



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 6 March 2025

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website -
www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Thursday 6 March 2025

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Recorded Crime Rate	1
Independent Schools' VAT Liability (Impact on State Schools)	2
Religious Observance Opt-out (Schools)	4
Sport and Physical Activity (Dumfries and Galloway)	5
Greenock Police Station	6
ADHD and Autism Assessments (NHS Forth Valley).....	8
Housing to 2040 (Adaptations)	9
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
School Leaving Age (Reduction)	10
National Health Service	13
Energy (Heat in Buildings).....	16
International Women's Day	17
Drug Driving	20
Islamophobia	20
Police Officers (Working Conditions).....	22
Concessionary Bus Travel Scheme	22
Islands (Resilience Fund)	23
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services	23
NHS Highland (Vascular Surgery).....	24
Two-child Benefit Cap	24
Scottish Water (Strike Action).....	25
Orthopaedics Waiting Times	26
Speed Awareness Courses	26
UNITED KINGDOM GOVERNMENT WELFARE REFORMS	28
<i>Motion debated—[Marie McNair]</i>	
Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP).....	28
Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)	31
Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	33
Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)	35
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	37
The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart)	38
COVID-19 DAY OF REFLECTION	42
The First Minister (John Swinney)	42
Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con).....	43
Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab)	44
Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green)	45
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)	46
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	48
NET ZERO AND ENERGY, AND TRANSPORT	48
Net Zero Emissions Target.....	48
Proposed Heat in Buildings Bill	50
Approval of Renewable Energy Developments above 50MW (Community Consultation).....	51
Road Safety	53
ScotRail Services (Cancellations)	54
Hydrogen Production and Usage	57
Reducing Car Use	58

REDUCING DRUG HARM AND DEATHS IN SCOTLAND: PEOPLE'S PANEL REPORT	60
Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP)	60
Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)	62
Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)	65
The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray)	67
Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con)	71
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab)	73
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	75
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)	77
Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)	79
Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)	81
Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)	83
Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab)	84
Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)	86
Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con)	87
Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)	89
Maggie Chapman	91
Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)	93
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)	94
Neil Gray	97
Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green)	100
DECISION TIME	104

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 6 March 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.

Recorded Crime Rate

1. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how Scotland's recorded crime rate compares with other areas of the United Kingdom. (S6O-04394)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Scotland's recorded crime statistics cannot be compared to those of the rest of the UK, due to the different counting and classification systems used to produce the data. However, with a 40 per cent fall in recorded crime across Scotland since 2006-07, including a 74 per cent fall in housebreaking and a 68 per cent fall in theft of a motor vehicle, the long-term trend is clear.

Crime surveys can provide some comparisons, with the latest findings suggesting that in Scotland as well as in England and Wales, around one in 10 adults experienced violent and property crimes. That has fallen significantly for both jurisdictions since 2008-09.

Gordon MacDonald: I welcome the fact that recorded crime has halved since 1991, but what impact will the £25 million increase in national insurance by the UK Labour Government have on Police Scotland?

Angela Constance: As this Government and, indeed, this Parliament have repeatedly made clear, the UK Government's decision to increase employer national insurance contributions will have a major impact on all sectors, with the hike likely to result in higher costs, job losses and increased prices. The impact will also be felt by our front-line public services, such as Police Scotland, and we estimate that the change could add more than £700 million in costs for public sector staff. 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.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Reports say that up to a quarter of crimes go unreported, with more than 215,000 calls to 101 having been discontinued between January and

July 2024. Since 2013, more than 140 police stations and 100 police counters have been closed. There are nearly 1,000 fewer police officers than there were in 2020, with the Aberdeen pilot of not investigating all crimes having been extended across Scotland. Given those facts, is the cabinet secretary investigating their impact on recorded crime rates, or are simplistic comparisons to other parts of the UK simply easier?

Angela Constance: I have no interest in making simplistic comparisons, but it is important that we focus on the facts. The strength of the Scottish crime and justice survey is that it captures not just recorded crime but the experience of crime. It is testament to the hard work of Police Scotland and, indeed, other parts of the justice system that there has been a significant fall in reports of victimisation from around 20 per cent to around one in 10.

Independent Schools' VAT Liability (Impact on State Schools)

2. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the potential impact on state schools of the United Kingdom Government's decision to make independent schools liable for VAT, how it plans to use any Barnett consequential funding resulting from this decision to support state schools. (S6O-04395)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The Barnett formula does not entitle the Scottish Government to consequentials that are raised under reserved powers. Block grant changes are calculated with reference to the UK Government spend in devolved areas.

The UK Government had previously indicated the VAT revenue would be ring fenced and applied to the Department of Education budget to increase teacher numbers in England. His Majesty's Treasury has now advised that there will be no ring fencing of that revenue. Although the autumn budget contained additional funding for the Department for Education, which led to Barnett consequentials, I am not able to confirm the proportion that was funded by VAT on school fees.

Miles Briggs: This issue is becoming a growing concern in Edinburgh in particular. In a response to me, the cabinet secretary has said that, already, 79 pupils from the independent sector have enrolled in the state sector. Moreover, in response to the Education, Children and Young People Committee, she gave the detail that around 40 per cent of all pupils who attend independent schools in Scotland are in Edinburgh. If we finally get clarification from the UK Government on Barnett consequentials, will she commit to allocating 40 per cent of that funding to the City of Edinburgh

Council, which is the council that will be most impacted?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for his interest in the matter, which we discussed recently at a meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. I also responded yesterday to the member's parliamentary written question, giving the detail that he has alluded to.

In response to the member, I have made it very clear that the distribution methodology that we use for our funding to local government will take into account the issues that he has raised. I recognise that the issue is particularly pertinent to the City of Edinburgh Council, because of the number of pupils in the area who attend private school.

I hope that the member will take some comfort from my response today. I apologise that I am not able to give him the granular detail that he asked for originally, but that is because of the decisions that have been taken by the UK Government.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary outline how the 2025-26 budget has already earmarked funding for support to state schools and, specifically, how the Scottish Government is supporting the recruitment of additional teachers, which is a significant issue in my constituency?

Jenny Gilruth: The 2025-26 Scottish budget provides record block grant funding of more than £15 billion for local government, which is an increase of £1.1 billion, or 5.5 per cent in real terms, compared with 2024-25. The 2025-26 local government finance settlement also includes an extra £186.5 million for increasing teacher numbers to 2023 levels, and a further £28 million of funding for the additional support for learning workforce. An additional £1 million has been specifically earmarked to support national initiatives to help recruit and train more ASL teachers, including in the member's constituency.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): The UK Government has increased funding for the Department for Education by much more than what the VAT policy is raising, which means that Scotland is getting Barnett consequentials that are worth more than just the VAT policy. This week, the NASUWT published research showing worrying increases in incidents of violence in school and highlighting that 62 per cent of respondents were not aware of the Government's national plan in that respect. Given that, will the cabinet secretary use some of the increased funding to implement commitments set out in her national action plan?

Jenny Gilruth: The increased funding to which the member alludes was included in the Scottish Government's budget. As I outlined in my response to Ms Nicoll, that budget includes £186.5

million for increasing teacher numbers to 2023 levels and an extra £29 million for additional support needs in our schools to help with, for example, the recruitment of additional support needs teachers, which of course can help to respond to some of the challenges that the member has set out. I do not understand how, on the one hand, the member can come to the chamber today and praise the additionality that is coming to the Scottish Government while, on the other, her party can decide not to vote in favour of the Scottish Government budget, which delivers on the challenge set out in the NASUWT report.

Religious Observance Opt-out (Schools)

3. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported view of the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland that proposed changes to legislation on religious observance diverge from the recommendation by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to allow young people to independently opt out of religious observance at school. (S6O-04396)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): As the First Minister noted in the chamber last week, we have consulted a wide range of stakeholders on changes to legislation on religious observance and religious and moral education in schools. The public consultation closed on 26 January. We recognise that there is a wide range of views on the topic, and ministers will continue to discuss those issues with Parliament and other interested parties. We will consider all responses to the consultation and publish a consultation analysis report in due course, as well as outlining next planned steps.

Carol Mochan: The 2022 census found that more than 60 per cent of school-age children in Scotland now identify as non-religious. In an increasingly secular and religiously diverse country, it is critically important that young people of all faiths and none have their beliefs and choices respected in school. Parents have always had the right to opt their children out of religious observance, and all state schools are legally required to provide that opt-out to parents; however, pupils have no equivalent right, no matter their age, maturity or personal beliefs. Can the cabinet secretary provide clarity on the timeframes for when we might get the information that she mentions in her answer? Is it her view that we should conform to the UN committee's recommendations?

