate to the chamber. It has been very wide ranging in content, so I hope that members will appreciate that I cannot address all the points that have been raised. I also note for the record that I am recused as a Government minister from commenting on matters relating to airspace expansion plans for Edinburgh airport.

As Cabinet Secretary for Transport, I understand the crucial and evolving role that the transport sector plays in supporting the economy. It is estimated to support more than £9 billion of Scotland's gross value added and around 150,000 jobs, which is about 7 per cent of the Scottish economy as a whole. Transport literally drives the economy.

I note that, in this short debate, more positive things have been said about transport by Mr Simpson, Mr Johnson and Ash Regan than we normally hear in the chamber. I encourage them to continue to support me in championing the positive role that transport can play. There will always be challenges and frustrations, but there is space in the chamber to champion transport, and its role in the economy, more widely.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I welcome the way in which the cabinet secretary is approaching the debate. She will be aware that Stuart Patrick, the chief executive of Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, has said that, under the aviation strategy, despite the airport-neutral approach, every single route has gone to Edinburgh airport. I

am sure that the cabinet secretary can see that, in the context of trying to achieve regional economic balance, that approach might need to change. Will she commit today to doing something about that?

Fiona Hyslop: It is really important that we support our airports and our country as a whole. There are commercial issues that mean that we have to—and should—take an airport-neutral position, but we continue to actively support Glasgow airport and its work. I hope that some positive developments can be announced at some point in the future.

I have listened carefully to members' views and noted their valuable contributions. Edinburgh airport and our other major airports in Glasgow, Aberdeen, Inverness and Prestwick provide vital connectivity to many destinations, helping to deliver significant economic and social benefits. We are committed to working with Scotland's airports and airlines to help to grow Scotland's international connectivity, particularly by developing connectivity to key international markets. That is important for tourism, business connectivity and the economy as a whole.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: I ask the member to let me develop my point. I want to address some of the points that Ash Regan raised, because she led the debate.

We are also happy to provide non-financial support to our airports when they take initiatives that can bring clear benefits to local economies or Scotland as a whole. Ash Regan provided the good example of Edinburgh airport seeking to provide preclearance for passengers travelling to the US, which we have supported for some time and continue to support. That said, preclearance is a commercial matter for Edinburgh airport and, ultimately, it would need to be approved by the relevant authorities in the United States. I and the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture have already discussed the importance of the issue with the incoming US consul general.

Douglas Lumsden: As I mentioned in my speech, the devolution of air passenger duty could be a way of boosting economic numbers and growth and making our airports more attractive. Is the Scottish Government still considering the devolution of air passenger duty?

Fiona Hyslop: Part of the agreement is to devolve APD. The issue is how we can do that in a way that does not compromise, in particular, the issues around Inverness airport. I reassure the member that the matter is being dealt with by the finance secretary as a taxation issue, and I take a keen interest in it. It is a live and current matter

and we are considering how we can use the powers that have already been devolved.

Ministers are committed to reducing aviation emissions, of course, as well as to increasing our connectivity. The reserved nature of aviation means that we will continue to influence the UK Government so that Scotland can benefit fully from its jet zero strategy for aviation decarbonisation, which applies throughout the UK. We have provided funding to enable Glasgow airport to explore the feasibility of a hydrogen production, storage and distribution hub, which would help to support zero-emissions transport at that airport. MSPs who attended the airport industry rise coalition reception, which was hosted by Jackie Dunbar MSP yesterday evening, heard more about the role that sustainable aviation fuel can play in reducing the industry's emissions, and they will have heard my positive comments about the role of airports in our economy.

On access to Edinburgh airport, which is mentioned in the motion, the Scottish Government is aware of the plans for a second access road, which are included in the recently adopted Edinburgh city plan 2030, noting that any new road will be subject to the statutory approvals process. Edinburgh airport needs to improve sustainable access. As far as possible, passengers and staff should use existing public transport options to make their journeys to and from the airport.

On Glasgow, ambitious future plans for Scotland's transport network are set out in the second strategic transport projects review. The review's recommendations represent a repositioning of our transport investment priorities. The focus is firmly on how transport can help us to protect our climate and improve lives while supporting the economy. As we have heard, the most transformative of the review's recommendations involves the Clyde metro, which represents a multibillion-pound investment. When complete, that project could better connect more than 1.5 million people to employment, education and health services across the Glasgow city region. It includes integrated public transport connectivity to Glasgow airport. The development of the case for investment is being led by the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, which is supported by Glasgow City Council and Transport Scotland. On-going work includes the development of the network and consideration of funding options for the project's delivery. I heard what members said about that during the debate.

We recognise that a diverse and successful port sector contributes significantly to the national, regional and local economies in which ports operate. They are vital in delivering the outcomes of NPF4 and achieving the success of the national

development sites that are identified in it. Ports and harbours are crucial gateways to Scotland, and Scottish ministers continue to support a market-driven approach to ports policy and to recognise the contributions of port operators to Scotland's economy. I have taken a keen interest in supporting and promoting that area of policy since taking on the transport portfolio.

An example of our understanding of the importance of our ports to Scotland's economy includes the recent granting of pilotage powers to the owners of the port of Ardersier. The harbour order, which was consented to last month, is an important step in a process that will put the port of Ardersier at the front of our offshore renewable sector. Those powers will support significant investment, totalling £400 million, in a remote and economically challenged part of the country.

Fergus Ewing: On ports and the thorny issue of the appointments to CalMac and CMAL boards, the cabinet secretary re-appointed a Danish gentleman as the head of CalMac, and two other executive directors, of whom neither is believed to have visited any CalMac ports. Having visited Stornoway once, the Danish gentleman presumably decided that it was not worth going back to. Why were local, worthy candidates rejected? They are island residents and distinguished, knowledgeable people who know about the islands. Why is the SNP Government replacing the old absentee lairds with absentee quango bosses?

Fiona Hyslop: Fergus Ewing quoted Brian Wilson earlier. Mr Wilson was very selective in his reporting on CMAL and CalMac board members and their involvement in sites and how they engage with communities.

I agree that we need to have representatives of islands who have expertise in the required areas, and CMAL and CalMac have people from island communities on their boards currently. As cabinet secretary, I have been active in encouraging that and in advertising such issues widely. As a former Government minister, Fergus Ewing will know that there are particular skills—particularly around audit and risk—that require some experience. That has been the case with some of those appointments.

I am conscious that I have taken quite a few interventions. This is a big and wide debate, so I will continue.

Obviously, our offshore capabilities will place more demands on our ports and harbours.

On road connectivity, we know how important the A9 is. I have engaged with members by providing the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee with updates and, in December, by briefing MSPs who have a continuing interest in

the issue. We have invested in and delivered on the Queensferry crossing, the M8, the M73, the M74, the A90 and the hugely important Aberdeen western peripheral route, and we have made a variety of rail investments, including at Levenmouth, Bathgate, Airdrie, Barrhead and East Kilbride.

Considerable investments have been made right across the whole infrastructure, in challenging times and in a fiscal situation in which £6 billion has been taken out of our budget. We cannot ignore the challenges that we have faced.

Should the Parliament pass the budget bill, we will see next year a record-breaking transport budget that breaks the £4 billion level. That said, we face increasing pressures across all our transport systems to ensure that they remain safe and secure, with the most substantial allocation, as members are well aware, going to rail. Of course, there is more that we would like to do, if we had full resources and full powers.

This has been a constructive debate. I assure members that we are committed to investing in our transport networks and connecting our communities; indeed, that is vital to our future economic growth. I hope that, if this debate has done one thing, it has opened a chink not only for absolutely robust scrutiny of me in terms of my accountability as Cabinet Secretary for Transport, but to give us the space to elevate transport to its central role in Scotland's economy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:25

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time. As ever, I would appreciate succinct questions and answers, in order to get in as many members as possible.

Higher History 2024

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will launch an independent review of the 2024 higher history exam, in light of reports that responses to a survey by the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History were overwhelmingly critical of the Scottish Qualifications Authority review, that it had been described as a “whitewash”, and that one respondent referred to it as “the most biased and useless investigation I have ever seen a public body attempt to pass off as legitimate.” (S6O-04169)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government has accepted the findings of the SQA's 2024 higher history review, which was an operational matter for the SQA. The Scottish Government and the SQA met the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History immediately after the publication of the survey results and agreed that there would be a package of measures to support teachers delivering higher history in 2025, including a dedicated inquiry line so that teachers, lecturers and school leaders can raise questions directly with the SQA. Another understanding standards webinar has also been organised. Further, I have asked to meet the president of SATH, and I look forward to doing so.

Douglas Ross: The cabinet secretary mentioned that she accepts the SQA review. Why will she not accept the findings of the survey by the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History? The findings were overwhelmingly critical and did not accept the outcome of that independent review.

The cabinet secretary mentioned a meeting that the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History had had with the SQA. SATH's president said that the SQA did not consider the possibility of having another investigation and looking back at what went wrong this time. Will the cabinet secretary take her head out of the sand and accept that the matter has not been handled well by the Government or the SQA, and that the only way to

resolve it, to please all parties, is to have a truly independent review?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Ross for his involvement and interest in the matter, which we discussed prior to Christmas at the Education, Children and Young People Committee, which he convenes. I have taken an active interest in all the matters that he has raised today, particularly in relation to the involvement of the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History, which is the professional association of history teachers. It was at my behest that we continued that further engagement with SATH.

Kirsty MacDonald, SATH's president, said:

"SATH has gathered the views of Scottish history teachers on this issue in order to ensure that everyone in the teaching community can have their voices heard. We are pleased that SQA and the Scottish Government are keen to action many of the points raised in the survey and work with the SATH committee towards positive outcomes."

I look forward to engaging directly with the president on that matter.

I am more than happy to engage further with the member on the issue, because I recognise the legitimate concerns that he has raised today. I have acknowledged the various concerns that have been raised by history teachers in the SATH survey responses and the need to rebuild trust and confidence.

As I alluded to in my original answer, the Scottish Government and the SQA have engaged substantially with SATH as an organisation, following the publication of the review. I will continue to engage with the president, and I am more than happy to engage with Mr Ross on the issue, because I recognise the concerns that he has raised.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): How will the Education (Scotland) Bill help to rebuild trust in qualifications among pupils, teachers, parents and carers?

Jenny Gilruth: The issue of trust links directly to our broader agenda in relation to education reform. It is essential that qualifications Scotland acts differently and feels different to those whom it serves. The bill provides a framework that will strengthen the way in which young people, adult learners and our teaching professions are put at the centre of decision making. That will be achieved through new governance and accountability measures that promote participation, transparency and openness, such as the learner and teacher charters and committees. A strategic advisory council will also provide a platform for parents, carers and other key stakeholders to advise the organisation.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will know that it is not just the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History that is furious. She has had correspondence, as I have, from a teacher who said:

"There is a huge distrust between teachers and the SQA. They are a laughing stock."

Another teacher has said:

"They've mucked up kids' futures."

The fact that the cabinet secretary still will not launch or instruct an independent inquiry beggars belief. In the committee session with the SQA on 4 December, the cabinet secretary said:

"I have not yet been presented with an evidence base to substantiate my instructing the chief examiner to lead an independent review."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 4 December 2024; c 79.]

Why are the views of history teachers in Scotland, and the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History, not substantial enough for her to act?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for her interest in the matter. As I alluded to in my previous response, we had a substantial discussion of the issue at a meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee prior to Christmas.

It is worth saying that not all history teachers deliver history at higher level, and not all history teachers are involved in the marking of history qualifications. Around 17 per cent of history teachers responded to the SATH survey. The issue that I raised at committee was the need for us to look objectively at any concerns raised in the independent report carried out by the SQA, and for history teachers to engage with the Government on that matter. I have done that.

As I said in my response to Mr Ross, I have also made very clear, on the record, my continued keenness to engage with the history sector. I will engage directly with the president of SATH. It is also worth reflecting that the SQA has announced more support for history teachers, including a direct inquiry point and an additional webinar on understanding standards, which SATH has broadly welcomed.

I do not want to stop my engagement with the sector; I will continue it under the auspices of the president of SATH. I will be more than happy to update Ms Duncan-Glancy on that or on any other matters that may come to me in that regard. As I made clear in my response to Ms Dunbar, it is hugely important that history teachers have confidence in the qualifications body, but it is also a key reason for our needing education reform.

Childcare (Island Communities)

2. Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that there is adequate childcare provision in island communities, including in the Orkney constituency. (S6O-04170)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): High-quality, accessible and affordable early learning and childcare is vital in island communities to support children's outcomes and to enable parents or carers to train, work or study. We fully fund local authorities to deliver 1,140 hours of ELC to eligible children, backed by almost £1 billion of funding each year, with each council being responsible for ensuring that local provision meets families' needs. In addition, at national level, the Scottish Government is currently supporting projects to improve childcare provision in island communities through the national islands plan, our early adopter communities and the programme for Scotland's childminding future.

Liam McArthur: The minister acknowledged the specific challenges that island and rural areas face on childcare provision when I raised the issue with her during questions on education last summer. Sadly, there has not been much improvement in the situation. I have been contacted by a constituent who explained that, despite the availability of spaces at her local nursery, there was not the staffing capacity to allow her two-year-old child to be given a place.

What more can the minister do to assist local authorities such as Orkney Islands Council to recruit and retain the staff required to deliver the childcare that the Government is promising, which is desperately needed by parents in my constituency?

Natalie Don-Innes: I am sorry to hear about those challenges. We are working to increase uptake of provision for two-year-olds across local authority areas, but I recognise the particular and distinct challenges there. I welcomed a recent opportunity to meet representatives of Highlands and Islands Enterprise to discuss such issues. I asked them to report to me in the spring, to support and consolidate our knowledge in that area. I will carefully consider the findings of the report when it is available.

As I said in my first answer, we are also working with island communities, local authorities and other partners to ensure that the new islands plan continues to deliver. I understand that Orkney Islands Council is taking part in the retention strand of the Scottish Childminding Association's programme for Scotland's childminding future, which seeks to support childminders through funded time off the floor. As childminding is a

critical part of the challenges that Mr McArthur has outlined to me, I encourage him to engage with Orkney Islands Council on how access to the programme could be of benefit.

My offer to meet Mr McArthur, which I made last summer in response to his previous question, still stands.