Jenny Gilruth: The legislative changes proposed in the consultation will strengthen the rights of children and young people in Scotland; I think that that is what the member is alluding to, and I am very supportive of it. The changes also

build on our commitment under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The existing guidance, which the member also alluded to, encourages schools to discuss with both parents and children the question of opting out of religious observance.

As the member will understand, the consultation analysis has not yet been published. However, I am more than happy to write to her about the timescales associated with the consultation in due course, when I have received that advice from my officials.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government is ensuring that children's rights are incorporated across our education system?

Jenny Gilruth: We are committed to upholding the rights of children and young people across Scotland and supporting public authorities to understand and fulfil their UNCRC duties, including in our education system.

In May 2022, we awarded UNICEF UK a three-year grant to support it in raising awareness of children's rights across the majority of Scottish schools through its rights-respecting schools award. I was pleased yesterday to visit Glenrothes high school in my constituency to see the impact of that award, which the school has received at gold level, on the rights of children in that school in Fife.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): If we believe in the principle of religious freedom, surely it is clear that any pupil who is mature enough to decide that they are not a believer should not be required to go through a pretence of religious observance. Can the cabinet secretary assure us that, in analysing the consultation responses, she will give due regard to the views of young people who want to make what is a perfectly reasonable choice for themselves?

Jenny Gilruth: Of course, I recognise the member's views. It is important that we balance them accordingly, and I am also mindful of the range of different views on the topic. As I said in my response to Ms Mochan, I will give due consideration to those views once I have received the consultation analysis. I can then set out more detail on the associated timescales.

The Presiding Officer: Question 4 was not lodged.

Sport and Physical Activity (Dumfries and Galloway)

5. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to support increased levels of sport and

physical activity in Dumfries and Galloway. (S6O-04398)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): We are working in partnership with Public Health Scotland, sportscotland and colleagues in Dumfries and Galloway to identify evidence-based actions based on our physical activity for health framework, which will improve levels of physical activity in that area.

This year, sportscotland has provided £424,000 to Dumfries and Galloway Council to support its active schools programme, community sport hubs, community cycling, and coaching. Recent investment of £880,000 has been delivered through sportscotland's sport facilities fund and cycle facilities fund, and £845,000 has been awarded via the transforming Scottish indoor tennis fund to construct a new indoor facility in Dumfries.

Emma Harper: I was pleased to hear recent announcements that encouraged a higher uptake of physical activity for my constituents in that area—in particular, the announcement of the Stranraer water sports hub, which is expected to open in 2026, and the new indoor tennis courts development at the King George V complex in Dumfries.

Will the minister join me in welcoming those significant investments to the sports sector in Dumfries and Galloway, and will she consider joining me to visit both sites to see the marked improvement that they will make for local people?

Maree Todd: I absolutely welcome those significant facilities investments. Both of those developments will have such a positive impact on the local community and will provide more and better opportunities to be physically active, either on the water or on a tennis court. I would be delighted to visit both sites to see the positive impact at first hand.

Greenock Police Station

6. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last discussed the future of Greenock police station with Police Scotland. (S6O-04399)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): I last discussed the police estate with the chief constable in January. We discussed Police Scotland's estate master plan, which sets out its plans to modernise the police estate to ensure that it best serves communities and the Police Scotland workforce and that it is fit for the future.

Despite the unprecedented challenges to public finances in 2025-26, we will increase the police

capital budget to £75 million—an increase of more than £10 million. That capital increase will support Police Scotland to commence delivery of its estate master plan, which will deliver a modern, fit-for-purpose estate that best serves the needs of communities and the policing workforce.

Stuart McMillan: It is well documented that the Greenock police station is far past its sell-by date. The facility is no longer fit for purpose and the volume and cost of repairs will only continue to grow. Although I acknowledge that there is no question but that there will be a replacement police station in Greenock, there has been no firm commitment with regard to replacing the custody suite, which is absolutely crucial. Has the cabinet secretary received any assurances that any new Greenock police station will have a custody suite?

Angela Constance: Mr McMillan raises a very important point about the provision of custody suites and their location in his locality and across Scotland. I assure him that Police Scotland's initial work on its estates master plan has identified Glasgow and the west of Scotland as priority areas for further work, and it is currently undertaking detailed work to understand the property requirements. That work will include consideration of the provision of custody facilities across those communities, to ensure that effective policing can continue to be delivered.

The Presiding Officer: Time is tight, but I will allow a brief supplementary from Jamie Greene.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I endorse Mr McMillan's comments. Two years ago, Police Scotland wrote to me to say that it was considering a replacement for Greenock police station. A replacement is now needed more than ever. Last year, in the Inverclyde area, common assault was up by 10 per cent, violent crime was up by 7 per cent and domestic abuse was up by 20 per cent, so surely the cabinet secretary can see the need for quick action on the issue.

Angela Constance: I assure Jamie Greene that no decision has been taken on the future of Greenock police station at this time. It will be considered as part of the delivery of the wider Police Scotland estates master plan. I am aware of the important consultation that has been held with respect to services in Greenock. That consultation has now closed, and its results remain under review. In January last year, the divisional commander for Renfrewshire and Inverclyde attended Inverclyde Council's police scrutiny panel to discuss the details. I am sure that members will be kept informed on those important matters.

ADHD and Autism Assessments (NHS Forth Valley)

7. Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it will work with the national health service to ensure that infrastructure is in place to meet demand for adult attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism assessments, in light of reports that NHS Forth Valley has closed its service. (S6O-04400)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): I recognise that the significant increase in adults seeking ADHD and autism assessments across Scotland is creating challenges for services. However, a diagnosis can be crucial to receiving the right support, and I expect the situation to be resolved at the earliest opportunity. My officials are liaising with national health service boards across Scotland, including NHS Forth Valley, to understand what provision they have in place, and they are exploring how to address current issues.

Evelyn Tweed: My constituent Jake has struggled with his mental health for many years. A child and adolescent mental health services professional suspected ADHD, but no formal diagnosis was forthcoming. Jake finally got a private diagnosis of ADHD, but now he cannot access NHS support. What pathways and support are available to people in that position?

Maree Todd: As I said, we are working with local health bodies to improve services and support. The General Medical Council's good practice guidance on shared care advises that decisions about who should take responsibility for continuing care or treatment after initial diagnosis or assessment should be based on the patient's best interests. It is at the clinical discretion of each individual general practitioner to decide the best course of action for their patients. Although a recommendation from a private specialist does not entitle the patient to NHS prescriptions for the relevant medicine, medication can be considered as part of the shared care agreement.

I am concerned that GPs sometimes face pressure to prescribe when the assessment is sufficient and the patient is moving to the NHS, but they have not yet been accepted into the NHS psychiatry side of the shared care agreement. The challenge is that—

The Presiding Officer: Please be brief, minister.

Maree Todd: —if the monitoring requirements that have been set by a private provider differ from the NHS recommendations, that leaves the GP prescriber in a very difficult, and potentially unsafe, situation.

Housing to 2040 (Adaptations)

8. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on action 20 of the housing to 2040 strategy to “streamline and accelerate the adaptations system”. (S6O-04401)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): We are taking forward a review of the current housing adaptations system to consider how the process can be streamlined and made easier for people who need adaptations. We are also continuing to provide support to help registered social landlords meet their responsibilities to deliver housing adaptations. The 2025-26 budget will more than double the budget for that, taking it to £20.9 million.

Colin Beattie: I was pleased to take part in last week’s members’ business debate on protections for park home residents, during which I raised the issue of park homes being exempt from financial help towards home adaptations, as per the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006. What steps will the Scottish Government take to improve protections for park home residents?

Paul McLennan: We are committed to ensuring that park home residents have appropriate rights and protections. The adaptations review will consider funding and legislation, including the situation for mobile homes. In addition, the Housing (Scotland) Bill proposes changing the basis for pitch fee uprating from the retail prices index to the consumer prices index. I also intend to engage with local authorities to remind them of their powers in relation to site licensing, with the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets to raise the issues faced by park home residents in relation to oil, and with the United Kingdom Government to highlight the impact on Scottish consumers of the mis-selling of mobile homes.

First Minister’s Question Time

12:00

School Leaving Age (Reduction)

1. Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): In recent weeks, I have had the privilege of meeting apprentices in businesses across Scotland, including at Thales in Govan, at Collins Aerospace in Prestwick and, yesterday, at Persimmon Homes in East Lothian, where I must report that it became clear that I will never make it as a brickie.

This week, my party started a public debate on reducing the school leaving age from 16. It has long been clear that far too many young people have been failed by the Scottish National Party’s education system, and we propose giving young people who are being left behind the opportunity of having a hybrid education with training in colleges and the workplace. Does John Swinney agree that that conversation is long overdue, and will he give any consideration to our proposals?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That is a bold approach to First Minister’s question time, given that, when Mr Findlay set out his proposals yesterday, he conceded in a television interview that he was, in fact, not certain that those proposals would get anywhere near a Conservative manifesto. After that interview, I am not sure that Mr Findlay has quite as much confidence in the policy that he has put to me today.

I do not agree with the proposals. We have spent a great deal of time and effort on trying to encourage young people to maximise their engagement with education. That has resulted in more young people staying on at school and, as a consequence, more young people going into positive destinations when they leave school. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Indeed, the numbers of those going to positive destinations are at record levels, so I do not intend to follow the policy approach that has been proposed by Mr Findlay, but I do not think that he does, either.

Russell Findlay: Scotland’s business community can see that the issue needs proper political attention. Last night, I attended a think tank event where senior people from business and education voiced their support. They can see that, over the past 18 years of SNP rule, far too many young people have been left behind. Former SNP Government economic adviser Jim McColl said:

"A lot of these youngsters at school don't want to be there ... They're not interested in it. And all of a sudden you're giving them an opportunity to learn a trade and be earning money. So I feel it's a brilliant move."

[Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Findlay.

Russell Findlay: This Parliament needs to focus more on encouraging opportunity and aspiration and on giving pupils the chance to thrive. Does John Swinney not see that we need to do things differently?

The First Minister: I am all for encouraging young people to thrive and for taking opportunities to ensure that that is the case. That is why this Government has reformed the approach to apprenticeships. For example, while young people are school pupils, they can take up foundation apprenticeships as part of work-based learning in the senior phase. That can result in young people spending a day per week, during the senior phase, working with an employer. Since their introduction in 2016, 15,371 pupils have enrolled in a foundation apprenticeship and have benefited from the value of work-based learning, and 5,000 places are now available each year.

That is the pragmatic approach that this Government takes to make sure that we address the issue that Mr Findlay has raised with me. School does not suit everybody, so we are adapting the curriculum to make sure that it does suit young people through the use of foundation apprenticeships. That is one of the excellent reforms that this Government has introduced.

Russell Findlay: As a former education secretary, John Swinney knows fine well that far too many young people are being left behind, no matter what statistics he selectively quotes at me. One in seven Scottish pupils leave school without a single qualification, and he thinks that that is good enough. Last year, half a million days were lost to unexplained absences of secondary 4 pupils. Thousands of bright, talented and dynamic young people simply drop out of the system. Far too many are being failed by this complacent Government. Is John Swinney really telling us that he is content to deprive thousands of young Scots of a brighter and better future?

The First Minister: As I said in my earlier answer, I want young people to have the brightest possible future, which is why we have enabled schools to offer increased opportunities for young people to prepare for the world of work. Thirty-five per cent of 2023-24 school leavers gained a vocational or technical qualification at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 5 or above, which is an increase of 7.3 per cent compared with the figure for 2013-14. That is the Government actually delivering practical steps to

improve the work chances and life chances of young people in Scotland. This Government has reformed education to strengthen the opportunities for young people. As a consequence, young people are going on to positive destinations after leaving school at record levels in Scotland today.

Russell Findlay: The First Minister wants to quote statistics on standards, but we have the lowest rate of higher passes for a decade. *[Interruption.]* The education secretary is providing a running commentary from a seated position. She will have to stay behind for detention. She is setting a very bad example to the pupils who are in the chamber today. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Russell Findlay: The problems with Scotland's schools run even deeper than the scandal of so many young people being left behind. More than 80 per cent of teachers say that violent and abusive behaviour has increased. In a teaching union survey that was published this week, they told of being assaulted with knives, chairs and hockey sticks. They have been bitten, spat on, head-butted, punched and kicked. They have had fireworks thrown at them and their cars vandalised. Teachers say that they are at breaking point and that pupils' education is suffering. What does the First Minister have to say to teachers about the breakdown in classroom discipline?

The First Minister: The first thing that I will say is that I take deadly seriously the findings of the NASUWT survey that were published this week. That is why the education secretary has been working with local authorities and trade unions on a series of interventions in relation to behaviour at school.

It is important that, for completeness, we hear all the issues that are raised by the NASUWT survey. The NASUWT said:

"a greater focus on exploring correlation between behaviour issues and poverty is required."

The general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland said:

"since the onset of austerity, we have seen rising incidents of violent, aggressive, dysregulated, distressed behaviour in classrooms and growing incidents of additional support needs."

I acknowledge that, in the atmosphere and environment since Covid, there has been an increase in challenging behaviour in schools, but that is not unique to Scotland—every education system in the western world is reporting the same evidence. The Government will take action, working with our local authority and trade union partners, to try to address the issue, because that

dysregulated behaviour in our schools is unacceptable.

What I will not do is what Russell Findlay does, which is to characterise all young people as behaving badly. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

The First Minister: Most young people in our society behave well, and I compliment young people on the achievements that they make in our country.

National Health Service

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): I start by congratulating the First Minister on the wonderful news that he has become a grandfather. *[Applause.]* I emphasise that he is a young grandfather. *[Laughter.]* I am sure that everyone across the chamber sends their best wishes to all his family on the birth of baby Rua.

A national health service that is available and free when we need it is the founding principle of our NHS, but under the Scottish National Party, that principle and promise have been broken. Right now, more than 100,000 Scots have been waiting more than a year for hospital treatment, so it is not there when they need it. In the past nine months, more than 36,500 private procedures have been paid for by Scots, so treatment is not free when they need it. Why is the NHS no longer available and free at the point of need under John Swinney and the SNP?

The First Minister: First, I thank Mr Sarwar for his generous and kind comments about the birth of my first grandson. I also welcome his characterisation of me as “a young grandfather”. That is the most precious remark, and it is helping me to come to terms with all that is going on in my life just now. His kindness and good wishes are deeply appreciated by my daughter, her husband and Rua—as are those of many other members of the Parliament. I am grateful for them.

In relation to the NHS, Mr Sarwar knows from our exchanges that the issue commands my attention and is an absolute priority for me. I recognise that people are waiting too long for treatment in Scotland today, so the work that the health secretary and I are doing is very focused on reducing waiting list numbers—indeed, that was the subject of a lengthy discussion yesterday between me, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and NHS chief officers from around the country.

We are in a position in which progress has been made. Figures that were published in February show a 4 per cent decrease in the total waiting list size for diagnostic tests, which is one illustration of the improvements that are being made. We are

determined to focus on further improvements by ensuring that we increase the capacity of the national health service, increase productivity at the local level and are able to meet the needs of the population.

The point that Mr Sarwar put to me, in principle, of an NHS being available free at the point of need when people require it, is exactly what I want to deliver for the people of Scotland.

Anas Sarwar: I think that that was an admission that the First Minister wants to deliver that, but that it does not exist for patients across the country.

The sad truth is that the NHS is not even free and available for all the people who work in it. Let us take the experience of an NHS support worker from the west of Scotland. She has worked in our NHS for 35 years. Due to being increasingly unable to walk because of her hip, she was left hobbling to work on crutches. She faced up to three years on an NHS waiting list and being forced to retire nine years early or paying to go private. She took the difficult decision of withdrawing from her modest pension to pay for a private hip operation. The total cost of that to her was £24,000. That was almost her entire annual salary spent on an operation that should have been free. That is scandalous.

Is John Swinney proud that even NHS workers are being forced to pay thousands of pounds of their own money to get the treatment that they need?

The First Minister: I do not want that to be the case. I want individuals—particularly those who are in circumstances such as Mr Sarwar has put to me—to be able to access healthcare services when they require them. That is why the health secretary and I are working so intensively with health boards to increase the capacity and capability of health boards around the country to deliver more procedures. It comes down to their being able to deliver more hip and knee operations, and to undertake more diagnostic activity. The investment that has been made available through the Government’s budget for the next financial year will help us to strengthen delivery through increased numbers of procedures.

As Mr Sarwar will know, there has been a significant expansion in waiting lists because of the interruption that was caused by Covid, which disrupted our healthcare services. We are working to recover from that as quickly as we can. I give him my assurance that ministers are entirely focused on that, and that we have put in place the financial support to ensure that we will be able to undertake more procedures than we have been able to undertake in the current financial year.

Anas Sarwar: That NHS worker is not alone. Based on the data for the first nine months of 2024, Scots have had to pay an estimated £17.6 million of their own money on cataract treatment, £30.8 million of their own money on hip replacements and an estimated £16 million of their own money on knee replacements.