Additional Support Needs (Dumfries and Galloway)

3. Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the data from the pupil census supplementary statistics, which reportedly shows that the number of pupils with additional support needs in Dumfries and Galloway increased by over 1,000 between 2019 and 2023. (S6O-04171)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Figures published last month show that, nationally, 40.5 per cent of school-age children were recorded as having an additional support need in 2024. Those figures show an increased recognition by local authorities of the needs of pupils, which is, in turn, reflective of the inclusive approach that the Scottish Government has taken to education. However, I accept that that presents challenges across our education system. That is why next year's budget includes additional investment of £29 million for additional support for learning for local authorities, including Dumfries and Galloway. That builds on our joint work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to deliver the additional support for learning action plan, which is already under way.

Colin Smyth: The figures show a 16 per cent rise in ASN pupils in Dumfries and Galloway since 2019, and that number continues to rise. The number of ASL teachers has been cut by 16 per cent over the same period and by a shocking 40 per cent since 2010. What assurances can the cabinet secretary give that those cuts in ASL teachers will be fully reversed by the Government's budget and through the recruitment of additional teachers, at a time when the council is consulting on further cuts to ASL teachers? Behind those numbers, there are far too many young people who are simply not getting the support that they need.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for his question, and I recognise some of the challenge there. He will recognise that, thanks to additional investment from this Government, since 2014, the overall number of teachers in Scottish schools has increased by more than 2,500. He will also know that I updated Parliament on the Government's response to the issue before the Christmas break. I gave an update to Parliament then on the agreement that we have reached with local

authorities, which will see the £145 million for teacher numbers, which is ring fenced, uprated by £41 million. It will also secure additional investment for additional support for learning. The purpose of that £29 million is to provide additionality to local authorities such as Dumfries and Galloway to allow them to invest in specialists, because we know that those specialists make a real difference. I very much hope that the member will be encouraged by that investment from the Government and will be inclined to support the budget when it comes to Parliament.

Discipline in Schools

4. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve discipline in schools. (S6O-04172)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): We published a joint behaviour action plan with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities last August setting out action that is to be taken over the next three years at national and local level to support schools to improve relationships and behaviour. Since May 2023, we have responded to schools' concerns in a number of different ways, including the publication of the national action plan, the publication of new guidance on gender-based violence, mobile phones and anti-bullying and the provision of additional funding to support the training of support staff.

The budget, if passed, will also offer a package of measures worth an additional £29 million for additional support needs, which will include support for the recruitment and retention of the additional support needs workforce.

Kenneth Gibson: I note that the cabinet secretary referred to the further £28 million for additional support needs teachers and £1 million to aid their retention and recruitment. Does she anticipate an improvement in classroom discipline, which will better enable ASN pupils, who might otherwise struggle, to access and engage with the curriculum?

Jenny Gilruth: The Government is absolutely determined to increase teacher numbers in Scotland's schools, which is why we have reached the agreement that I alluded to in my response to Mr Smyth, which I think will make a real difference in our schools, particularly in relation to some post-Covid behaviour and relationship shifts. We know that a number of young people have struggled post-Covid with the return to formal education, which has impacted on behaviour and relationships in our classrooms. That is a problem not just in Scotland but across the United Kingdom and globally.

We also recognise that the growth in ASN presents additional challenges, and we remain committed to improving how children and young people get the support that they need with their learning. That is why we have committed that additional £29 million that I spoke to in my previous response, which is very much targeted on enhancing the ASN workforce.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Teachers and unions have warned ministers that many more incidents of violence take place in our classrooms than are reported, because teachers do not have the time to report those incidents. The minister references the action plan, which had two key points—the lack of options for how to manage the behaviour of a small core group of pupils and the lack of alternative options and resources for pupils for whom mainstream education may not be appropriate. What in the budget will help to address those two things?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for his interest in the issue. He spoke about the time that teachers might take in reporting and recording incidents. I know from my experience that there is often a reticence among staff about reporting, because they are concerned about how their school might be perceived. We in the Government should reflect on that.

I was very clear in my update to Parliament in, I think, November 2023 that we wanted consistent and clear recording and reporting of incidents as and when they occur in our schools, because there is currently a level of reticence. The action plan sets out a range of different measures in that regard. The additional funding that I spoke to in my previous response for teacher numbers and for ASN specialists, including things such as behaviour, is fundamental to addressing the issues that Mr Briggs raises.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am concerned about the level of violence and harassment against girls at school, but I am also concerned about the low take-up of the equally safe programme. Take-up was supposed to be up at around half of all schools by 2020, but it is at only a third of all schools. What is the cabinet secretary doing to improve the uptake of that programme so that we can tackle violence against girls?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises an important point, which was reported in the national press over the recess. I share his concerns, and I have asked officials for further advice. The equally safe strategy works alongside the gender-based violence framework, which was launched last March. It is important that those complementary pieces of work act in tandem to tackle issues relating to misogyny. We know that there have been such issues, particularly post-pandemic. The

Government's research, which was published in late 2023, showed that there has been an increase in misogynistic behaviour, particularly from male pupils, which is often directed at their female teachers. It is hugely important that those issues are addressed. I have asked for further advice, and I would be more than happy to share some of that with Mr Rennie. It is important that all schools are aware of the different approaches that are at their disposal, either through the equally safe work or through the gender-based violence framework.

Physical Literacy

5. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what role schools can play in ensuring that children develop lifelong physical literacy skills. (S6O-04173)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Schools ensure that children develop physical literacy skills with physical education, activity and sport embedded in the curriculum framework. The active schools network provides opportunities to participate in physical activity, while developing pathways between schools and sports clubs in the community. Our active play development project also develops physical skills in early years settings. At July 2024, 99.6 per cent of primary schools and 95.9 per cent of secondary schools delivered at least two hours of PE per week for pupils in primary school and at least two 50-minute periods of PE per week for pupils between secondary 1 and secondary 4.

Brian Whittle: During the pandemic, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—UNESCO—reported that, with schools closed, there was a significant loss of school-based physical activity, with many children becoming socially isolated and lacking in movement opportunities. The research by Huggett and Howells, which was completed post-lockdown, observed in four to five-year-olds that there was a significant difference compared with expected age-related physical development. The researchers understand that one in six children aged five to 16 are now likely to have mental health conditions, which is an increase from one in 10 children prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Does the Scottish Government recognise the need to educate young people about their mental and physical health in conjunction with reversing the continuing decline in the opportunities that are available to be active in schools? Does it agree that that is one of the greatest health education priorities that we face?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much share Mr Whittle's passion for the subject. I recognise the importance of physical education, particularly in educational settings, and its impact on attainment, behaviour

and relationships. Of course, often, it will not necessarily be a PE teacher who is leading the after-school clubs. Mr Whittle might be amused to know that, many years ago, I took a hockey club when I was teaching at Elgin high school for a number of weeks. There are opportunities for staff across the school estate to be engaged in building better relationships, which helps with behaviour and facilitates greater opportunities for physical literacy.

I know that there are challenges in our schools post-pandemic. It is worth while recounting some of the progress that has been made, and I gave statistics on that in my initial response. However, the progress that has been made is remarkable when we look back at the position during the school session of 2004-05, when only 10 per cent of schools were providing the amount of PE that is being provided now. That is not the end of the story. The additional investment that we provide via the active schools co-ordinators, which amounts to £13 million annually, also has a substantial role to play in that regard. Finally, I should say—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, we need to make progress. Could you please bring your answer to an end?

Jenny Gilruth: The education reform work that we are engaged in also provides an opportunity to drive improvements. I would be more than happy to write to the member to give him a further update on that work.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Scotland was the world's first daily mile nation. Can the cabinet secretary set out the work that the Scottish Government has done to encourage further take-up of the daily mile?

Jenny Gilruth: In September 2022, Scotland was announced as the first daily mile nation worldwide, with roll-out to nurseries, schools, colleges, universities and workplaces across the country. There are currently more than 1,000 nurseries, schools and special educational needs schools that are participating in the daily mile in Scotland, and more than 164,000 children and young people across Scotland benefit. The daily mile can be implemented at no cost, and its transformational impact is well evidenced. Not only can it improve a child's fitness; it can improve their concentration levels, mood, behaviour and general wellbeing.

Antisocial Behaviour and Girls' Welfare

6. Sharon Dowe (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to tackle antisocial behaviour, and safeguard the welfare of girls, in schools. (S6O-04174)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government's gender equality task force in education and learning asserts that all girls and young women should have a gender-equal experience of education in an environment that is free from sexism, sexual harassment and violence. It follows a preventative approach, as outlined in *Equally Safe*, which is Scotland's strategy to prevent violence against women and girls. In March, I launched "Preventing and Responding to Gender Based Violence: A Whole School Framework", which supports schools to address the underlying causes of GBV and ensure that appropriate action is taken in response to specific incidents.

Sharon Dowey: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the recent horrifying case at a Dundee secondary school, where a hidden camera was discovered in a toilet roll holder, reportedly in a unisex bathroom.

A 15-year-old boy has been charged, with reports suggesting that the camera contained hundreds of sensitive images of girls. That has left pupils and parents angry and traumatised, with at least one girl refusing to return to school.

At a recent round-table meeting, a teacher spoke of appalling and, sadly, frequent instances of boys taking advantage of unisex toilets to slip phones under cubicles and film girls using the toilets. Given those disturbing incidents, will the cabinet secretary recognise the significant safeguarding risks of unisex toilets, and will she commit to ensuring that all toilets are returned to single-sex use in order to protect young girls?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I ask the cabinet secretary to respond, I note that the question contained a reference to a live case. Obviously, the usual caveats apply.

Jenny Gilruth: As you say, Presiding Officer, I am not able to comment on a live case. I am aware of the incident that the member has raised, which I think was raised previously with the First Minister in the chamber. Obviously, it is deeply disturbing.

I want to reflect some of the wider work that the Government has been undertaking in this space, some of which I alluded to in response to Mr Rennie. There will be a summit on Monday, to which the member is invited, as is the First Minister, which will look at youth violence and associated challenges in the round. A number of MSPs will be engaged in that work on a cross-party basis.

Some of the issues relating to the increases in misogynistic behaviour are systemic in our society at the current time. I have documented some of the work that the Government has undertaken in

relation to the behaviour in Scottish schools research and the gender-based violence framework, but some of the changes that we have seen in recent times, particularly in our young men, are deeply concerning. It is hugely important that schools are supported in that regard.

The member asked a specific question about the provision of toilets, which is, of course, a matter for local authorities, although I am happy to engage them on those issues. I recognise the concerns that she has raised this afternoon and look forward to further engagement with her on the issue. Again, of course, she will be attending the summit, along with the First Minister, on Monday.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): How is the Scottish Government supporting the mentors in violence prevention programme to address gender-based violence in schools?

Jenny Gilruth: We are continuing to invest to support Education Scotland to nationally co-ordinate the delivery of the mentors in violence prevention programme in schools across Scotland, and the associated training.

The programme has been delivered in more than 200 schools across all our local authorities. The work has included 5,800 senior pupil mentors delivering violence prevention lessons to more young people.

Through the programme, we are engaging young people to help them understand different forms of violence, including gender-based violence, and how they are related, and teaching young people ways to speak out against gender-based violence, bullying, and abusive and violent behaviour. The programme enables boys and girls to become part of the solution to help eradicate gender-based violence in Scotland.

Technology Careers

7. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress being made to improve the learning outcomes of pupils to prepare them for careers in the technology sector. (S6O-04175)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Work to improve the sciences curriculum as part of the curriculum improvement cycle is now under way, with work on technology starting in early 2025. That is being led by Education Scotland as part of a planned, systematic approach to curriculum improvement that will support high-quality teaching, learning and progression across all curricular areas.

We have provided more than £1.2 million this financial year alone to organisations that are

supporting high-quality delivery of science, technology, engineering and mathematics in schools and helping to develop STEM subjects, such as computing science, as attractive and relevant subject choices.

Elena Whitham: I know that the minister will be aware of Education Scotland's wonderful cyberfirst girls competition, designed to help girls enter the world of cyber technology and security, in which Girvan academy in my constituency recently made the shortlist of 10 finalists. Noting that fantastic achievement, does the minister agree that it is vital that continued support is provided to equip our young girls with those much-needed skills to engage, nurture and inspire them to enter the field of computer sciences, providing them with the skills that Scotland's technology sector and wider economy will fundamentally depend on?

Graeme Dey: I do. I am encouraged that, in recent years, there has been an increase in the number of girls undertaking computing science courses, not least because closing the equity gap in participation in STEM is crucial and central to our vision for an equal Scotland. However, there is more to do if we are to reach the position that we all want to be in. That is why Education Scotland is working with organisations, including Tech She Can and Code Club, to promote careers in computing science to girls. We have also invested £840,000 in Scottish Teachers Advancing Computer Science to support excellence in the teaching of computing science and the promotion of the subject to pupils and parents.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In evidence to the Education, Children and Young People Committee, the Scottish Government's former chief entrepreneurial adviser, Mark Logan, was particularly critical of the Scottish Government's lack of progress on computing science teaching reform. He cited figures, which were gathered at local authority level, that showed that, in 2024 in Scotland,

"at least 32,500 pupils"

had

"no access to a computing science teacher".—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 29 May 2024; c 8.]

When pupils do not have access to a science teacher, the minister cannot state that the Scottish Government is currently doing enough to improve their learning outcomes to prepare them for a career in the technology sector. What will the Scottish Government do to rectify the situation?

Graeme Dey: If Ms McCall had listened to what I said, she would have heard that I said that there is more to do—I was quite clear about that. More is being done. For example, the Aberdeen university pilot, which has been launched, will help

in that area. We are in no way complacent, and I have acknowledged clearly that there is more to be done in that space.

Additional Support Needs (School Estate)

8. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government how the needs of pupils with additional support needs are taken into account in the procurement and replacement of the school estate. (S6O-04176)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): It is the statutory responsibility of local authorities to manage their school estate, and the Scottish Government expects them to focus on ensuring that, in estate planning, learning environments recognise the needs of pupils with additional support needs.

Through our £2 billion learning estate investment programme, dedicated ASN spaces will be delivered in 20 school infrastructure projects. The Scottish Government and the Scottish Futures Trust will continue to learn from LEIP projects and to seek feedback from users to help inform the design of future learning spaces to support the needs of every pupil.