Most shocking of all is that Scots have had to pay thousands of pounds of their own money to fund 700 rounds of chemotherapy: Scots have had to pay for cancer care under John Swinney and the SNP. That cannot go on. That is why, as First Minister, I will declare a waiting times emergency. *[Interruption.]*

It is their constituents whom I am talking about, who are having to pay thousands of pounds for care, so SNP members should reflect on why they are groaning.

I will declare a waiting times emergency and do whatever it takes to cut waiting lists across the country, so that Scots get the care that they need. Is it not the case that the SNP broke our NHS, but can never be the party to fix it?

The First Minister: I think that Mr Sarwar has used that line on me once or twice before, and I dare say that I will hear it a few more times between now and the elections in May 2026.

I will try to address the substance of Mr Sarwar's points. I am concerned about those points, and I will happily look in more detail at the issues that he has raised. On cancer care, under the 31-day standard, 94.3 per cent of patients were treated within 31 days of a decision to treat, with a median wait for treatment of just four days. That is exceptional performance. We are finding difficulty in meeting the 62-day standard, but the median wait is 49 days from urgent suspicion of cancer referral to first treatment.

In addition, through the work that is under way, the Government is putting in place provisions to deliver more than 150,000 extra appointments and procedures. In relation to some of the additional sites that we are bringing forward to undertake orthopaedic appointments—which Mr Sarwar asked me about—we expect to be able to deliver more than 2,500 extra procedures in those sites. That is possible only because the Government's budget has been approved by Parliament and will invest a record amount of money in the national health service.

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, please, First Minister.

The First Minister: Mr Sarwar can talk to the Parliament all he wants about his intentions for the years to come—if he gets that opportunity—but in the here and now, when Parliament was faced

with deciding whether to fund the NHS to the required level, Mr Sarwar was posted missing.

Energy (Heat in Buildings)

3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Happy news is a rare and precious thing in these times, so I echo the congratulations to the First Minister and his family on their new arrival.

In April, energy bills are set to rise for the third time in less than a year, and people across Scotland are worried about those bills. At the same time, energy companies are raking in vast profits at the expense of people and the planet. Our energy markets are broken. We could both say what we think the United Kingdom Government should do to fix those markets, but the Scottish Government has also promised action that has not been taken.

My most recent question to the First Minister was nearly three months ago. I asked him about his promise of a new law to end our reliance on gas for home heating—law that is vital to tackling the climate emergency and cutting people's bills. The proposed law was, without explanation, already overdue back in December. Here we are in March, but there is still no legislation and no explanation.

The Presiding Officer: Question, please.

Patrick Harvie: Where is it?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is considering all the issues that were raised in the consultation on heat in buildings. We will respond as soon as we can.

I confirmed to Parliament that tackling the climate emergency is one of my key priorities—it is one of the four priorities of the Government. Heating our homes and workplaces causes around 20 per cent of our emissions, and we cannot achieve net zero without ending our use of gas boilers.

Patrick Harvie: The Government was considering the consultation a year ago, and the real concern is that it has been spending that time watering it down. That is my fear and the fear of the green-heat industry.

The reality is that Scotland is already well behind many other European countries on the issue. France and Germany have been accelerating their action, and Scandinavian countries are decades ahead of us. The only way to catch up and to give Scottish households the benefit of affordable and reliable heat, and to cut the pollution that is destroying our environment, is for the Government to act decisively and to show leadership. However, just as the Government has slowed down on other green measures by hiking

rail fares and watering down rent controls, progress on clean heat has been stalled.

Will the First Minister commit to getting the overdue proposed legislation published this month, so that we get the clarity and leadership that have been lacking?

The First Minister: I am very happy to confirm to the Parliament that there will be leadership to take that issue forward, as there is on a wide variety of climate measures. That is evidenced by the financial commitments that the Government has introduced in the budget, which I was delighted that Mr Harvie and his colleagues were able to support.

I recognise the urgency and seriousness of the issue. Fuel poverty in our country is one of the key issues that underpins the question that Mr Harvie has put to me. The impact of changes in energy prices on fuel poverty rates in Scotland is clear, as those rates have almost doubled between 2019 and 2023. We must acknowledge the significance of the impact of fuel and energy prices on fuel poverty. That is why we must take action on the climate, which Mr Harvie has raised with me, why the matter is central to the Government's agenda and why we will deliver progress as quickly as we can.

International Women's Day

4. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government will mark international women's day, and its theme of "Accelerating Action" to reach gender equality. (S6F-03867)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is accelerating action for a fairer Scotland for women and girls, working to ensure that women and girls have equal rights and opportunities and equitable access to resources and can live their lives free from abuse. That work includes delivering the women's health plan, investing to tackle domestic violence against women and girls and survivors of abuse, supporting women to access fair work and helping to reduce the gender pay gap.

The Government will leave no stone unturned in our work towards equality. I know that many members will be attending events this international women's day, which are taking place in local communities across the country. I wish everyone a successful day of celebration and action.

Marie McNair: I am privileged to have already spoken at two fantastic international women's day events in Clydebank, with Moments of Freedom and the Isaro Community Initiative, both of which are led by formidable women who push for the social and economic integration of new Scots in our communities.

Will the First Minister join me in welcoming the contributions that local groups in Clydebank and Milngavie are making and advise us what steps the Scottish Government is taking to accelerate action on gender equality for all women, in particular those who face overlapping forms of oppression based on their identity?

The First Minister: I am very happy to welcome the contribution of Moments of Freedom women and the Isaro Community Initiative to welcome new Scots. I know that Moments of Freedom was one of more than 80 organisations that hosted a community consultation as part of the work to update the "New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy" last year.

Through our cross-policy working on the "New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy Delivery Plan 2024-26", we are taking account of intersectional approaches to gender equality, including engaging new Scots in the delivery of Scotland's equally safe strategy and the wider work on violence against women and girls to ensure that the needs of new Scots are addressed. Intersectionality is key to our work with the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls for accelerating action on gender equality.

The Presiding Officer: I call Rachael Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): My constituent has been told that, based on the current outpatient waiting list, he is required to wait 59 weeks for an orthopaedic appointment.

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Ms Hamilton, but is your question in relation to question 4?

Rachael Hamilton: Oh, no. Well, the First Minister will have got the idea.

The Presiding Officer: We will get to general constituency supplementaries later. I call Tess White.

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Women's human rights are being abused in Scotland due to the treatment of biological males as females. A report was published this week by the Women's Rights Network with spine-chilling figures on rapes and sexual assaults in Scottish hospitals. It is not only in our hospitals—women are being placed in harm's way, both physically and psychologically, in Scottish prisons, rape crisis centres, toilets and changing rooms. In this week of international women's day, if the First Minister is not alarmed by that, shame on him. If he wants to do something about it to accelerate action, which is this year's theme for international women's day, will he meet me and cross-party MSPs as a matter of urgency? How can any progress on women's equality be made without that?

The First Minister: Anyone who has listened to anything that I have said during my tenure as First Minister will know that I am absolutely committed to protecting and asserting the safety of women and girls in our society.

I am exercising leadership, as I have done from the moment I became First Minister, to challenge the underpinning issue that affects the safety of women and girls in society, which is the behaviour of men. I will be unapologetic in setting out that point of view from my position as a male First Minister, and in exercising leadership to make sure that men face up to their responsibilities to ensure that women and girls can live safely in our society today.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): It has recently been reported that almost 10 per cent of the 2,000 women who have died at the hands of men in the United Kingdom over the past 15 years have been killed by their own sons. What more does the First Minister believe the Scottish Government can do to raise awareness of that risk and improve support for women?

The First Minister: Katy Clark puts an incredibly serious point to me. It comes back to the answer that I have just given, which is that there is a responsibility on all society to try to help boys and men to improve their conduct and actions. That will be the route to addressing the fundamental issue that Katy Clark puts to me, which will result in the protection of mothers and women who face danger. She has my absolute assurance, and I am very happy to work across the political spectrum to do all that we can to improve the cultural attitudes and approaches of men and boys in our society, because I believe that to be fundamental to addressing the serious issue that she puts to me.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): Despite the First Minister's warm words during the answer to the question, I feel that he is woefully out of touch on the situation of women's rights across Scotland. Therefore, it is utterly impossible to accelerate action towards gender equality when women's human rights are under attack.

The Scottish Government must now apologise for its role in that and break from those state-sanctioned abuses. Will the First Minister make a clear commitment today to uphold the internationally protected human rights of women and girls in Scotland?