Mark Ruskell: It is absolutely clear that schools are being built right now without proper consideration of the promises that this Government made to future learners with additional needs.

For example, within the next year, a school in the Stirling Council area is being rebuilt. Current ASN provision is for 12 places, which, families tell me, is completely oversubscribed. The provision in the new school will, again, be for just 12 places, so that lack of ASN provision in the school building will be physically locked in for years to come.

Will the cabinet secretary review the council school building programmes to make sure that they are fit for the future, so that we do not end up repeating the mistakes of the private finance initiative schools from 20 years ago?

Jenny Gilruth: I am rather surprised by the issue that Mr Ruskell has raised. I am more than happy to hear a bit more about it, and we can perhaps discuss that after today's question session.

The learning estate and investment programme is helping to deliver additionality across Scotland to improve the quality of our school estate. A number of projects across the country have dedicated ASN school projects. The decision about school design is ultimately a matter for local authorities, and the member has mentioned a school in his region today.

This issue was also addressed at the Education, Children and Young People Committee last year.

At that time, engagement with the Scottish Futures Trust confirmed that we had in place a 10-step plan, which included, as we set out in our response to the committee, a number of different areas in which we were going to strengthen work on ASN provision.

More broadly, as we have already been doing, the Scottish Futures Trust and the Scottish Government will continue to meet and engage with stakeholders—for example, the cross-party group on autism, in September—to ensure that we learn lessons.

Although I am surprised by the issue that Mr Ruskell raised today, I am happy to hear more on the detail of it and see whether Scottish Government officials might be able to provide further support. It is essential that, in improving Scotland's school estate, the totality of Scotland's pupil population, including those with an identified additional support need, have the building that is right—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I am keen to get a supplementary question from Martin Whitfield.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Perhaps the answer lies in the 2018 Scottish Government-published report on the consultation exercise that looked at updating the School Premises (General Requirements and Standards) (Scotland) Regulations 1967, which included the requirement to look at ASN provision. What has happened to that legislation since 2018?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Whitfield for his interest in the issue. Consultation has previously been undertaken in relation to the regulations. My officials are about to provide me with further advice to that end, and I will write to the member with an update.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on education and skills. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow front-bench teams to change position, should they so wish.

Migration System

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-16034, in the name of Kaukab Stewart, on building a migration system that supports Scotland's economy, public services and communities. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. I call Tom Arthur to speak to and move the motion, for up to 12 minutes.

15:00

The Minister for Employment and Investment (Tom Arthur): I am pleased to open this important debate on migration. Parliament has debated migration previously, and although there have been disagreements, we have also been able to come together to recognise the benefits of migration to our economy, our public services and our communities.

Historically, Scotland was a nation of emigration, with people leaving to build a future elsewhere. Since 2001, Scotland has been a nation of net in-migration. We should celebrate the fact that Scotland is now a country that attracts people—people who want to come here to build their future and to make a positive contribution to this nation by working in our public services, helping to build our economy and becoming valued members of our communities.

People choose to come to Scotland from across the world and from across the United Kingdom. The latest data shows that 13,900 more people chose to come to Scotland from the rest of the UK than chose to leave Scotland.

Like many nations across the world, Scotland's population is ageing. National Records of Scotland data shows that just over 20 per cent of the population is aged 65 and over. Over the past two decades, the number of people aged 65 and above has grown by 36 per cent, while the number of those under 16 has fallen by 5 per cent. The number of people aged 65 and over is projected to grow by nearly a third by mid-2045, while the number of children is projected to fall by nearly a fifth.

Our population is growing, but it is growing solely as a result of migration. Jon Wroth-Smith, director of census statistics at the National Records of Scotland, has stated:

“Without migration Scotland's population would have decreased, and we would have fewer people in younger age groups.”

It is clear that we need to continue to attract people to Scotland to grow our economy and sustain our public services. Therefore, the

Government will help employers to navigate the UK immigration system, enabling them to bring in the skilled workers that they need to grow our economy; argue for change to ensure that the immigration system is fit for purpose; and make the case for tailored migration routes to reflect the needs of Scotland's economy, public services and communities.

Our first priority is to ensure that employers and individuals are able to recruit the skilled international workers that they need to grow their businesses. In November, the Minister for Equalities visited a technology business, iGii in Stirling, to launch the expanded Scotland's Migration Service. The service is being provided by the Scottish Government through a partnership with Citizens Advice Scotland and Seraphus, an immigration law firm that is providing free advice to help Scottish employers and inward investors to navigate the UK immigration system. Through the partnership with Citizens Advice Scotland, Scotland's Migration Service is supporting international students, people who have recently moved to Scotland and prospective movers who have a confirmed job offer or are moving to join a close family member.

The Government is investing in support for employers to help them to navigate the existing system, but we are also hearing the very clear message that the current immigration system is not fit for purpose. It is expensive, it is bureaucratic and difficult to navigate, and it is too focused on salary thresholds rather than on the skills and expertise that our economy needs. It is deeply regrettable that, for too long, too much of the discourse on migration has focused entirely on reducing numbers rather than on having an honest public discussion about the needs of our economy, our public services and our communities. We need an immigration system that meets Scotland's needs.

Our second priority, therefore, is to engage with employers, stakeholders, local authorities and partners to identify the changes that are needed to the UK immigration system and to make the case for those changes to the UK Government. In March, the previous UK Government changed the immigration system to prevent overseas care workers from bringing dependants to the UK. Home Office data shows that, over the six months since that change—from April to November—there was an 84 per cent fall from the number of health and care visas issued in the previous year.

Last year, the previous UK Government also introduced changes to the study route that meant that most international students are unable to bring dependants with them to the UK. Those changes, together with the significant increase in the salary threshold for the skilled worker visa,

make it much harder for our universities to attract international students and for the Scottish economy to retain skilled international students.

We cannot view migration in isolation, focusing on whether numbers go up or down. It needs to be one strand in a wider strategy that brings together the needs of our economy, our public services, training and skills.

It is welcome that the UK Government has set out its intention to bring together migration, skills and industrial strategy. The Scottish Government will engage constructively in that process. However, we need to ensure that the process considers the needs of different communities. The current immigration system recognises that we need migration solutions that are tailored to the needs of different sectors, but we also need to recognise that there may be cases in which we need different routes based on geography.

Let us be clear that establishing different migration routes based on the needs of geography is not a novel concept. The current UK immigration system is already comprised of a series of different—or tailored—visa routes. The establishment of the Scottish Parliament was designed to allow distinct solutions to be developed to respond to distinct challenges, and one of the first distinct solutions that the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament developed was a tailored migration route for Scotland. The fresh talent working in Scotland scheme was launched in June 2005 as part of the wider fresh talent initiative, which aimed to encourage people to settle in Scotland. It was a tailored visa route for international students attending Scottish universities that enabled them to stay in Scotland for up to two years after completion of their studies.

In 2005, the UK Government of the day recognised that Scotland had distinct demographic needs and supported the establishment of a tailored migration route to address those needs. Our ambition is for the current UK Government to work with us once again to deliver a tailored approach to migration that meets the needs of Scotland.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): One of those distinct needs is to get skilled workers into rural areas. What does the minister say to the fact that the £25 million key workers fund for rural areas has managed to find only 17 homes in two years? That is clearly not the kind of action that is required to ensure that we get the right skills in the right places, particularly our rural areas.

Tom Arthur: Craig Hoy will recognise that a number of initiatives are being taken and that certain schemes will be demand led. However, the Government has a demonstrable commitment to

address some of those challenges using the powers of devolution. I invite members to guard against any single-action bias and the presumption that one intervention is the answer. We need a multifaceted approach to ensure that all parts of Scotland are capable of attracting and sustaining populations. That is the spirit in which the debate has been brought to the Parliament.

There is clear evidence of the need for a tailored migration route for Scotland. The current immigration system does not meet the needs of communities across Scotland, particularly our rural communities. That is not only the Scottish Government's assessment but that of the UK Government's Migration Advisory Committee, which accepted that

"the current migration system is not very effective in dealing with the particular problems remote communities experience."

The solution that the Migration Advisory Committee proposed, which the then Home Secretary accepted, was a pilot scheme to facilitate migration to rural areas. We have developed detailed deliverable proposals for tailored migration routes: a Scottish visa and a rural visa pilot. The Migration Advisory Committee reviewed our proposal for a rural visa pilot and described it as

"sensible and clear in both scale and deliverability",

calling on the UK Government to

"consider what action would be required to take a pilot from proposal stage to implementation."

There is no reason not to move ahead with that pilot.

Migration to Scotland supports economic growth and the delivery of public services. It helps to address the serious issue of long-term demographic change and enhances and sustains our communities. All—I emphasise "all"—our future population growth is projected to come from migration, so any reduction in migration, whether from the rest of the UK or internationally, will impact on the size of our working-age population. A UK immigration system that does not meet the needs of Scotland is not fit for purpose. Through the establishment of Scotland's migration service, this Government is supporting employers to navigate the immigration system, and we will continue to argue for changes to the immigration system to meet Scotland's needs.

The Scottish Parliament has previously supported motions that argued for an immigration system that focuses on the needs of Scotland's economy, public services and communities. This is yet another opportunity for this Parliament to set out our priorities and our asks of the UK Government.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the social, economic and cultural contribution made to Scotland by those who have chosen to live here; notes the establishment of Scotland's Migration Service at a cost of up to £1.5 million in the draft Budget 2025-26 to help employers, investors and individuals navigate the UK immigration system; further notes that the Parliament has previously endorsed a motion calling for the development of a differentiated, more flexible migration policy tailored to meet Scotland's specific needs, and calls on the UK Government to accept the Rural Visa Pilot proposal and to work directly and constructively with the Scottish Government to ensure that the needs of Scotland's employers, communities and public services are fully reflected within the immigration system.

15:10

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): The project of devolution is built on the idea that devolved Parliaments can carry out certain functions of government effectively at a more local level. Over the past 25 years of our history, the Scottish Parliament has been entrusted with many responsibilities—healthcare, education, transport and social security, to mention a few.

However, that model works only if the Scottish Government is actually focused on those issues. The system fails when we ignore our core responsibilities and, instead, spend time on functions that are reserved to Westminster. This debate is the latest example of the Scottish Government not being interested in making devolution work for the people of Scotland.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Will the member give way?

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Will Mr Balfour take an intervention?

Jeremy Balfour: Ladies first, if that is okay.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: How very gallant of the member.

I am already gravely concerned by the tone that the member is taking. As my colleague Mr Arthur pointed out, this debate is about how to improve the economy and our public services and about how to have surviving and thriving communities. I am deeply disappointed that, once again, the Conservatives do not see the importance of migration to the economy, our communities and our public services—all of which are devolved responsibilities.

Jeremy Balfour: With respect to the cabinet secretary, I think that she has slightly jumped the gun. She might want to reflect on what I will say in the next few minutes.

Instead of focusing on providing high-quality public services, the Scottish Government would rather grandstand on reserved policy areas and

deflect attention elsewhere. The consequences of that are plain to see: a suffering national health service, an ever-growing housing crisis, the social care sector on its knees, and the wider third sector looking for life support.

Should we be surprised that Scotland is struggling to attract migrants? If the Scottish National Party is not willing to put in the work to make Scotland an attractive prospect, why should migrants be willing to move here? Scotland is home to 8.4 per cent of the UK population, but we receive only 6 per cent of net UK migration. Regardless of the SNP's attempts to deflect from that, the blame lies squarely at its feet.

Ben Macpherson: Does Jeremy Balfour acknowledge the fact that inward migration from the rest of the UK has been positive—in that more people have come from the rest of the UK to Scotland than have gone elsewhere in the UK—and that the overall levels of migration to Scotland are pretty similar to those in the north of England? I am not sure that the argument is as clear as he has made out.

Jeremy Balfour: I do not accept the member's second point because, if we look at the numbers, we see that they are lower than they are for any other part of the UK. We have been brought to this point by the SNP's failed leadership on countless matters—not least on taxation.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): I wish to reflect on Mr Macpherson's point about inward migration from the rest of the UK. I do not think that we have a profile of the age demographic for that migration. Is Mr Macpherson able to demonstrate that the inward migration is of people of working age who are here to contribute to the economy? If that is not the case, his point is rather less effective than he imagines.

Jeremy Balfour: I will come back to the point that Mr Carlaw made, if time allows.

The Scottish Government likes to make a big song and dance about its progressive tax policy, but the truth is that medium earners in Scotland pay more tax than their counterparts pay south of the border. A Scottish resident on £50,000 a year will pay an extra £1,527.80 in the next tax year, compared with someone with the same job in England.

Last year, the Deputy First Minister said:

"I have often heard it said that the negative rhetoric about tax is more off-putting than the tax itself."—[*Official Report, Economy and Fair Work Committee*, 9 October 2024; c 25.]

She clearly believes that, if only Opposition parties would say nice things about SNP policies, we could trick people into moving to Scotland. The Scottish Conservatives would love to say positive

things about Scottish tax policy, but, unfortunately, the SNP insists on raising taxes for hard-working families, with nothing to show for it.

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): Will Jeremy Balfour take an intervention?

Jeremy Balfour: I have probably taken enough interventions.

The Scottish Conservatives believe that, by allowing people to keep more of their hard-earned wages, we can promote the economic growth that Scotland so desperately needs and establish ourselves as a top destination for skilled migrants in the UK and on the world stage. Too often, people come here not to work but to retire and be with family.

Although, as a party, we fundamentally disagree with high taxes, that would be slightly more acceptable if the standard of public services that we received was high. Unfortunately, after almost 18 years of SNP mismanagement, the people of Scotland are not getting anything like value for money. Our NHS is being stretched to breaking point. According to some estimates, more than 2,000 people died last year in Scotland due to a long wait in an accident and emergency department. Waiting lists for surgeries remain far too long, and more and more people are having to pay for private care on top of their taxes. However, once again, the SNP is more interested in spending parliamentary time talking about reserved matters over which it has no jurisdiction, instead of tackling the crisis that we have created in our health service.

The Government motion mentions that we need to increase migration to our rural communities in Scotland, but the Government does not understand that its actions are contributing to the problem. Its failure to follow through on its promises to dual the A9, for instance, has done nothing to make small communities in the north of Scotland more connected. Its failure to provide a high standard of healthcare in rural areas forces residents to travel great distances for routine appointments. Why would anyone want to move to such areas?

A report by the Scottish Human Rights Commission found that, in the Highlands and Islands, the Government is not meeting its minimum core obligations on food and housing, while it is only partially meeting its obligations on health. The Scottish Government should be dealing with those factors rather than debating today's topic. As the development manager for the Federation of Small Businesses in the Highlands and Islands, David Richardson, has said,

"Reversing population trends will require moving heaven and earth to retain more young people and attract younger

people and families to move in by focusing on making rural Highland the best possible place to ... work".

The Parliament was established to work for the people of Scotland on a number of matters. It was not established to grandstand on issues that we have no jurisdiction over, while failing to provide the basic functions of government. The irony is that, if the SNP focused on competent government and following through on promises, Scotland would be a much more attractive destination for migration. As with all debates of this nature, addressing those issues would be a much better use of parliamentary time. Unfortunately, the SNP does not seem to be interested in that.

I move amendment S6M-16034.4, to leave out from first "notes" to end and insert:

"understands that Scotland receives 6% of net migration to the UK, which is lower than its 8.4% population share; notes that the Scottish Government has made Scotland an unattractive destination to move to through a combination of higher taxes on skilled professionals, a lack of investment in rural economies, a failure to provide adequate transport routes, an inability to provide enough homes in key areas, and a neglect of public services; further notes that the Scottish Government's failures have led to depopulation from some of Scotland's more rural parts, and asserts that immigration is a matter reserved to the UK Parliament and not in the jurisdiction of the Scottish Parliament."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Rhoda Grant joins us remotely to speak to and move amendment S6M-16034.3.

15:19

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): We recognise the valuable contribution that is made by those who migrate to Scotland. In every walk of life, new Scots provide new knowledge and experience. However, that is not unique to Scotland. Indeed, Scots have travelled extensively around the globe and made their mark, and that still happens today.

We know that a large proportion of those we train as doctors go abroad to seek better conditions and training opportunities. That has happened for years, but we have not addressed that loss of talent. Instead, we continue to do the same in attracting doctors, medical staff and carers to move to Scotland to fill our vacancies. Many of them have trained in countries that are less wealthy than Scotland, and that has a social and financial cost to those countries, as well.

The fresh talent initiative, which was launched by Jack McConnell's Administration in 2004, demonstrated that Scottish Labour is not against inward migration. The success of that initiative, which was also known as the working in Scotland scheme, was down to the collaboration between the Scottish and UK Governments at that time. By working together rather than separately, policies

can be developed to serve Scotland well, and I was really pleased to hear that the minister committed to working with the UK Government on that issue.

In relation to workers and graduates, we should be training our own staff and taking steps to ensure that we retain them in our own workforce. Workforce planning should never be dependent on inward migration. The problems are more acute in rural Scotland, as populations are declining. The fundamental issue with attracting more workers to rural Scotland is not the mechanism by which we attract them but the ability for those people to stay, live and work in rural Scotland. There is a lack of housing, there is poor access to services and there is very little infrastructure. That situation is a result of Scottish Government policy. Such neglect forces people to leave. Therefore, even if we could attract inward migration, the very issues that force local people out will prevent incomers from settling.

That reality was highlighted by the Scottish Human Rights Commission's report. The SHRC said that, across all the rights that it examined, no human right was delivered in a way that met all the conditions of adequacy under international law. Although that report focused on the Highlands and Islands, much of rural Scotland faces similar challenges, and, because of that, it faces depopulation.

While the Scottish Government seeks to import skilled workers, it does nothing to skill our own people. Colleges are no longer able to reskill the workforce, as the part-time courses that used to enable them to do so have been totally decimated.

I will give an example. The University of the Highlands and Islands used to run a midwife conversion course that allowed trained nurses in the region to retrain as midwives. That course, which was run locally, worked well for nurses who had already settled in communities in the Highland and Islands and who could not move to access training in the central belt. However, that course was discontinued in the Highlands and moved south.

That pattern is all too familiar to those of us who live and work in rural Scotland. Local education and training are virtually non-existent, which means that young people are forced to move away to gain skills and qualifications at a time in their lives when they are more likely to put down roots and meet their life partner. When that happens, they seldom move back. Even if there was a career available for them, there might not be one available for their partner, and that stops them coming back, which fractures our communities.

The reports that have been published on the decline of the Gaelic language highlight those

issues. Young people in particular are being forced out of their communities, taking their language skills with them. That explains the decline in the number of native Gaelic speakers. Scottish Labour understands that, if we are to support, sustain and grow the Gaelic language, we must support and sustain Gaelic communities, which means putting economic prosperity front and centre.

Lack of basic infrastructure also causes problems. Even now, there are digital not-spots throughout Scotland. That is especially the case in rural Scotland. That prevents people from working from home, setting up businesses and accessing services, all of which makes it more difficult for them to live and remain in a community.

An ageing ferry fleet makes travel uncertain. When people are unable to confidently plan travel that is necessary for business, health or social reasons, that makes life much more difficult, and we end up in a position in which only the very determined remain in such communities.

Therefore, my question is: how on earth can we deal with that through inward migration? Migrants need homes, access to services and jobs for their partners, and—even more than locals—they must be able to travel to stay in touch with family and friends.

Let us be honest: this debate is the usual SNP Government tactic of creating a diversion and passing the buck when it fails. It can provide the skills, housing and infrastructure that would allow our communities to thrive, retain our workforce and make Scotland—and, more importantly, rural Scotland—a confident and growing community.

Scottish Labour would do just that. We would invest in skills, homes and infrastructure to ensure thriving communities that can retain their own as well as welcome new talent.

I move amendment S6M-16034.3, to leave out from “thanks” to end and insert:

“that there have previously been successful models of differentiated migration schemes, tailored to Scotland’s specific needs, such as Fresh Talent; recognises the impact of rural depopulation on Scotland’s communities and their sustainability, including the survival of the Gaelic language; calls on the Scottish Government to use its existing powers to encourage population retention and internal migration where it would benefit Scotland’s communities and economy; understands that the conditions in Scotland’s rural and island communities are challenging due to the centralisation of services and the degradation of infrastructure, and that migration alone will not fix these systemic problems, and calls on the Scottish Government to build homes, provide high quality public services, provide local education and ensure sustainable transport links in rural and island communities in order to ensure that populations are sustainable in the long term.”

15:25

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): As an immigrant into Scotland, I am proud to make the opening speech on behalf of the Scottish Greens in the debate, and to speak to our amendment.

Much will rightly be said this afternoon about how migrants benefit Scotland’s economy, especially in agriculture; in tourism and hospitality; in our health and social care; in our education, from rural primary schools to university research departments; in our communities; and in our creative lives. The inventive, imaginative, passionate and compassionate Scotland that we know and love relies on people who were born here and on people who have come from across the world, having recognised something special about this place, or having come to love it and having made it their home.

As well as Scotland’s needs and benefits, we should consider our responsibilities and how we should act as compassionate human beings. We must ask ourselves what we can and should do to open our borders to those who need a place to call home, whether that is on a temporary basis or a permanent basis.

I came here as a student and from a position of relative privilege. I was fortunate enough to have some choice of where to pursue my studies and had support from my family to do so. Also, of course, my skin colour and mother tongue meant that I was not obviously an incomer. I will always recognise those facts and remember the warm welcome that I received.

People are increasingly on the move across the world not out of choice, but because they have to move. They are forced from their homes by conflict, scarcity, loss and disaster. They come not for adventure and exploration, but for survival, and not so much in search of a better life as in perhaps diminishing hope of a life that is liveable at all.

We, and the Governments that represent us, have three layers of responsibility for migration. The first is that we abide by international law—in particular, our solemn commitment under the Geneva convention to grant asylum to those who are fleeing persecution. That would scarcely have needed a mention a few years ago. I hope with all my heart that we can return to that consensus, that we can undo the terrible damage that has been caused by the previous Westminster Government’s legislation and that we can dismantle the lies of the far right. I hope that we can replace with the dialogue of solidarity the rhetoric of hate that has, thanks to Conservative, Reform and even some Labour politicians, become mainstream.

Our second responsibility is that we acknowledge the particular role of the United Kingdom in creating many of the conditions from which people now flee. That role is historical, but it is also contemporary, and Scotland cannot evade its share of collective shame. I again implore both Governments to recognise what has been done in Palestine and beyond, and to recognise that there are no pathways to safety for the children of Gaza.

Children are also dying from climate injustice and its brutal blows on homes, crops, water sources, lives and livelihoods. We remembered that in Glasgow three years ago, but nothing has grown better since then. More and more people are being displaced by the climate crisis, and the fault is not their own. There is an opportunity now for the Scottish and UK Governments to work, together and with others, to build robust and fair responses, not only through mitigation and adaptation measures, but in compassionate and welcoming approaches.

Finally, our Governments must show decency, humanity and justice to all who come here from elsewhere. Human rights are for all humans—not only for those with citizenship or with deep pockets. The cruel and vindictive condition of having no recourse to public funds has been a disastrous experiment.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Maggie Chapman's amendment is very well pitched, as are her remarks about the conditions that are placed on asylum seekers—people who are seeking safe harbour in our country. Does she agree with the Liberal Democrats that we should change the conditions to allow, in particular, asylum seekers who have been here and waiting for more than three months to begin working? Many would do so with great enthusiasm, and would seek to repay the generosity that they have been shown.

Maggie Chapman: Absolutely. Several parties in this Parliament have been begging the UK Government to reconsider that policy. It is cruel, it is vindictive and, like the no recourse to public funds policy that I am speaking of, it has no place in a compassionate society.

The NRPf policy leaves people, especially children, destitute and desperate. It encourages exploitation and abuse, and it does not even succeed in its purported aim of saving public money. No Government that cares about reducing child poverty, violence against women, child exploitation or organised crime could justify the continuation of that scandalous measure. For a Government that is led by a former human rights lawyer, the position is utterly untenable. I therefore ask the Scottish Government to make urgent representations to its Westminster counterpart, and I implore Labour members in this Parliament

to use whatever influence they have to make that vital change happen.

Towards the end of last year, Scottish Greens held a debate about free bus travel for people who are seeking asylum. I was encouraged by the substantial consensus that supported our position and by the thoughtful and compassionate contributions of many members, but I was bitterly disappointed by the shameful response of some who sought to pretend that the needs and rights of people who are seeking asylum are somehow in opposition to those of elderly people who are facing the bleakness of winter. That is not true. In a world of deepening conflict and climate chaos, vulnerable and marginalised people stand in the same storm. We must cling to one another to survive, we must scan the horizon with wisdom and we must welcome our neighbours—new and old.

We must not see migrants either as cogs in the economic machine or as burdens on the public purse. Rather, we should strive together to ensure that all people in Scotland, regardless of their place of birth, have all their rights fulfilled, because human rights do not stop at our borders or on our beaches.

I move amendment S6M-16034.1, to insert at end:

“; remains committed to ensuring that all migrants in Scotland have all of their rights fulfilled; recognises the pervasive and increasingly hostile anti-migrant rhetoric from some politicians and media sources; believes that further action is required by both the UK and Scottish governments to support people displaced due to the climate crisis, and calls on the UK Government to remove the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPf) conditions that limit the support and services available to many, especially those seeking asylum.”

15:32

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am grateful to the Government for bringing the debate to the chamber.

I begin with a reflection on my interests, as Maggie Chapman did. I am a proud product of immigration—not from Africa, as she is, but from the Pacific north-west of Canada. I am very grateful for the life that my mother has made in this country and I know that she is still grateful for the welcome that she has been given.

Liberal Democrats believe fundamentally that immigration makes our country stronger and more prosperous. Rather than demonising those who want to come here, we need to encourage immigration to Scotland. In fact, we need targeted measures to make that a reality, not only because of the positive contribution that immigrants make, but because all our demographic projections—we have already heard about some of them in the

debate—suggest that Scotland’s population is in fundamental decline. We will see more deaths than births every year for the next 25 years. It is projected that there will be as many as 10,000 more by 2041. That is astonishing.

Population growth is therefore essential, because it underpins future economic growth and the sustainability of our public services. Immigration is essential for maintaining that growth, but it is also essential for sustainability of services. We need people to move here to plug the gaps in the Scottish workforce and to contribute to the tax base. Indeed, research consistently shows that those who come here for economic reasons pay more in tax than they receive in benefits—and by a country mile. Immigration and the economy are fundamentally connected.

A consequence of the hard Brexit that was imposed on us by the Conservative Government was the cutting off a source of labour for our farms, our care homes, our NHS, and our tourism and hospitality industry. Liberal Democrats are pragmatic and remorseless about building bridges and re-establishing our broken connections with our European friends and neighbours.

Lorna Slater: Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned reconnecting with Europe, but what about rejoining the European Union? What do you think the pathway is for Scotland to rejoin the European Union?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Speak through the chair.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am always grateful for an opportunity to lay out the Liberal Democrats’ pathway to reintegration with the European Union. That starts, unashamedly, with rejoining the single market and re-establishing connections through research, education and the free movement of goods, people, capital and services. Fundamentally, at the heart of every Liberal Democrat is that the country rejoin the European Union. My goodness—our approach to that is pragmatic, but it is remorseless.

To that end, we want the introduction of a UK-EU youth mobility scheme to boost the economy and allow young people to work here more freely. We also want the Scottish Government to provide a replacement for the Erasmus scheme—as has been done in Wales—so that students can benefit from that life-changing educational experience. For years, the Scottish Government has failed to do that.

We also need both of Scotland’s Governments to work together on immigration to ensure that rules are sensitive to the skills that are needed in every corner of these islands and in every sector of our economy. For example, there is a need to

lower the barriers to people coming here so that we can fill the gaps in geographically sensitive areas, including rural parts of Scotland, remote places and islands. There are things that the Scottish Government can do in a wider sense to make those areas more attractive to live in and work in. I am talking about ferries that work, long-overdue broadband provision and safe roads.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): If my memory serves me correctly, Alex Cole-Hamilton talked a year or so ago about how a Ukrainian daughter had to go to Ukraine to have dental treatment because the dental services in this country were so poor. Would the member like to comment on that?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: That is absolutely true. I raised that case at First Minister’s question time. We need to make Scotland attractive, and that means improving our public services. However, the Conservative Government cut the NHS off at the knees with the hardest of Brexits, which has meant that many people in the dental profession and in the wider healthcare force now have to relocate back to Europe because they can no longer live here.