The First Minister: I will not accept the charge—I reject it entirely—of state-sanctioned abuses. I will not accept that charge from Ash Regan in any way, shape or form. I have put on the record my absolute commitment to the protection of women and girls in our society. That

underpins the policy agenda of my Government and it will underpin my conduct as First Minister.

Drug Driving

5. Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister what plans the Scottish Government has to tackle the reported rising number of cases of drug driving. (S6F-03870)

The First Minister (John Swinney): In 2019, a new drug driving offence was introduced, which added to the powers that are available to keep Scotland's roads safe. Although I was concerned by the increase in the number of positive tests by Police Scotland, it is clear that its focused enforcement approach is helping to tackle the scourge of drug driving using the new law. We fully support the enforcement efforts of Police Scotland in addressing drug driving, and the budget will increase police funding by £70 million to £1.62 billion in order to support capacity and capability.

Annie Wells: Earlier this week, *The Scottish Sun* reported that drug driving in Scotland now eclipses drink driving by around three to one. It is even more incredible that when the police pull over someone suspected of drug driving, subsequent testing proves their suspicions correct on more than 50 per cent of occasions. In contrast, for drink driving, such tests are positive in only around one in 20 cases.

Over the years, drink driving initiatives have been hailed for their positive impact and their role in making drink driving far less socially accepted than it was in past generations, saving lives in the process. Does the First Minister have plans to do something similar with drug driving?

The First Minister: Yes—I agree with what Annie Wells puts to me. During the festive period just a few months ago, Police Scotland strengthened the drink and drug driving campaign. I hope that that gives Annie Wells assurance that it will now be woven into the approach that the Government and Police Scotland are taking.

I reassure Annie Wells that there is a very high conviction rate for drug driving. In 2022-23, 95 per cent, which is a very high level, of those who were accused were convicted as a consequence of charges being brought. I accept unreservedly the member's point about the necessity of raising awareness of the dangers of drug driving. We will ensure that that is reflected in the overall messaging on the issue.

Islamophobia

6. Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether he will provide an update on how the Scottish Government is working to tackle Islamophobia in Scotland, in light

of reports that anti-Muslim hate incidents across the United Kingdom reached record levels in 2024. (S6F-03871)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The rise in anti-Muslim hate incidents is of serious concern. The Scottish Government unequivocally condemns all forms of Islamophobia and the impact that it has on individuals, families and communities. That is why we work co-operatively with a range of partners to tackle such pernicious behaviour. Our hate crime strategy and the associated delivery plan include strategic priorities for tackling hate crime and Islamophobia in Scotland. Importantly, the strategy was informed by those with lived experience of Islamophobia, which is central to understanding the challenges that we face.

Foyso Choudhury: The First Minister will know that last Friday was the beginning of Ramadan, which is a time of reflection, peace and hope for Muslims in Scotland and worldwide. However, Muslim communities across the UK and Scotland are now facing hatred at a higher level than ever. The UK Labour Government has convened a working group on Islamophobia, which will create a definition of it. Will the Scottish Government adopt that definition? When will we see real progress on the implementation of the recommendations from the inquiry into Islamophobia from the cross-party group on tackling Islamophobia?

The First Minister: Two recommendations were levelled at the Scottish Government in the cross-party group's report. One was to increase the understanding of Islamophobia in the curriculum in our schools, and the other was to ensure that the public sector equality duty was enforced in schools. I assure Mr Choudhury that those priorities are being taken forward by the Scottish Government. It is vital that we do all that we can to ensure that we take steps on the issue. We will consider any decision that is made by the United Kingdom Government on the definition of Islamophobia and will consider any implications of that decision for our approach to adopting a definition.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The growing levels of Islamophobia in the UK are deeply concerning. It is vital that we recognise that more must be done. Will the First Minister further outline how he hopes that the gathering of representatives from key organisations with the leaders of Scotland's parliamentary parties, which was announced last week, will assist in creating a more cohesive society in which everyone feels at home?

The First Minister: Last week, I set out my aspiration to draw together leaders from across Scotland, including from our parliamentary parties,

to consider how we can agree a common approach to asserting the values of our country in order to bring people together and create a cohesive society where everyone feels safe and at home. I am heartened by the response from civic society and parliamentary party leaders, and I hope that we will be able to convene that gathering on 23 April. My objective is to draw people together to encourage community cohesion, which will involve working to tackle the hatred and prejudice that Mr Choudhury raised—Audrey Nicoll echoed what he said. I look forward to using that gathering to create a firm foundation for the values of Scottish society.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency and general supplementary questions. If we are all concise, more members will have an opportunity for scrutiny.

Police Officers (Working Conditions)

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Police officers in my region and across Scotland are suffering from burnout and low morale and are working in desperate conditions, according to a report that was published this week. The report showed that 68,000 rest days were cancelled in just six months. The pressure that is being put on police officers to meet the demands that are placed on them is clearly unsustainable. What measures will the Scottish Government put in place to ensure that hard-pressed and pressured officers are given the support that they rightly deserve?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I value the work that police officers undertake in Scotland, and we support Police Scotland with the financial resources to enable it to deliver its services across the country. The chief constable has put in place a variety of measures to support the mental health and wellbeing of police officers. That is undertaken through an employee assistance programme, which focuses on mental health support and provides enhanced occupational health services for police officers. The your wellbeing matters programme offers a range of services to care for the psychological, physical, social and financial wellbeing of police officers, and I welcome the impact that that has on supporting police officers.

Concessionary Bus Travel Scheme

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Figures that were released this week show that more than 200 million free bus journeys have been made across Scotland by under-22s. As this is Scottish apprenticeship week, will the First Minister provide further detail about how the scheme is supporting apprentices in Paisley and across Scotland to work, learn and earn?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The concessionary bus travel scheme has been an unparalleled success. It has, crucially, given young people much greater mobility in our society and has enabled them to access a much wider range of employment and training opportunities around the country. That will have a profound effect in all communities in the country, and I know that the effect that it has had in the Paisley constituency will be precious to Mr Adam. From my dialogue with young people, I know about the positive impact of the policy instrument and the way in which it has increased opportunities and life chances for young people in Scotland.

Islands (Resilience Fund)

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware that communities in South Uist and Barra are suffering a fifth year of extreme ferry failure, which is causing irreversible damage to the local economy. What resource can be set aside for a resilience fund for businesses and communities that are on the brink of collapse due to that failure?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very familiar with the issues that Rhoda Grant raises with me. I had discussions about that question when I was in South Uist some years ago, and I saw correspondence last night, which was sent to me by the local member, Dr Alasdair Allan, in relation to the very issues that have been raised by the South Uist business community.

I am sorry for the disruption that is being felt. We believed that, at this point, we would be in a stronger position with the resilience of the ferry network, but there have been delays regarding some of the ferries that we expected to be delivered—Rhoda Grant will be familiar with those issues, and Parliament has been advised of them.

I am considering the proposals that have been put to me by the South Uist business community, as is the Cabinet Secretary for Transport. We will update members, including Rhoda Grant, on any response from the Government to those proposals.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind members that I hold a bank nurse contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

New figures show that child and adolescent mental health services targets were met in the final quarter of 2024, with 90.6 per cent of patients being seen within 18 weeks of referral. Although there is still more to be done to build on that progress, can the First Minister advise how his Government's investment in mental health services in the 2025-26 budget will ensure that

that target is consistently met in the future, to deliver the best possible outcomes for young people who rely on those services?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is important that we continue to make progress on the issue. I welcome the fact that the 18-week target was met in the final quarter of 2024.

To respond to the specific question that Clare Haughey put to me, £123 million has been allocated through the enhanced mental health outcomes framework in the budget for next year, which I hope will help to continue to build on the progress that has been made in the current financial year.

NHS Highland (Vascular Surgery)

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): NHS Highland's vascular services have been in terminal decline for years. Sadly, our last vascular surgeon has just resigned because he feels that the way that the service is delivered is a threat to life and limb.

Given that NHS Highland has hospital beds and vascular surgery theatres available, will the First Minister ask his health secretary to review the situation? It is unacceptable that patients in the Highlands are being put in taxis and ambulances late at night to get to the central belt in order to get surgery.

The First Minister: Mr Mountain raises an important point. Indeed, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I discussed not that specific issue but the general question of how we deliver healthcare in areas where recruitment and employment can be a challenge but where, as Mr Mountain correctly puts to me, there is physical capacity to undertake some of that surgical activity in the health board facilities.

Part of what we are trying to work on is how we work collaboratively in health boards to address the circumstances that Mr Mountain puts to me, so that we can use that capacity to help us to reduce waiting times and meet the needs of his constituents and others. It is very much a live part of the activity that the health secretary and I are taking forward to ensure that the needs of constituents around the country are met.