It is not only Scotland that has its own specific needs—the same can be said for the other devolved nations and the regions of England. To that end, the Lib Dems want the UK Government to extend the participation of all devolved Administrations and the development of the evidence base for a UK-wide policy on work permits and student visas.

I feel duty bound to turn to some of the events of recent days. It has become increasingly clear that immigration is a new fault line in our political discourse and, increasingly, in our society. It is once again being used as a wedge by the far right to demonise large groups of people, many of whom have called the UK home for decades. That tactic is straight out of an old playbook, in which the actions of a tiny minority are used to stigmatise an entire group of people and inspire fear. Doing that has been on the rise in our politics for years, and now it feels dangerously normal, but we must never lose sight of how damaging it can be, and we must never be frightened to call it out. In fact, it is incumbent on all of us to call it out, wherever we see it.

I was so disheartened—but not surprised—to see in recent days that senior members of the Conservative Party, including the leader of the Opposition in London, have utterly failed to do so. Indeed, Robert Jenrick’s attempt to use the appalling actions of Rotherham grooming gangs for his own political gain, and referring to, in his words, immigrants from “alien cultures” was particularly shameful.

We have also become accustomed to the steady drumbeat of toxicity that is being fed to us via social media. All that is having a corrosive effect on our society and on how welcome or otherwise our migrants are made to feel. Not only is that type of politics disgusting, it is inaccurate, because this country is made up of different cultures that have come together during centuries and made this country the great place it is to live.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. I call Bill Kidd, to be followed by Craig Hoy.

15:39

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate. This is my first contribution of the year, so I also welcome the opportunity to wish everyone, not only in Parliament but across Scotland, a very happy new year.

Today's debate is apt, because at new year, Scotland is renowned across the world for our celebrations and the warm welcome with open arms that we find. As I am sure many members do, I have fond memories of first footing the folk on our street—always finding an open door with that welcome and those open arms.

For centuries, Scotland has welcomed those who have migrated to these shores and those who, contrary to what some may say, find Scotland an attractive place to put down family roots. Those roots have grown and blossomed, enriching our society in the process. Migration is a powerful force that not only enriches culture but strengthens economies and fosters more resilient, dynamic societies. Over time, migrant communities in Scotland have contributed to our cultural richness through new languages, cuisines, art and music, enhancing our multicultural fabric. Additionally, migration plays a crucial role in addressing Scotland's ageing population by injecting a younger workforce that supports essential services such as healthcare and social care—critical components for sustaining a thriving society.

Historically, people have been arriving in Scotland for more than 12,000 years, including—much more recently, towards the end of the 19th century—many Irish and Italian migrants who came to Scotland to escape dire poverty and famine in their countries of origin. They brought, among other things, Guinness, legendary ice cream parlours such as Luca's in Edinburgh and Nardini's in Largs, and world-renowned musicians such as Lewis Capaldi and Paolo Nutini, who are Scottish through and through. Communities from across the world continue to come to Scotland and make it their home. After Indian independence in

1947, many south Asians came to the UK, with a large number settling in Scotland and working at the mills in Dundee and on the buses and trains in Glasgow. They include the late Bashir Ahmad, whom I am sure we all remember fondly. Bashir founded Scots Asians for Independence in 1995 and went on to sit in this Parliament, becoming the first non-white and first Muslim MSP. He said at the time:

"It isn't important where you come from, what matters is where we are going together as a nation."

Those are words that I echo here today.

In his time in the Parliament, Bashir led the bill to make forced marriage a criminal offence in Scotland and participated in the humanitarian campaign for Scottish hospitals to treat the most serious casualties of Israel's attacks on the Gaza strip—how history, sadly, repeats itself.

More recently, we have seen an increase in people fleeing persecution and wars, such as the war in Ukraine, and we have welcomed them here with understanding and compassion. Scots have proudly stood up for those people's rights in the face of an immigration system that, sadly, has all too often let them down. We all remember the seven young women from Glasgow who, while attending Drumchapel high school in my constituency, formed the Glasgow girls in response to the Home Office detention of one of their friends. They became unlikely heroes in the fight for justice and equality for asylum seekers, and went on to win the Scottish campaign of the year award at the annual Scottish politician of the year ceremony in 2005. The Glasgow girls ultimately succeeded in halting the deportation of their friend, and their victory sparked a broader movement for immigration reform, which led to changes in the Scottish legal system. Their story shows us that, sometimes, the system needs to be changed and, sometimes, we can change it.

As we look to our future, the past shows us the invaluable contributions that migrants have made in shaping the Scotland that we live in now—a vibrant, diverse Scotland that is laced together through shared values of inclusiveness, empathy and understanding. It also shows us the present need for change. Scotland needs the opportunity to develop a migration system that reflects not only those values but needs and challenges specific to ensuring that we can all continue to flourish together. Today, we can come together to ensure that that happens. I urge members to do just that, and to support the motion to build a migration system that supports Scotland's economy, public services and communities.

15:43

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): This debate is another opportunity for the Scottish Government to concede what is now abundantly clear—that it has repeatedly failed Scottish businesses and hard-working people up and down the country, and that it has failed to make Scotland a globally recognised destination to attract inbound global talent. The SNP repeatedly spends vast amounts of money on pet projects, on pointless Government documents that nobody reads and on ferries that do not sail—certainly not with paying customers or toilets that flush.

It is important for the Government to remember that that does not all happen under the radar. People notice its recklessness and financial incompetence. They notice, too, that our education system, NHS, housing, public spaces, policing and infrastructure have all got worse under the SNP Government. They notice that our economy lacks dynamism and that the country does not feel as though it is on the up, because one of the few things that is presently on the up here is tax. That is a bitter pill to swallow for people who already live in Scotland; it is also a difficult combination to sell to those who might choose to live and work here. The SNP's financial recklessness and its poor management of public services, combined with the highest tax burden anywhere in the UK, make Scotland an unattractive place for global talent, which can move anywhere, and often does so rapidly.

Lorna Slater: I speak as what we might call a person of global talent, who chose to move to Scotland. I have a master's degree in electromechanical engineering and worked here, as part of an engineering team, with people from Spain, China and France as well as Scotland, to deliver the world's largest tidal turbine. People come to this country from all over the world to work in our exciting, growing industries. I do not recognise Mr Hoy's comments at all. He cannot have been out in our growing and thriving industries—which are exciting places to be—or spoken to anyone who is part of the pool of global talent coming here.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Hoy, I can give you time back.

Craig Hoy: I welcome the coming of such talent both to the chamber and to Scotland. However, I point out that, on net migration, Scotland is lagging behind the rest of the UK. There are reasons for that, to which I will come in the course of my speech.

Yesterday, I spoke to a representative of the hospitality industry in Scotland. For six months, she has been seeking to recruit a senior food and beverage manager for her group. The salary for

that post is £100,000 per year. She said that she could not attract the right talent here in Scotland, so she extended her search overseas. She flew to London, where she met a prospective candidate—an American—at Heathrow airport. She liked what she saw and she offered him the job, but he declined and took a similarly paid job in London. Scotland simply could not compete, she said, because tax was an issue. Why is that? It is because, this year, someone earning £100,000 will pay more than £3,300 more in tax than their equivalent south of the border. They will also pay significantly more in land and buildings transaction tax if they choose to buy a mid-market home when they move to Scotland.

Immigration and visa policies are set by the UK—and rightly so, I believe—but that does not mean that those systems should not be responsive to the needs of the whole of the UK. That is why we have seen certain schemes emerge, such as the seasonal agricultural workers scheme that addressed specific needs here in Scotland. However, the Scottish Government must learn to understand that if Scotland is to thrive it will require talented, hard-working migrants to want to come to this country and live and work here. The grain of public policy in Scotland is presently working against that.

For the record, and as I said earlier, we have record net migration into the UK. It is true that more people are coming to Scotland, but not at the same levels in percentage terms. As Jackson Carlaw identified, data shows that people on the highest incomes are simply not coming in the same numbers. In many respects, those who are moving here are often retired or working part time and looking towards retirement. The Government will play down the significance of that, but if high earners choose to work elsewhere, there is the potential for a significant skills gap to emerge in key sectors in Scotland—most notably in our national health service, where we are battling for global talent that often goes to the rest of the UK before it comes here.

Businesses are also struggling in the high-tax environment that the SNP has inflicted on them. Scottish Financial Enterprise found that 80 per cent of financial services firms believe that tax divergence in Scotland is adversely affecting recruitment and retention, which, in turn, affects their ability to operate. We need to bear in mind that financial services is one of Scotland's key sectors, employing approximately 9 per cent of our national workforce. Coupled with Labour's disastrous decision to hammer businesses with crippling national insurance hikes, that tax divergence has made running a business in Scotland, whether it be large or small, increasingly difficult. Is it any real surprise, therefore, that talented entrepreneurs or members of the skilled

workforce, for whom we compete on a regional, country-wide and global scale, are thinking twice about moving to Scotland? Surely that must make the SNP Government uneasy. The negative impact of having a high-tax, poorly performing, low-efficiency, central belt-biased Government cannot now be underestimated.

This year, my party submitted budget proposals that the SNP Government has chosen to ignore but which would have given individuals and struggling businesses a well-deserved tax break while promoting economic growth. We would put more money into people's pockets and pass on the 40 per cent rates relief for pubs and restaurants, which would give them more money to invest in targeting talent, including from overseas.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am grateful to Craig Hoy for giving way. His party proposes tax cuts, which obviously mean cuts to public expenditure. Could he suggest how public services would be improved with more than £1 billion-worth of tax cuts, set against the free prescriptions, the free tuition and the other parts of the social contract that the Scottish Government provides?

Craig Hoy: The minister better be careful about what is coming, because her Government is looking at the issue of Government efficiency and Government waste, as we are. For example, we could save £110 million by taking 5 per cent out of the corporate back-office functions of departments that do not involve the NHS or touch the front line. I suspect that her Government, in order to pay for the welfare choices that it is making, will have to make significant savings in its back-office functions, otherwise it will bankrupt its budget in the foreseeable future.

The Government also has to recognise that it has misused devolved powers to make Scotland a relatively unattractive place to come to and live in. That does not have to be the case, because Scotland is a friendly, welcoming and exciting place to live and work in. However, sadly, depopulation is another problem that too many of our local authorities suffer, and I hope that the debate will touch on that issue. It is a particular problem in our rural and remote areas, which for too long have been neglected by the central belt-biased SNP. In my region, Dumfries and Galloway has suffered the largest net outward migration of young people anywhere in Scotland. It is a serious issue for areas such as the south of Scotland and the Highlands and Islands. I hope that the Government will work with local authorities and enterprise agencies such as South of Scotland Enterprise to tackle the problem, which undoubtedly affects inward migration.

The SNP Government should use its powers to make Scotland a place that people want to live in

and invest in and where people want to be part of driving economic growth. The Government should let hard-working people keep more of their hard-earned pounds, removing red tape, delivering quality public services and providing real support for business.

Maggie Chapman: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is just concluding.

Craig Hoy: I do not have time, I am afraid.

Sadly, I suspect that the Government will not rise to the challenge, because it continues to make the same mistakes and operate in the same manner, which leaves us at a competitive disadvantage not just with the rest of the UK but with the rest of Europe and the rest of the world. That is why I suspect that we will struggle to grow our economy and attract the right talent to this country.

15:52

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Our population—its make-up, health, diversity and distribution—is arguably the most important aspect of all our considerations in the different policy areas that we contend with. Of course, migration is a significant part of that; it has been historically, is today and will be going forward. That is why it is important and right that we debate these issues today.

My constituency has often symbolised and been at the forefront of Scotland's migration story. I was reminded of that on Christmas morning when I joined Street Soccer Scotland's annual football game, with people from across the world who did not necessarily have other things to do that day coming together, playing in friendship and doing something that everyone can enjoy.

Leith, with its docks, often tells the story of Scotland's migration journey, whether it is of the Italians who first started selling ice cream in the port of Leith, the proud Indian heritage that we have with our Sikh community, the Pakistani community, the Chinese community or the eastern Europeans who have made Edinburgh Northern and Leith and the city more widely their home from the 1950s onwards. That story also includes the recent Syrian community, the Lebanese community, various aspects of the African story of migration to Scotland, the historical story of Irish migration and, most recently, our growing Ukrainian Scot community.

All those new Scots, as well as people who have come from the rest of the UK, such as my mother, who worked for more than 30 years in our NHS, are part of the make-up of our society.

Whether it is in Edinburgh Northern and Leith or across Scotland more widely, the story of migration is enriching, not just for our culture and our inclusive Scottish identity, which I will say more about in a minute, but factually, because migration makes a positive contribution to our economy and our public services.

Scotland is not perfect by any means: racism exists, and our challenges with sectarianism go back to challenges with migration in decades and centuries past. Generally, in Scotland—although, again I am not in any way saying that it is perfect—inclusion has been reasonably successful. BEMIS describes it as our intangible cultural heritage and our inclusive identity; new Scots become proud Scots very quickly. We do not just have multiculturalism but interculturalism. My constituent Paul Singh's organisation, Building Bridges, does great work. I refer members to his contribution to time for reflection on 22 February 2022.

The story has been a good one and we have a good place from which to build, because, as has been said by members on the front benches and many others, our demographic challenges are real. I do not think that migration is a panacea for our demographic challenges; no one in the debate has argued that. However, migration is part of how we respond to that challenge, not just in Scotland but in most western economies and democracies. The need to attract more people and to bring more people to Scotland is an essential part of how we orchestrate our public policy going forward. It has been good to hear the different perspectives from members of all parties in the chamber about how we do that. I am interested in solutions on how we move forward.

I refer colleagues to the fact that, as is noted in the Government's motion,

"the Parliament has previously endorsed a motion calling for the development of differentiated, more flexible migration policy, tailored to meet Scotland's specific needs".

The 2020 paper, "Migration: Helping Scotland Prosper" was the culmination of a lot of work that was done cross-party and cross-sector to propose solutions that could be achieved with creativity and with a new constitutional position on immigration policy. It was about maintaining aspects such as border control as reserved issues but enabling the Parliament to take responsibility for and show innovation in how we attract more people to Scotland.