Two-child Benefit Cap

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): This week, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights called on the United Kingdom Labour Government to immediately repeal its two-child cap, as it violates children's rights and exacerbates poverty and social inequality. In that context, will the First Minister give an update on the work of our Scottish National Party

Government to end the two-child cap in Scotland? Will he join my calls—yet again—for Westminster to scrap at source Labour's cruel two-child cap, which, let us not forget, is deliberately designed to deny 1.6 million children in low-income families enough money simply to live on?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I reassure Mr Doris that the Government is taking forward work that involves the design of systems to enable us to lift the two-child cap, which is one of the policy priorities and commitments in the Government's budget for the coming year. That is under way and we are making the necessary progress on it.

Obviously, that measure will help us to lift children out of poverty. That will not be assisted by some of the speculation that we have heard over the past few days about significant reductions in the welfare budget, which will undoubtedly have the effect of jeopardising the incomes of households in Scotland and, particularly, affect child poverty levels in our country.

Scottish Water (Strike Action)

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Does the First Minister share my concern that industrial action is set to begin at Scottish Water this weekend? What does he say to the Scottish Water trade union representatives who are gathered in the public gallery about his ministers sanctioning bonuses to the bosses of Scottish Water that are more than 10 times greater than the pay rise that is now offered to the workers of Scottish Water?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The first thing that I will say is that I saw during the week news that Mr Leonard intends not to seek re-election to Parliament. I express my warmest wishes to him and commend him for his service in the Scottish Parliament, which has been full of impact on many issues—including some of the issues that he puts to me on behalf of employees in Scotland today—for which I have the greatest respect.

Strike action at Scottish Water is obviously a matter for Scottish Water. I encourage the Scottish Water leadership and trade unions to try to find a solution that avoids disruption.

On the question of bonuses, because we have explained all the details to Parliament, Mr Leonard will be familiar with the point that, when it comes to the recruitment of leadership for Scottish Water, we are invariably in competition with other water companies around the United Kingdom. In that competition, the element of bonuses is part of the fabric of the financial settlements that are available

to attract employees. Comparatively, bonus payments for the leadership of Scottish Water are much lower than those in other parts of the United Kingdom and the performance of Scottish Water is much higher than that of companies in other parts of the United Kingdom.

I acknowledge that those are difficult comparisons to make, but they are part of the judgments that the Government has to arrive at on how we attract the leadership to safeguard the important asset that is Scottish Water.

Orthopaedics Waiting Times

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): My constituent has been told that, based on current out-patient waiting times, he is required to wait 59 weeks for an orthopaedics appointment. If he then requires surgery, he will have to be added to the in-patient waiting queue and, currently, wait up to 91 weeks.

In response to Anna Sarwar's question on waiting times, the First Minister said that progress had been made, but it has not, has it? Will the First Minister apologise personally to my constituent, who will wait for weeks in agony?

The First Minister: Progress is being made. As I said in my answer to Mr Sarwar and as I repeat in my answer to Rachael Hamilton, figures that were published in February show a 4 per cent decrease in the total waiting list for diagnostic tests, so we are making progress. For example, there has been a 44 per cent decrease in imaging waiting times at NHS Fife and a 22 per cent decrease in neurology waiting times at NHS Forth Valley.

Progress is being made, and it will be helped by the investment that the Government is making in the national health service, which I point out that Rachael Hamilton did not support. It is all very well coming here and complaining about issues in the national health service, but Rachael Hamilton is not prepared to support that financial investment; in fact, she represents a position of wanting to reduce public expenditure by £1 billion to afford a tax cut. How that will get orthopaedic appointments undertaken is beyond me. The Government is investing, and we are making much progress to reduce waiting lists. I will be happy to update Rachael Hamilton on the progress that we make in the weeks to come.

Speed Awareness Courses

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): According to Police Scotland, between April last year and February this year, there have been 132 road casualties in Renfrewshire. That is up by more than a quarter compared with the same period the year before. Since 2007, speed awareness

courses have been in operation in England and Wales to help the police, but, as Chris Musson of *The Sun* wrote this week, there is still none available in Scotland, despite the Scottish Government first looking at the matter 16 years ago, in 2009.

In 2023, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs stated that

“The Scottish Government agrees that speed awareness courses will have a positive impact on driver behaviour”

and that research on the matter

“shows that such interventions reduce reoffending”.—
[*Official Report*, 7 September 2023; c 3.]

Does the Scottish Government still support speed awareness courses? Why are we still waiting for them to be rolled out, and when will they start?

The First Minister: I accept Mr Bibby’s point, and I will look at the question to see what action the Government can take to address that. Fundamentally, we have in place speed limits that are very clearly and manifestly advertised to individuals, so there is a level of personal responsibility at the start of all this. However, if there are speed awareness courses that can help to address the issue, I will happily consider the matter, and I will write to Mr Bibby about the steps that the Government is prepared to take.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister’s questions. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and the public gallery to do so before the next item of business begins.

12:47

Meeting suspended.

12:49

On resuming—

United Kingdom Government Welfare Reforms

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S6M-16536, in the name of Marie McNair, on the impact of UK welfare reforms in Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

I make a further plea to those who are leaving the public gallery to please do so as quietly as possible. I invite Marie McNair to open the debate.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament condemns the Labour UK administration for its reported intention to proceed with what it sees as punitive welfare reforms proposed under the previous Conservative administration; notes the calls on the UK Government to immediately reverse its plans, which, it considers, could seriously impact disabled people and increase financial insecurity in vulnerable households; further notes with alarm reports that, by 2029, over 450,000 disabled people and people with long-term conditions across the UK could be impacted as a result of the proposed reforms to Work Capability Assessment, with, it understands, many losing payments currently worth over £400 per month; is deeply concerned by what it sees as the callous language of UK Government ministers when discussing welfare reform, including the reported comment by the UK work and pensions secretary that some benefit claimants are “taking the mickey”; notes what it sees as the contrast between what it considers the demonisation of welfare recipients, under the UK Government, and the Scottish Government’s continued commitment to a devolved social security system based on dignity, fairness and respect; welcomes the reported investment of £1.3 billion above the UK block grant adjustment for social security expenditure in the draft Budget 2025-26, which reflects what it considers to be the social contract between the Scottish Government and the people of Scotland; understands that the Scottish Government is set to invest up to £210 million in measures to mitigate what it sees as UK Government austerity policies such as the so-called bedroom tax, benefit cap and cut to the Winter Fuel Payment in 2025-26, and notes the calls encouraging disadvantaged or low-income households across Scotland, including disabled and long-term ill people in the Clydebank and Milngavie constituency, to check their eligibility for social security payments and to claim the support to which they are entitled.

12:49

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am pleased to have secured today’s debate to discuss the impact of United Kingdom welfare cuts, and I thank all the members who have supported my motion. I also thank Age Scotland for the briefing that it provided.

Today's debate comes at a very important time. Instead of a change of direction, we have a Government at Westminster that seems intent on making disabled people, children and pensioners the victims of austerity. The biggest lie of any election campaign was the statement, "Read my lips: no austerity." The Labour Government has declared its intention to proceed with the cruel and inhumane welfare cuts that were proposed by the previous Tory Government. They are cuts that the respected disability charity Scope has described as "catastrophic". It quotes Naomi who says,

"I feel abandoned by the Government ... It feels like they don't see disabled people's needs as important. I don't think they care, and it makes me feel insignificant."

Scope is calling for Labour to invest in an equal future for disabled people and not to increase poverty by cutting benefits.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Marie McNair: I will only take it if I can get the time back, because I am really tight for time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You will get the time back.

Paul O'Kane: Does Marie McNair accept that an important part of dignity for disabled people is ensuring that disabled people who want to access work can do so. Does she accept that simple premise?

Marie McNair: Of course I do. I thank Paul O'Kane for his intervention. However, I thought that you would stand up to apologise for how your party is treating our most vulnerable in Scotland and the wider UK.

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

Marie McNair: Instead, Labour plans to proceed, with those on essential social security benefits being an easy target. We should not be surprised by that. Dr David Webster of the University of Glasgow has pointed out that, under the previous Labour Government, benefit sanctions rose to some of their highest levels. The stigmatisation of those on benefits has terrible consequences for individuals and for a fair society in which no one should be left behind.

In its report, "Jumping through hoops", Independent Age quotes Susan, who described her experience of claiming UK benefits as

"Reducing me to tears and even making me feel suicidal several times. Not only were the questions difficult to understand, dwelling on all of the things that I am no longer capable of doing sent me into a very dark place."