Craig Hoy referred to the example of an American migrant. One of the problems that potential American migrants face is that the cost of the visas allowing them to come to the country is extortionate. If Scotland could approach that differently, would that not have an impact? There

are practical, creative solutions that we could come up with if we had the flexibility to do so. As a result of the constitutional changes with the Scotland Act 2016, we have the advantage of having a tax code; we have a way to build a more tailored migration system around something that is already in place.

Canada and Australia have much more decentralised immigration systems. The UK is not necessarily normal in the way that it handles migration so centrally and with such homogeneity. We could have a better way of doing things. I am glad that there is more constructive engagement with the UK Government and that there is an openness to think about these issues. Whether from Adam Tomkins in the previous session of the Parliament or from Labour MSPs, there has been good constructive discussion across political parties about how we could better approach migration in Scotland with tailored solutions under devolved power.

The migration service that the Government has introduced will absolutely help to support people when they arrive in Scotland, which is important. I also encourage the Government to continue to support organisations such as Multi-Cultural Family Base in my constituency and others in the third sector that do such important work to support people when they arrive in Scotland. There is a sense that Scotland is a place that is growing its population well through migration and that it is inclusive and allows integration. There is a sense that everyone is proud to be Scottish, alongside their heritage from the different places that they have come from. We have something special in that and we have a good opportunity to build on it.

I commend the Government's motion. The debate is important for us all, because migration is one of the issues of our time. We should all come to this debate with solutions and with a sense of how we can work together to improve things.

15:59

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the publication of "Ganz Unten"—"at the very bottom"—by the radical campaigning journalist Günter Wallraff. It was translated into many languages, including into English as "Lowest of the Low". In it, Wallraff goes undercover as an immigrant Turkish worker. The only jobs that he can get are filthy, back-breaking, dangerous, exhausting, badly paid and temporary. He wrote:

"Today, in the middle of West Germany, I experienced conditions which are usually only described in history books about the nineteenth century. The work was dirty, crushing and drained one's last reserves; but worse, was the humiliation that I had to bear and the contempt in which I was held."

Four decades later, for West Germany then, read Scotland now, because that is a perfect description of the imperfect experience of migrant workers in Scotland today. These are not just the conditions faced by Turkish workers in Germany, found in a book written 40 years ago; they are the conditions described to me over the past 12 months by migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan who are living and working on farms right across Scotland now.

So it is all very well for ministers to talk of a “human rights-based”, “person centred” approach to migration, of “dignity, fairness and respect”, of a “humane, principled approach to migration”

and of

“Scotland as a welcoming and safe place”

when, right under the Government’s nose, nine out of 10 migrant workers on seasonal workers visas are tethered in accommodation tied to their employer. As one migrant worker told me, they are

“away from home, working in a field, sleeping in a field”

in metal containers or in a caravan last repaired 20 years ago. Their accommodation is not subject to any standards whatsoever—none. There are no national laws and no local by-laws applied to plug that gap in protection.

For the privilege of staying there, straight from their wages is deducted the maximum rent that is allowed by the Scottish Agricultural Wages Board of £300 a month each, and they have to pay their energy bills on top of that. The accommodation is all too often overcrowded and insanitary, with inhumane conditions, and they are not treated with dignity, fairness or respect. All of which begs the question, what happens to the money that is raised through that rent? Where does it go? It is not being reinvested in accommodation.

I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has met me about the scandal and that, following the raising of these issues during the passage of the Agricultural and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, a working party has now been set up, which includes the outstanding Worker Support Centre. However, I have been told that it is “a scoping exercise”, that we are at “an early stage” of the process and that we have to be “wary of unintended consequences”. What about the intended consequences of alienation, exploitation and degradation?

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Mr Leonard makes a powerful case, and I cannot claim to share the expertise that he has on this issue. However, I would say that the issue may very well be a complicated one with unintended consequences,

and that it might impinge on UK employment law and UK immigration law. Should those aspects also be brought to the table so that no stone is left unturned to deal with the situation of those workers, who, rightly do not want to be exploited by employers and the state?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Richard Leonard, I can give you the time back.

Richard Leonard: I have got a letter back in just this week, because I have been lobbying Seema Malhotra, the Minister for Migration and Citizenship, about these very issues, so I do care about it and I am making representations about it.

For those grumbling at the back, I will come on to some of the devolved issues that we need to tackle here.

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

Richard Leonard: No.

I have heard it said that the Scottish Government’s aim is to support migrant workers in a timely fashion, but where is the urgency? What about the people who will be arriving in a couple of months’ time to work in horticulture? Do they not deserve a “humane and principled approach”? What about the women among them? Do they not deserve support in a timely fashion? Our debate on migration in this Parliament cannot simply be about

“the needs of Scotland’s employers”

as expressed in the Government’s motion. It has got to be about human rights, because it is about human beings.

Neither can the changes that we demand be deferred. Housing is devolved. The Government should use the powers that it has got now to act to protect these workers, to improve their quality of life and to close this loophole.

Finally, the edition of the Wallraff translation on my bookshelf has an introduction by the intellectual giant, A Sivanandan, who back then was the director of the Institute of Race Relations and the editor of its journal *Race & Class*. It was Siva who famously challenged those who questioned immigration with the great aphorism:

“We’re here because you were there”.

That serves as a timely reminder that we have to keep challenging not just Nigel Farage and his groundless claims that British culture is directly under threat from immigration, but those others as well who peddle the idea that migration is a negative, that it should be reduced and that it is a problem.

I have always been struck that those same people who oppose the freedom of movement of labour always seem to support the freedom of movement of capital. So we have to keep taking on the argument. That means defending, resisting, speaking out and standing up for the rights of migrant workers on our farms, in our service economy, in the factories and across our public services.

That is what I will continue to do. That is what this Parliament must do. That is the test. That is the measure of the kind of society we are—whether we are hostile or welcoming, racist or anti-racist, striving for equality and for social justice or callously turning our back. That is the choice before us, and I know which side of that choice I am on.

16:07

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): How to follow Mr Leonard?

Some years ago, the languages tree in my son's primary school had 46 leaves, to represent the 46 languages that were spoken in his school and the mix of nationalities that had settled in the north-east. Children were learning about one another's cultures, traditions and values. They lived in families who worked in the energy industry, health services, education and business, and made a significant contribution to the local economy, their communities and the social and cultural ecosystems in the north-east.

Scotland is a welcoming nation, which embraces those who come to live, study and work, and those who flee persecution and conflict. That is a far cry from the previous UK Government's unwelcoming approach of reducing migration through its immigration and asylum systems. I sincerely hope that the current UK Government commits to shifting the dial on that harmful approach. Scotland has distinct demographic and economic needs, and I will highlight two interconnected issues that are highly relevant to the north-east.

First, I thank Universities Scotland and Robert Gordon University for their helpful briefings on higher education. In our higher education space, international students have contributed between £4 billion and £6 billion to Scotland's economy since 2019, and attracting global talent, such as Lorna Slater, to Scottish higher education has brought huge social, cultural and soft benefits.

In 2021-22, in Aberdeen alone, the contribution of international students had a net impact of more than £350 million. However, numbers have recently fallen dramatically due to the previous UK Government's decision to end dependant visas. In 2023-24, Robert Gordon University in my

constituency saw international on-campus postgraduate student enrolment decline by 34 per cent, and applications from female students declined by a staggering 57 per cent—they were clearly disproportionately affected by that decision.

Importantly, some postgraduate courses are viable only due to the presence of international students. Those courses provide the higher-order skills that are required by our workforce in Scotland at a time of significant skills shortages across a range of sectors. The UK Government must reverse the decision that prevents international students from bringing dependants to the UK, and maintain the graduate-route visa to ensure that Scotland remains an attractive destination for our international students.

That brings me on to the energy industry—specifically offshore wind. I am grateful to Scottish Renewables for highlighting a recent white paper that was submitted by numerous energy industry bodies, which outlines the detrimental impact of amendments to the Immigration Act 1971 and changes to visa rules for offshore wind workers that mean that almost all non-UK offshore workers require a visa to work in UK territorial waters.

The offshore wind sector is dependent on specialist vessels and crew that operate around the world, and the strict UK visa requirements are presenting a significant barrier to the deployment of vital Scottish offshore wind projects, which adds complexity and costs to working in the UK amid an increasingly competitive global offshore wind market. To illustrate—I ask members to stick with me—the average construction of a 1GW offshore wind farm in the UK can require close to 100 vessels. Industry has calculated that in that scenario, the cost of obtaining visas for a full complement of crew could be in excess of £45 million. The point about such costs was also made by my colleague Ben Macpherson.

To achieve clean power by 2030 and to capture the economic benefits for Scotland of our offshore wind potential, we need a visa system that enables those specialist vessels and crews to work in UK waters. Importantly, that would then allow projects to be successfully deployed and allow the long-term, high-value jobs that they create to be secured for our workforce here in Scotland.

To put it simply, visa requirements do not align with the needs of our economy, and they are creating an untenable situation for a key industry to Scotland. Scottish Renewables and industry partners are highlighting the issue with the UK Government, but traction with the Home Office has been limited. The Scottish Government has limited powers in that space, so I hope that there is scope for some collaboration between the Governments, working with industry, to find a resolution, given

the importance of our ScotWind and innovation and targeted oil and gas projects.

I commend the action taken by the Scottish Government to establish Scotland's Migration Service, which is an excellent support for employers, investors and individuals who are navigating the UK immigration system once they have arrived here. However, given the challenges faced by Scotland's higher education and energy industries, and others that have been referred to by colleagues this afternoon, I fully support the Scottish Government's calls for a differentiated, more flexible migration policy that is tailored to meet Scotland's specific needs, including a policy that derives from a geographical context.

I urge members to support the Government motion this afternoon.

16:14

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): It is always a pleasure to participate in a debate with Richard Leonard. It reminds me of happier times, when, as leaders of our parties, if nothing else, we probably forced members in the chamber to stay awake during our speeches.

I had a look back and noted that I last made a substantive contribution to a debate on the subject in 2018. I was able to say in my remarks then that, as deputy leader of the Conservative Party, I spoke on behalf of my party, as led by Ruth Davidson.

This afternoon, as I repeat some of what I said then, perhaps I speak more for myself than I do for my party. I will quote some of what I said then:

"Almost 60 years ago, I was born in my Eastwood constituency. Eastwood, where I have lived for the vast majority of the years since, is a community that has been home for many who have migrated to Scotland from the rest of the UK and from the rest of the world, including Europe."

Incidentally, despite what some speakers said, inward net migration from the European Union continues to hit record levels.

"Let me tackle directly some of the myths that are often repeated to me as an MSP—myths founded on concerns that migration alone is responsible for the pressures on our infrastructure and public services, which is simply not true.

Yes, we have a housing shortage, but that is not because of migration. We have seen radical shifts in the way that we choose to live, with far more single home occupancy and longer life expectancy. Homes that might have been expected to appear on the open market two decades ago are now still happily occupied.

Yes, we have busy hospitals and general practitioner surgeries, but that is not because of migration. We have a population that is living longer but is not always well. Even in the lifetime of this Parliament, we have seen new issues that were not envisaged when we first met, such as dementia and diabetes arising from obesity, present

enormous strategic and budgetary challenges to the national health service.

Yes, we have busy schools, colleges and universities, but that is not because of migration. Far more of our young people stay longer at school and proceed into further education of whatever kind.

The suggestion that migration is at the heart of the stresses in our public life and services is a fantasy, and a malicious and self-deceiving one at that. Let me be absolutely clear ... that migration and immigration from wherever are good, necessary and desirable. There is a strong, powerful and unarguable case for migration to Scotland and"

I am

"on its side."—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2018; c 60-1.]

This may be the 19th year that I have been in the Parliament but, throughout those 19 years, we have talked about the ageing demographic in Scotland. In the report that the Scottish Government published in 2018, we noted that, over the next 25 years, the number of people aged 75 and over would increase by 79 per cent. Way back in my first session of Parliament, that situation was described to me as a pyramid that was about to be inverted. Therefore, to underpin our public services and to make ourselves economically attractive, we need to bring people into Scotland who will be able to contribute to the welfare of all of us who are here in the future.

All that is taking place at the same time as we are leaving an industrial revolution and embedding and embracing the digital technical revolution. All of that represents changes over the next 30 years that will probably be as great as any over the past 200 years. We need to have an entrepreneurial, younger and aspirational workforce that is attracted to come to Scotland.

We need to have a mature discussion. I still do not think that we properly answer the question as to why Scotland has been less successful than other parts of the United Kingdom at attracting a proportionate share of those who come to the United Kingdom to work here. Yes, we can point to free university tuition and free personal care, other mitigations and free prescriptions, but if you are a young person of working age, none of those things is terribly relevant to you. You do not yet have children going to university. You think that you are invincible and that you will not need free personal care for decades. Nor do you think that you will need free prescriptions. You are looking to other things. At the moment, we are not attracting the sort of economic opportunities into Scotland that make it desirable for those younger people to come and settle here. We need to ask ourselves why and to do everything that we can to try to bring that change about.

At one point, I heard Rhoda Grant say "back in 204"—I think that she meant 2004; I am sure that

that was a slip of the tongue—which was when the Emperor Elagabalus was ruling over England. Maggie Chapman might be interested to know that Elagabalus was the first transgender emperor, who started as a male and transitioned to a female. Colleagues, nothing is new under the sun.

Notwithstanding that, Tony Blair dismantled the consensus around some of the fears about immigration. We all know that, when, to my dismay, this country voted to leave the European Union, migration was the issue at the heart of that. Over the new year, papers were released under the 20-year rule that showed that the Home Secretary and various other ministers queried whether Tony Blair was doing the right thing in dismantling the entire immigration application apparatus. In a narrowly defined ultimate contest, did he not potentially stoke the very fears that, to my dismay, subsequently led to people voting for us to leave the European Union?

We must have a migration system. Professor Sir John Curtice produced a report, that we debated in 2018, which showed that 63 per cent of people in Scotland did not want those matters to be devolved to Scotland. As I have said to Maggie Chapman and some others, one reason that people are concerned about the devolution of those issues is that some parties have never supported the deportation of any illegal migrant, in any circumstances whatsoever. The concern of many people, and of much of the public, is that that is not a system; that is just an open-door policy. What they want is a migration system that will work—that is humane and compassionate, but with a principle that people can unite behind.