That is not someone who is looking for a "handout"; it is not someone "gaming the system"; and it is not someone "taking the mickey".

For an easy political hit, Labour plans to adopt austerity on stilts instead of dignity, fairness and respect. It will hurt real people in my constituency and across Scotland. Under its plans, disabled people will be seriously impacted, and the financial insecurity of vulnerable households will increase. To put that into figures, there are reports that, by 2029, more than 450,000 disabled people and people with long-term conditions across the UK could be impacted as a result of the proposed reforms to the work capability assessment, with many losing payments that are currently worth more than £400 per month. Only yesterday, the BBC reported that

"The Chancellor has earmarked several billion pounds in draft spending cuts to welfare".

In a 2024 report from the Poverty Alliance in Scotland for its collaborative project with the Scottish Government to assess the impacts of poverty related stigma on benefit take-up—

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the member give way?

Marie McNair: I will not.

The report found that—

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Marie McNair: I have already said that I will not take an intervention.

According to the report:

"Most Panellists agreed that stigma had gotten worse with austerity, UK government's 'welfare reform', and the cost-of-living crisis",

and

"Several spoke of putting off claiming for as long as they possibly could, to the point of hunger and destitution."

That is really concerning, and we have heard it so many times in the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. It is up to us to combat the stigma and to change the narrative around benefits. Benefits are a safety net, and they are normal. But Labour is promoting a narrative of the scrounger and the undeserving—I will say this again: please, let us be mindful of the language that we are using.

By contrast, Scotland's social security system is based on fairness, dignity and respect. The Poverty Alliance's report highlighted the different approach in Scotland and noted that dealing with Social Security Scotland was viewed as a far less stigmatising experience than dealing with the Department for Work and Pensions. The difference was noted as "night and day". We will keep going further to protect our constituents who require benefits. That is clear from the budget for 2025-26, which will invest £6.9 billion in social security and is expected to support around 2 million people in 2025-26.

However, although we will continue to do everything that we can to protect those in need, we are continuously hindered by UK austerity measures. The austerity policies of 2010, which were put in place by our Tory and Liberal Democrat colleagues, have led to severe suffering for the Scottish community, particularly those on low incomes. Those policies have been described by economists and economic historians as “disastrous” and “reckless”. The United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights went even further in 2023, condemning the UK Government’s shameful record on poverty, saying that the UK’s “grossly insufficient” welfare system, after a decade of austerity, is “simply not acceptable” and may be in violation of international law.

That reckless approach has resulted in the Scottish Government having to spend a large portion of its budget to counteract those damaging policies to protect the Scottish people. In 2025, the Scottish Government is set to invest up to £210 million in measures to mitigate UK Government austerity policies, such as the so-called bedroom tax, the benefit cap and the cut to winter fuel payments. We will go further by scrapping Labour’s abhorrent two-child benefit cap, which will lift approximately 15,000 children out of poverty.

The Scottish Government’s social security policies are significant, and they are the reason why Scotland is the only part of the UK where child poverty rates are predicted to fall. Under the Scottish National Party, the Scottish Government will continue to value and protect benefit claimants, but only with full control over welfare policies will we be able to truly address poverty and inequality. Therefore, I am calling on my Labour colleagues to push the UK Government to take the right approach and reverse its punitive welfare reform plans. If they do not do that, they can at least call out those plans and support the full devolution of social security and employment policy. Only then will we have a fair and compassionate welfare system that leaves no one behind.

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

12:56

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Marie McNair, I congratulate you on the debate, but that speech was something else. You quote the UN rapporteur in relation to UK welfare—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair.

Stephen Kerr: We spent £350 billion this year on welfare in this country. It is about time that we

had an honest debate about welfare. We should be honest. The reality is that too many people in this country are able to work but have chosen not to engage in employment. That is not just an economic crisis but a moral one.

I wanted to speak in the debate because I firmly believe in the ennobling and fulfilling importance of good work. The welfare system was intended to be a safety net—I think that we agree on that. It is not a lifestyle choice. It should support people back into employment and not trap them in dependency.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): On the point of morality, does the member acknowledge that disability benefits are not all out-of-work benefits? Does he realise the impact that cutting those welfare payments to disabled people would have on their ability to stay in work and to feed and clothe themselves?

Stephen Kerr: Therefore, the system should be geared around helping people to stay in work and to have as much self-reliance and independence as possible, but we should not be designing systems that trap people in dependency.

According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, UK welfare spending this year is—as I have already mentioned—£350 billion. It is spiralling unsustainably, and reaching levels that even a Labour Government has acknowledged cannot continue.

In 2025-26, the Scottish Government intends to spend £1.3 billion more than the UK block grant adjustment on social security, with further increases anticipated. Despite repeated requests, notably from the Finance and Public Administration Committee, the Government has yet to outline a sustainable long-term funding plan—maybe the minister is going to conjure one out of her speech at the end of this debate. The SNP’s proposal to remove the two-child benefit cap would add at least another £200 million a year just to start with. None of that expenditure has been properly accounted for.

The welfare system that we have created is not financially sustainable, and there is no point in pretending otherwise. I welcome the acceptance across the parties that we need to reduce the number of people dependent on welfare. A successful Government sets goals to cut the number of people on welfare, not to increase it. The SNP’s approach is not compassionate. It is cruel, because it is designed to keep people stuck where they are, instead of to help people to move forward.

We need to rebalance our economy. Alongside the welfare crisis, we have too many people working for the Government, while the private sector—our best source of new jobs—struggles.

We must extend the tax base by making more people self-reliant—as they would desire to be—and less dependent on the state. We should be investing in skills, training and apprenticeships, yet, under the SNP, the opposite is happening: cuts to further education, an artificial cap on apprenticeships and a lack of investment in upskilling.

That is a failure of ambition for Scotland. What a strange nationalist party we have in government that it lacks such ambition for our people.

We must also be mindful of working people, who should not be left feeling that their hard-earned money is being used to fund people who are capable of working but who are choosing not to. We need to create the conditions for the creation of good work.

Work must always pay. We must help people to feel that they have an opportunity to upskill, to make choices for themselves and to increase their capability to earn and to provide for their families. Instead of being penalised by punitive taxes, people should be encouraged to work and have ambition. Aspirations should be rewarded, not punished. We need a Government that believes in work, self-reliance and growth.

13:02

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I want to try to be generous to Marie McNair, but I would describe the motion and the debate as unserious. I say that because we are debating a motion that seeks to discuss proposed reforms to UK social security payments that have not, in fact, been announced and the detail of which none of us has seen. The proposals have appeared publicly in the press in a way that I think the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice referred to in the Social Justice and Social Security Committee this morning as “rumours”.

It is important that we look at the context of where we are right now.

Stephen Kerr: To be fair to Marie McNair and the motion, is it not the Labour Government’s intention to cut the welfare bill by helping people back into work?

Paul O’Kane: I have just said that there are reforms that have not yet been consulted on. It is the Labour Government’s intention to ensure that people who want to work can access work and are supported to do so. I will say more about that in my speech.

It is important to deal in the facts about what seven months of a UK Labour Government have meant for those issues. There is no mention in the motion of the changes that have been made, such as the fair repayment rate on debt, which means

that 110,000 Scottish households will be, on average, £420 a year better off because of our universal credit reforms.

There is no mention of the changes to the earnings threshold for carers allowance to allow unpaid carers to earn more while they keep their entitlements. That is the biggest change to carers allowance since 1974 and a move that the Scottish Government took weeks to confirm that it would follow.

There is no mention of the changes to statutory sick pay that were announced this week, which mean that 1.3 million of the lowest paid Britons can access sick pay from day 1 of their sickness, and that they do not have to choose between their health and earning a living. That goes alongside the UK Employment Rights Bill, which I will speak about in my contribution.

From reading the motion and listening to the opening speech in the debate, members would think that Social Security Scotland is completely flawless in this space. However, the roll-outs of adult disability payment and child disability payment have involved significantly higher processing times than their DWP equivalents have. Tragically, in 2023 alone, almost 100 people died while they were waiting for their ADP applications to be approved. More than £1 million of social security overpayments will not be recovered, which creates an unnecessary fiscal pressure. There have been significant issues setting up the agency, including a £39 million spend on information technology systems and a low staff occupancy rate at its Dundee headquarters, which has annual running costs of £1.5 million.

As the motion highlights, the spend on social security above the block grant adjustment is ever rising, which puts pressure on tax receipts in Scotland and other spending portfolios. At this morning’s meeting of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, the cabinet secretary acknowledged—perhaps for the first time—that there is pressure on the budget and that the implications are “stark”.