That is what we have got to do. I do not see that we have any other alternatives—

Ben Macpherson: Will the member give way?

Lorna Slater: Will Mr Carlaw take an intervention?

Jackson Carlaw: Yes, I will.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: From whom, Mr Carlaw?

Jackson Carlaw: I think it was Mr Macpherson—but I heard another voice that sounded female. Was Ms Grahame trying to come in as well? I will take the intervention from Mr Macpherson.

Lorna Slater: It was me.

Jackson Carlaw: Oh! I am sorry.

Ben Macpherson: I thank Jackson Carlaw for taking the intervention. I agree with the points that he has made. The devolution of migration policy would also give us the opportunity to take further responsibility, given the seriousness of all aspects of migration policy. That could also help us.

Jackson Carlaw: That is the bit that I am not yet persuaded about—but I could be.

I heard Mr Arthur talk about the carefully defined scheme that he has been progressing in relation to migration. I am sorry that I do not have the detail of it. He said that the scheme was articulated to the Home Office in a detailed proposal. Is that detail in the public domain? I would be glad to receive it—if it can be forwarded, that would be helpful.

Clearly, there is an opportunity, particularly through digital technology, to overcome some people's fear that if you bring people into Scotland, they will be on the first train back down to London. If we can overcome that fear, perhaps there is a case, and perhaps there is an opportunity in the future.

However, the Scottish Government must address the points that I made at the start of my speech. We must make the infrastructure investments that enable us to attract people into Scotland, so that we have sound public services to which they can add support.

16:22

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Both Labour and Tory Governments have made the word "migration", or, perhaps more accurately, the word "migrant", something of a dirty word—a headline-grabbing problem and a blight on the UK. I immediately dissociate Jackson Carlaw from those remarks. He made a very interesting and thoughtful speech.

Focusing on stopping the boats—those fragile dinghies packed with desperate people, mainly the young, who are in hardship, traversing continents and paying vast sums, with the real risk of drowning at sea, all for a chance of a better future—is not appropriate. In fact, the vast majority of migrants are here legally. Targeting the boats distorts the debate, but it is a very easy target. Yes, we need to regulate migration, but it must be done in a way that is just, humane, compassionate, balanced and tempered to the requirements of the country. I also fully support allowing asylum seekers to earn after a period and to contribute to society as their applications are processed.

What is apparent is that the current revised UK immigration system does not fit the needs of Scotland and that that fact, combined with Brexit and an increasing proportion of older people—I declare an interest as part of that demographic—have exacerbated the problems of workforce availability, particularly in areas such as health, social care, hospitality and some parts of the rural economy. Recent news reports about the issues of

an ageing population in the Western Isles and Orkney testify to that. In rural areas, younger people tend to migrate to urban areas, while older people stay put. The demographic balance changes even more as others seek to retire to rural locations such as the Borders, which I understand.

In 2023, non-EU nationals accounted for 91 per cent of work-related migration to the UK, with the main countries being India and Nigeria. We can contrast that with migration from the EU, which has been negative since Covid, and following Brexit, which was pursued by Boris Johnson notwithstanding the pandemic, as at June 2024, EU net migration was down by 95,000. The year before, only 5 per cent of visas were issued to EU nationals and the enrolment of new EU students fell by 53 per cent, which had, as we know, a substantial impact on the funding of further and higher education institutions.

However, we do not need statistics to know that there are shortages in health, social care and hospitality in some rural areas, all directly as a result of Brexit. Even in this Parliament, I know of staff—hospitality staff, in particular—who left during Covid to return to Europe, and who, with the loss of free movement because of Brexit, have not returned. They were young people, some of whom had families.

There are particular difficulties for the Scottish economy as a direct consequence of UK migration policies and Brexit, which, of course, we opposed—62 per cent overall—in every area from Shetland to the Scottish Borders, without exception.

I will focus on health and social care. The 2022 Scotland census recorded more than 1 million people who are aged 65 and over, which is more than a quarter of a million higher than the number of people who are under 15. By mid-2045, the number of people aged 65 and over is projected to grow by nearly a third to 25.4 per cent of the population, while the number of children is projected to fall to 13.3 per cent of the population. That matters because, as a result, Scotland's dependency ratio is projected to increase from 60 per 100 to 68 per 100 by 2033. We need young people and families, and migration provides that. That is obvious in rural areas, which I have referred to, where 21 per cent of the population is aged over 60 compared with 17 per cent across the whole country.

We need a tailored migration system to help to grow our economy in key sectors such as tourism and agriculture—but not to exploit people, Richard Leonard. If you had taken my intervention, I would have asked you whether you would agree with employment legislation being devolved to this

Parliament—but, no, you want to stick with the union and all the problems that it has.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair.

Christine Grahame: Richard Leonard wishes to stick to the union on his soapbox—no matter what.

We could once again have international students, with opportunities for them to live and work here after studying. With independence and a return to being a member state of the EU, new visas would be introduced to support people to live and work here, including a live-in-Scotland visa, which would allow people to live and work here without employer sponsorship if they met certain criteria. A Scottish connections visa would give certain people immediate rights to live and work here if they had been in residence for five years and met other criteria. A work-in-Scotland visa would be a visa through employer sponsorship, with simplified rules to allow more employers to recruit from abroad. A family visa could remove the minimum income requirement that is currently in place for a UK family visa, making it easier for families to choose Scotland as a place to live; it would also help to reunite families who have been separated.

All in all, with what lies ahead, it is not good for our public services and our economy unless we have control of these matters. Migration is natural. It is in our DNA, and, broadly, it is a good thing. We Scots should know that. The Scottish diaspora worldwide is estimated to be between 28 million and 40 million people. Two years ago, one of my sons and his family became migrants, moving to a welcoming Canada—another family lost to Scotland. It is time for our country to do the same: let us regulate migration to Scotland, bring employment law here and welcome families and young people who will contribute so much to our economy and our services.

16:28

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): As members know, I am a new Scot, and this debate has allowed me to reflect on my position as such. Even although I am, as Maggie Chapman said about herself, a white, English-speaking person with a couple of degrees, which makes me a very privileged migrant, I have found Scotland to be not only an exciting place to live, with massive opportunities for those in both my chosen fields—engineering and politics—but one with an exciting future. It is one of the reasons why I support independence for Scotland. The idea of creating something new, creating constitutional change and reimagining the kind of country that you want to live in is exciting.

As I said earlier during one of my interventions, when I worked at Orbital Marine Power, we built the world's largest floating tidal turbine. Most of the build happened in 2020; I do not really recommend doing that during a pandemic, but it can be done. Along with Scottish engineers, it was me and colleagues from Spain, France and China, all of whom had moved to Scotland, who did the design, build, integration and commissioning of the system.

I say that to illustrate the fact that we do attract people to Scotland in those exciting industries, but I think that we all know, including from the debate today, that we need to attract more. We need to get more labour in those industries, both through encouraging young Scottish people to pick up the skills that are needed in those growing and exciting fields—mathematics, engineering, physics and so on—and through allowing more people to come to Scotland.

Towards the end of that build, we had to get the turbine back into Scotland urgently. We loaded it on to a crane on 12 December because the Brexit curtain was going to come down on 30 December and I had to get the machine back into the UK before then because we did not know how we would be able to move it across the border from that point on. So, we ended up bringing the turbine into the country unfinished, and we finished it up here in Scotland.

As that Brexit curtain came down, it not only harmed our ability to finish the turbine in an efficient way but harmed labour markets, particularly in industries such as hospitality and agriculture, whose businesses suffered so acutely. Those businesses are still suffering and still reporting a shortage of workers, and so are our rural businesses, which depended on those workers. That brought massive damage to our economy, because one of the brilliant things about the EU was that it allowed free movement of people. It allowed people to take up opportunities where they could from across the EU.

We are now in a period of relatively high employment, and we still have sectors that need to grow and that need labour. We need people, especially in areas such as renewable energy and construction. I know that all members are familiar with the housing emergencies that exist in Scotland.

However, I am encouraged by the consensus across the chamber that migration into Scotland is desirable. That is so nice to hear when, across the world, we hear that migration is undesirable. That is a nice change, and it is part of why I am proud to make Scotland my home.

Before I go through members' contributions to the debate, I want to follow up on the point about

Scotland being different than elsewhere. Today's debate has felt so different from conversations elsewhere, such as those in England, where the hostile environment was a stated Government policy. We are the Scotland of Kenmure Street, where the people of Glasgow protected their neighbours from Home Office depredations.

An issue that my colleague Maggie Chapman touched on that all of us need to keep in our focus is that of the global challenge of climate migration. We are only at the start of that. It will be—pardon the pun—the hot topic of the next 100 years, as more and more parts of planet earth become uninhabitable to humanity, sea levels rise, coastal cities become flooded and crops fail. As parts of the world become simply too hot for humans to safely live in, humanity will be on the move. Even if we managed to stop our emissions today, global temperatures would continue to rise because of our historical emissions. However, as we all know, emissions have not stopped—they continue. Global temperature rises are approaching terrifying levels, and they are already costing lives and causing people to move.

How will we deal with that? Even if we reach the goal of net zero, that will still be the problem. We are only at the start of the process. We should all keep in mind the fact that the next 100 years will be about humanity managing migration as people flow around the world. Are we ready for that? Are we ready for what that future looks like?

I very much welcomed Alex Cole-Hamilton's contribution, in which he recognised the importance of the European Union. I look forward to the Liberal Democrats campaigning loudly and enthusiastically for the UK to return to the EU.

I felt that Jeremy Balfour's characterisation of us as being in a situation in which Scotland has nothing to show for higher taxes was totally disingenuous. There is nothing to show except, of course, free prescriptions, free university tuition, bus travel for under-22s, better provision of free school meals, the Scottish child payment, free eye tests and a better performing NHS. The list goes on and on.

I welcomed Richard Leonard's highlighting of the plight of agricultural workers. We can all agree that their situation is not remotely acceptable and that we need to work to tackle it.

I close by saying that the positive and welcoming tone about migration, even from Conservatives who want to make Scotland an attractive alternative market, is welcome. However, the truth is that the laws in this space—including those about the treatment of asylum seekers or the visas for other types of migrant—sit with the UK Government. Until Scotland becomes independent, these decisions will not be made by

the people of Scotland or with our needs and vision in mind.

16:35

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. We recognise the benefit of immigration for our economy. Edinburgh sees people coming to study and work in our information technology, finance and tourism sectors, and they can even become MSPs if they are lucky.

Following the racist riots of last summer, it must be said that Scotland welcomes immigrants and asylum seekers and deplores all forms of racism and prejudice. Regardless of how someone came here, our immigration system must be fair and based on respect.

It is necessary to support businesses and individuals to hire from outside Scotland, but our responsibilities do not end with visas. New Scots face the same issues that many others face already. Richard Leonard raised the poor conditions faced by agricultural workers. I have heard of cases of new Scots or asylum seekers being stuck in temporary accommodation with no running water for months on end and of instances of a room being shared between three people. Tackling issues such as the housing emergency and ensuring that our councils have the resources to support new Scots must be part of any immigration strategy.

We have heard today about the importance of using immigration to fill skills gaps in our economy, but I note that those exact issues were discussed in Parliament in 2018. It seems to me to be an admission of failure on the SNP's part that some professions have been on the shortage occupation list for more than a decade. Some of that can be addressed through immigration, but the power to fill those gaps exists today.

That brings me to the proposed rural visa pilot. Members have outlined the many issues caused by rural depopulation and the resulting inequalities between regions. Having a specific immigration strategy could be a useful way of increasing the number of people moving to island and rural areas. That has been done before: my colleague Rhoda Grant said that Scotland previously had immigration schemes such as the fresh talent initiative when Scottish Labour was in Government.

The major issue that remains is that people want to live in rural and island areas but are forced to move, or are put off from coming, by the lack of economic opportunity, lack of housing and high cost of living that the Scottish Government has allowed to take hold. That is recognised in Labour's economic plan for the Gaelic language. If

the Scottish Government wants to attract and retain people in rural areas, tackling those issues must take priority. A temporary increase in population is not a long-term solution for the depopulation crisis.

In closing, I will discuss Scotland's ageing population. Members have said that Scotland's working-age population is predicted to decline in the next 20 years. That creates the need for greater immigration, but we cannot rely solely on the rest of the world to provide us with a workforce. Scotland's fertility rate has fallen and, although the attitude towards having children has changed in recent years, we must consider the outside factors that may be driving that, including childcare, the cost of living and a housing emergency that leaves people paying high rents later and later in life. Scottish Government research shows that finance and childcare remain the largest barriers to people having children.

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

Foysoyl Choudhury: I will not, as I have a lot to get through.

Immigration must not be used as a sticking plaster for a society where starting a family is out of reach for too many.

Scottish Labour believes that immigration has a key role to play in Scotland's economic future. The immigration system should reflect the needs of the Scottish economy. However, immigration must not be used as a substitute for skills development or tackling the root causes of rural and island depopulation.

16:40

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Before I begin, I would just like to say thank you to Jackson Carlaw, Richard Leonard and Christine Grahame for their interesting and engaging speeches.

The migration system is important to a thriving economy. I think that we are all in agreement on that. I echo the positive words that we have heard in this debate about the contributions of those who have made Scotland their home. Ben Macpherson used the word "enriching", and I definitely agree with him. As a human resources leader in the international energy and renewables sector for three decades, I understand the importance of positive migration and, like Jackson Carlaw, I am on the side of having a migration system. It is absolutely fundamental to who we are.

However, as my colleague Foysoyl Choudhury said, the migration system is not a cure-all for Scotland's economy. It will not fix the demographic challenges that we face. I find it really

disappointing that the SNP's motion does not address the drivers of depopulation. My colleague Craig Hoy spent quite some time in his speech raising the importance of that. The motion fails to acknowledge Scotland's rising levels of economic inactivity due to ill health and it fails to address how we can harness the existing potential labour force in Scotland. It ignores the housing shortages, the income tax burden, our creaking NHS, our crumbling transport infrastructure, our failing education system and the sky-high cost of childcare, which is pushing too many women out of work.

As my colleague Liz Smith emphasised earlier this week, the SNP keeps trying to address serious policy issues by using short-term fixes. When it comes to Scotland's demography, sticking plasters are not the solution, as we have heard today.

Maggie Chapman: Tess White has just talked about the need to think about education, transport and all those other issues as well as, in her words, the failing healthcare system. Does she agree with her colleague Craig Hoy, who called a few moments ago for a cut to every budget apart from the health budget? Does she agree that we cannot deal with all the issues that she claims we need to deal with if we cut every budget apart from the NHS budget?

Tess White: My understanding of what Craig Hoy said is that he was talking about £140 million of efficiency savings. I do not think that there is anything wrong with efficiency savings. If the SNP Government would focus on that, maybe we would have money to fund other important infrastructure projects.

Rhoda Grant rightly said that workforce planning should never be dependent on inward migration, and Christine Grahame talked about workforce availability. The two things are quite different. Workforce planning is very, very important. As we know from the NHS system, there is a lack of proper workforce planning in the Scottish Government, particularly in relation to the NHS. Scotland is the only nation in the UK where both the overall population and the working-age population are forecast to decline.

Christine Grahame: Will the member take an intervention?

Tess White: Presiding Officer, will I get the time back?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Yes.

Tess White: Thank you.

Christine Grahame: Is the member prepared to concede that Brexit has impacted on our workforce? Does she agree that people's lack of

ability to move around Europe has impacted particularly on the NHS and the care sector, and that Brexit has a lot to answer for?

Tess White: Christine Grahame is harping back to Brexit, but that ship is gone. When you were making your speech, I started to think that you were making some interesting points, but you dashed it all when you talked about grabbing employment law. If the Scottish Government could control and manage the things that it had the levers to manage, maybe the Scottish population would trust the Scottish Government and the SNP to deliver.

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair, please.

Tess White: The SNP has spent years agitating for independence, but as Scotland is part of the UK, the Scottish Government's budget is protected from population decline. That point was not made by me; it was made by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. It is no surprise that, instead of using existing levers to tackle the population challenges that Scotland faces, the SNP reverts to form and calls for more powers. That is the same SNP that took years to set up the Scottish social security system, following the passing of the Scotland Act 2016. It is the same SNP that still has not floated new ferries for our island communities, prompting a grovelling apology from the First Minister this week.

As a north-east MSP, I represent areas of remote and rural Scotland, and I know the unique population challenges that communities in those areas face, and I have raised them with Scottish ministers. However, when it comes to solutions, we should look first at the causes of depopulation. Almost half of council wards in the Borders and in the Highlands have experienced population decline—as my colleagues highlighted.

Richard Leonard will be pleased to know that human rights are very important to me. The Scottish Human Rights Commission published alarming findings that show that food and housing in the Highlands do not meet minimum core human rights obligations, whereas health only partially meets obligations.

Jeremy Balfour stated a stark fact, which is that Scotland receives 6 per cent of net migration to the UK, which is lower than its 8.4 per cent population share. The Scottish Government likes to downplay the significance of that, but it is extremely important. The reality is that, after 17 years of SNP mismanagement, Scotland is often not an attractive prospect for people who are looking to relocate. The SNP-controlled NHS is performing worse than the health service in England. If the SNP wants to support Scotland's economy, public services and communities, it

should show some more common sense and focus on using the powers that it has to make Scotland a more attractive place to move to.

The Presiding Officer: I call Tom Arthur to wind up the debate.

16:47

Tom Arthur: I thank colleagues across the chamber for their contributions to what I thought was a broadly informative, productive and constructive debate.

Before moving to the substance of the contributions, I will respond to a point that was raised by one or two members who questioned whether it was even legitimate for the Parliament to be discussing the issue of migration. Of course, there are a number of policies that members on the Government benches would like to see devolved to the Parliament that are currently sitting in schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998. However, there was once a time when every power exercised by the Scottish Parliament and by Scottish ministers was exercised at Westminster and Whitehall. In a democracy, it is perfectly legitimate to make the case and advocate for change. If we cannot parlay in a Parliament, goodness knows where we can do it, particularly when it is on a subject of such profound importance to our economy, our wellbeing and our society overall as that of the very people who live in Scotland and how we create pathways for people to come and live in Scotland.

I will move on to some of the fundamental economic arguments that underpin the motion that the Government has brought before Parliament today. However, first, I want to say two things. As I said in my opening remarks, this is not seen as a silver bullet or as a single solution. We recognise that what is required to ensure that we are able to sustain and grow our population in Scotland is a multifaceted approach that involves retaining people in Scotland, attracting people from other parts of the UK and attracting people internationally. As part of that, the migration system under which we operate has a key role to play, but I want to disabuse members of the notion that it is the exclusive focus of the Government's action to address the matter of population.

Craig Hoy: I thank the minister for giving way and for conceding the fundamental point that the migration system is not a silver bullet. What does the minister say to Scottish Financial Enterprise, which says that its evidence-based approach clearly shows that higher taxes have reduced migration into Scotland, particularly in the financial services sector?

Tom Arthur: I say to Mr Hoy that I very much recognise the points that have been raised by SFE

and others and that have been reported anecdotally in the media. He will note the comments of the finance secretary on presenting the budget to Parliament and, indeed, the First Minister's comments about the Government's position regarding tax policy for the remainder of this session of Parliament. I will not rehearse the arguments, but Mr Hoy is well aware of the significant additional revenues that are raised through taxation policy in Scotland, which are estimated at some £1.5 billion this year.

As many members have noted, there is a view that the performance of our public services is of key importance in attracting and retaining population in Scotland. A significant tax cut in the region of £1.5 billion is not consistent with wanting investment in our public services. However, I do not want to rehearse those arguments, as they have been well aired.

The second point that I want to note is about tone. The point was raised by Maggie Chapman, Lorna Slater and Alex Cole-Hamilton, and it was implicit in the remarks of Mr Leonard. It was also very much at the centre of excellent contributions from Jackson Carlaw and, indeed, my colleague Bill Kidd. It is heartening that, although we see a coarsening of language and, quite frankly, some obscene and outrageous rhetoric in other quarters, we have avoided that in Parliament today. It is an opportunity to recommit to speaking positively and constructively about migrants and their contribution to Scotland.

Lorna Slater: I want to follow up on Mr Hoy's intervention. I noticed that, in his speech, he spoke about central-belt bias in Scotland without recognising at all the distorting power that London has on UK and English economic statistics. I felt that his data misrepresented the point that he was trying to make. Mr Hoy presented London as the cheaper option, in terms of the cost of living, compared to Scotland. In Scotland, higher earners pay a little bit more tax, but they get so much more in return for that—baby boxes, free university tuition and so on. Does the minister recognise that point and agree with me?

Tom Arthur: That is quite helpful, because I was going to turn to a question asked by Mr Carlaw and touched on by one or two other members: why does Scotland seem not to take a population share of overall migration to the UK? It is a fairly legitimate question, but the distorting factor is, of course, London. I take the view that it is fantastic to have a brilliant, world-class city such as London on these islands, four and a half hours away on the train and an hour or so away on a flight, but it does not come without its challenges. There are many reasons why people would wish to move to London, but I do not think that the cost of living is one of them. I think that we all

recognise that implicitly. There is a challenge there.

It may be helpful for the chamber if I share some statistics. We know that London attracts disproportionately more skilled workers than the rest of the UK. Analysis by the migration observatory found that, between 2016 and 2020, 44 per cent of skilled workers with certificates of sponsorship went to London. London has the highest proportion of migrants among UK areas, and around 40 per cent of its residents were born abroad. According to census data, in 2021-22, almost half of all foreign-born residents of the UK lived in London and the south-east. That is the reality. There is freedom of movement, and London will always have that magnetic pull.

Here I will draw a comparison. Richard Leonard made the point that it is interesting that some of the most vociferous advocates of free movement of capital are also the most vociferous opponents of restricting migration. We know that, against a country such as the United Kingdom, in which there are significant opportunities for inward investment, Scotland competes well. London and the south-east do disproportionately well, but Scotland is regularly the strongest-performing part of the UK outside those areas. That is testament to the tremendous work of our overseas offices, such as Scottish Development International, and of Scottish businesses and our business representative organisations in attracting inward investment. The challenge for us is that the migration system in the UK is more restrictive; it is not as open as the opportunities for investment.

That reflects the Government's three-part approach. First, we want to provide as much support as we can within the existing UK migration system. Secondly, we aim to advocate for change in that system. Thirdly, we will argue for a tailored approach, because the principle of adopting a differentiated approach is conceded. We have sectoral differentiation, so why not geographical differentiation? What is the role of Government if it is not to intervene through regulation when we see the distortionary effects of the magnetic pull of London and the south-east? That is the situation that confronts us. London provides great opportunities for Scottish business and Scottish people, but it also presents a challenge.

Tess White: Will the minister take an intervention?

Tom Arthur: Certainly—in just a moment.

We can help to address that challenge in a similar way to our approach to capital. We work to attract investors to Scotland. We work within the existing system to attract people to come here. Let us remember that we are seeing net migration to Scotland from the rest of the UK, including among

taxpayers, according to the recent data that we have available. However, there is much more that we can do. The way in which we could enhance our progress to date would be to see changes made to the migration system. I stress that those changes would not be a silver bullet, but they could make an important contribution.

I will give way to Tess White.

Tess White: The minister says that it is an important part of the role of Government to use interventions, but what about the fact that a quarter of the working-age population in Scotland is inactive because of ill health?

Tom Arthur: That is an important point, and it sits directly within my portfolio as the minister with responsibility for fair work. We are making a range of interventions. I gently caution members against looking at the available statistics, given the caveats that the Office for National Statistics has placed on them and given the issues with the labour force survey. We already know that too many people are economically inactive. We are taking action through the no one left behind strategy that forms part of our devolved employability services. That is a devolved, local partnership-based approach that allows such partners to respond to the needs and assets in their areas. Further funding for that has been committed in the Scottish budget. We have also committed to providing specialist disability support across all 32 local authority areas.

I want to see opportunities for consistency in our devolved employability system where that is in the interests of collaboration. I also want to see local working that engages with businesses and organisations that are specific to each community. I have engaged directly with the UK Government on its "Get Britain Working" white paper. I want to work with it constructively on employability, given the overlap between devolved and reserved competencies in that area.

Of course, we are seeking to implement other measures, such as interventions through health. The UK Government is seeking to implement policy interventions through the social security system, which we must consider very carefully. We must ensure that we are incentivising people back into work and supporting them at their own pace, rather than having a system that would stigmatise people. That is always a danger in the employability sphere. We want to support people back into work and into jobs that they can sustain. That is a key priority for the Government.

I go back to my earlier point that, if we are to grow our workforce and our pool of labour, we will need to take a multifaceted approach. We are not looking at any one matter in isolation, but regulation of the movement of people in and out of

the UK is a key component. We have issued proposals that I think are reasonable and proportionate and that can command support. We want to work constructively with the UK Government, because, as I said, there is differentiation based on sectors and we believe that we can look to have that on the basis of geography. Furthermore, as Alex Cole-Hamilton highlighted, that should not be confined to Scotland, as there are challenges with the retention of population in parts of England and Wales. We absolutely agree with the Liberal Democrats' proposal on the inclusion of devolved Governments and ministers in that process.

I hope that what the Government has set out in the debate will command the widest support among members. We recognise that we will have to take a multifaceted approach. However, looking to have a tailored approach to immigration that we can work and collaborate with the UK Government to design will be of significant benefit to the Scottish economy, our public services and our society.

I encourage members to back the Government's motion.

Decision Time

17:00

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

I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Jeremy Balfour is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Rhoda Grant will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-16034.4, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16034, in the name of Kaukab Stewart, on building a migration system that supports Scotland's economy, public services and communities, 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.

17:00

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: Colleagues, there is a technical issue, so I am going to suspend the meeting briefly again.

17:04

Meeting suspended.

17:07

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Jeremy Balfour is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Rhoda Grant will fall.

We come to the vote on amendment S6M-16034.4, in the name of Jeremy Balfour. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to connect; I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: We will ensure that that is recorded.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

Something went wrong with my app; I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (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)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 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)
 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]
 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)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 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-16034.4, in the name of Jeremy Balfour, is: For 27, Against 90, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-16034.3, in the name of Rhoda Grant, which seeks to amend motion S6M-

16034, in the name of Kaukab Stewart, on building a migration system that supports Scotland's economy, public services and communities, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to connect through my app. I would have voted no.

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

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 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)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (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)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 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)
 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)
 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)
 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]
 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)
 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, 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)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 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-16034.3, in the name of Rhoda Grant, is: For 24, Against 93, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-16034.1, in the name of Maggie Chapman, which seeks to amend motion S6M-16034, in the name of Kaukab Stewart, on building a migration system that supports Scotland's economy, public services and communities, 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)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (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)
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)
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, 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

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (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)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Choudhury, Foysol (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)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)

O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-16034.1, in the name of Maggie Chapman, is: For 68, Against 28, Abstentions 21.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-16034, in the name of Kaukab Stewart, on building a migration system that supports Scotland's economy, public services and communities, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect for that vote. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Beattie. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (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)
 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)
 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, 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)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (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)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

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)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:17.

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-16034, in the name of Kaukab Stewart, on building a migration system that supports Scotland’s economy, public services and communities, as amended, is: For 67, Against 27, Abstentions 22.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the social, economic and cultural contribution made to Scotland by those who have chosen to live here; notes the establishment of Scotland’s Migration Service at a cost of up to £1.5 million in the draft Budget 2025-26 to help employers, investors and individuals navigate the UK immigration system; further notes that the Parliament has previously endorsed a motion calling for the development of a differentiated, more flexible migration policy tailored to meet Scotland’s specific needs; calls on the UK Government to accept the Rural Visa Pilot proposal and to work directly and constructively with the Scottish Government to ensure that the needs of Scotland’s employers, communities and public services are fully reflected within the immigration system; remains committed to ensuring that all migrants in Scotland have all of their rights fulfilled; recognises the pervasive and increasingly hostile anti-migrant rhetoric from some politicians and media sources; believes that further action is required by both the UK and Scottish governments to support people displaced due to the climate crisis, and calls on the UK Government to remove the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) conditions that limit the support and services available to many, especially those seeking asylum.

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

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