I make it clear that it is legitimate for such decisions to be taken in this Parliament. My party, as the party that founded this Parliament, supports the principle of the devolution of decision making, but we cannot escape the fact that we must have a discussion about how we pay for such things. I called the debate unserious because we are not having that discussion and it is not mentioned in the motion. We must have an open and honest discussion about the purpose of social security and how we can ensure that people get the right support to get into work and to arrive at true and meaningful positive destinations.

I am happy to try to inject some nuance into the debate by saying that the positive steps that I have outlined that the Labour Government has taken so far must be coupled with further reform work. That is why the reform of universal credit and the UK Government's on-going review are so important. Any changes that are made, especially those that relate to people who are in receipt of sickness benefit or who are disabled, must be geared towards investment in ensuring that people can be supported into work. Just this morning, the DWP and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions announced that 1,000 extra job coaches will be deployed in the jobcentre network to support people to get into work. Such interventions will be crucial.

I am happy to acknowledge that many challenges exist across the variety of issues that contribute to poverty in our country, but we must have a serious, grown-up and nuanced debate about how we can tackle all those facets through the social security system and access to work. It is clear to me that members of the Government party have no intention of doing that today.

13:06

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank Marie McNair for securing this important debate, which emphasises the detrimental impact that the UK welfare system is having on society's most vulnerable.

At the outset, I want to touch on a couple of Stephen Kerr's comments. He said that the SNP's approach is not compassionate but cruel. He also spoke about the cutting of apprenticeships and the lack of upskilling, and he highlighted the idea that work must always pay. When Stephen Kerr's party took control at Westminster in 1979, many communities, including mine in Inverclyde, were absolutely decimated because of the Government's cruel approach. Apprenticeships were culled and there was a lack of upskilling, because the introduction of the youth training scheme—the YTS—to replace apprenticeships did not upskill people.

Stephen Kerr: Stuart McMillan deflects from my comments by referring to events that took place 44—no, 46—years ago. He must reflect on the fact that it is desperation on his part to reach back so far to deflect from the valid criticisms that are being made by many outside the Parliament about the SNP Government's lack of commitment to skills training and further education.

Stuart McMillan: I am sorry, Mr Kerr, but the fact is that my community has still not fully recovered from the decimation—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please speak through the chair.

Stuart McMillan: My community has not fully recovered from the decisions that were taken by Mr Kerr's party in 1979. The same is true of Marie McNair's community and the communities of other members of the Parliament.

The policy positions that were adopted under consecutive Westminster Governments are the polar opposite of how benefit support should work—it should lift people up when they need a helping hand, rather than make life harder for them. I am therefore pleased that, in Scotland, we have taken a different approach through Social Security Scotland. I recognise what Paul O'Kane said about the challenges that exist, which clearly must be worked on, but the principles of dignity, fairness and respect are at the heart of the organisation.

I will give an example. The Scottish child payment is unique to Scotland. Currently, the payment is worth £26.70 per week per eligible child but, following the passing of the budget last week, it will increase to £27.15 per week from 1 April. Since the Scottish child payment was established in 2021, more than £17 million has been paid out to assist families in my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency, benefiting 5,360 children as of December last year and demonstrating the SNP Government's commitment to putting more money into people's pockets. That is in stark contrast to the operation of the DWP, which seems to be tasked with finding any reason to deduct money from people's benefits.

I will touch on some elements of a case that my office has been dealing with.

Paul O'Kane: Will the member accept an intervention?

Stuart McMillan: I am sorry, but I am short of time.

I am not going to reveal the constituent's name or much of their case, but that individual approached me for support due to rent arrears. Numerous personal circumstances, many of which were outwith my constituent's personal control, had led to them falling behind on their rent, but they had agreed a repayment plan with the DWP. The DWP then penalised my constituent for missing an appointment, which, once again, was for reasons outwith their control. The penalty was that they got no universal credit payments for 80 days.

As I said, I will not go into all the details, and my constituent accepts that they have made mistakes along the way, but I fail to see how that approach achieves anything other than making people feel more vulnerable. For my constituent, that almost resulted in eviction, at which point other services had to step in to provide support. I firmly believe

that, if the DWP had employed a more caring and person-centred approach, staff might have identified the acute challenges that my constituent was facing. Instead, the modus operandi is to treat people with suspicion rather than view them as human beings in need of help.

I imagine that colleagues across the chamber will have experience of similar actions from the DWP, but whether they consider that to be a horror story depends on their point of view. It is abundantly clear to me that the UK welfare system is not fit for purpose, and I echo Marie McNair's comments about benefits being devolved to this Parliament. I consider that for Labour to come into power and adopt the Tories' cruel and callous so-called reforms and, in some cases, to perpetuate them further, is an utter betrayal.

I again thank Marie McNair for bringing the debate to the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final speaker in the open debate is Maggie Chapman, who joins us remotely.

13:12

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Marie McNair for securing this important debate. Her motion reflects an alarm that I believe is shared by a great many members of the Parliament, although not all might be able to express it.

The continuation of Tory policies by a Labour Government is, of course, not new, but the speed and scale with which Sir Keir Starmer has sloughed off his former principles is both breathtaking and terrifying. Perhaps the idea, in line with the mantra of the brotocracy, is to move fast and break things, but if the things that are broken are the welfare state, the social security system and the social contract of which the motion speaks, is that really a price worth paying for the illusion of any growth, either benign or malignant?

Marie McNair is right to identify the policies as those of austerity, whether or not the Labour Government uses that word. Like the policies of the previous UK Government, those policies have, or threaten to have, a threefold impact on Scotland. First, they impose direct harm on individuals, families and communities: the harms of poverty, anxiety, exclusion and stigma. Many of our constituents know those harms intimately, as they are their constant companions through days of desperation and nights of sleepless fear.

Secondly, by the nature of the so-called devolution settlement, those policies make the creation of alternatives much more difficult. Financial and constitutional barriers corral us into

doing what Westminster does, however much our instincts rebel.

Thirdly, and most perniciously, the ideology of austerity makes the alternatives hard to express and even to imagine. It is an ideology of punishment, not for what people do but for what they are—for their bodies and homes and for their failure to get themselves born into greater comfort. The only release is through what is called striving—not for a better future but for a fuller bank account, and not for the common good but for the private and to build walls that keep the world outside.

I believe that our shared responses must confront all three of those impacts. First, we must continue to extend and deepen our work of creative mitigation, finding ways, even within our current confines, that can protect those who are most in need and prevent the greatest harms. I am grateful that, in some limited ways, we are able to do some of that work in Scotland.

Secondly, we must not lose sight of the horizon of our progress towards greater agency. For most of us who are speaking in the chamber this afternoon, that horizon means Scottish independence—the freedom to shape a future that more closely embodies our values.

Thirdly, we must urgently articulate those values. Vulnerability is not a defect to be cured by bullying and deprivation; it is a universal human condition that is masked only by a privileged few for a few years of pretended autonomy. We depend upon one another. We depend upon the earth. We depend upon care, compassion and creativity, upon sustainability and solidarity. Those are our sources of growth and of roots, as well as fruit and flowers. We can and should be proud to speak of them.

The motion that we are debating is about welfare cuts, but it could have been about immigration policy, Gaza or the plan to ravage UK aid commitments to fatten the defence budget, shamelessly turning ploughshares into swords. In each of those situations, the same pattern appears. There is the same betrayal of those with least and the same refusal to acknowledge our shared vulnerability. For it is only together that we are resilient and only together that we are human. We can and should do so much more to express that humanity for everyone.

13:16

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): I thank Marie McNair for bringing this debate to the chamber. I have listened carefully to the comments that have been made and I hope to respond to some of the points that have been raised.

Any one of us might find ourselves at any time in our lives unable to get paid work due to sickness or disability or because we are caring for a loved one. If that happens, social security should provide us with a safety net. It should provide protection from poverty and financial insecurity no matter what life has thrown at us. That is what social security should be.

However, what we are seeing from the current UK Government, ahead of the publication of its green paper later this month, raises significant concerns for the future of that social security safety net. When the previous UK Government initially set out proposals for changes to the work capability assessment, the Scottish Government, along with poverty campaigners and disabled people's organisations, roundly condemned the targeting of vital benefits that support disabled people and those with long-term health conditions. It is deeply disappointing that the current UK Government is continuing with those plans.

With reference to Paul O'Kane's intervention, I know that this is a very uncomfortable space for Labour. Although the reforms originated with the previous Conservative Government, Labour has defended them. In fact, at the judicial review it was found that the consultation on the reforms was based on the need to save money as opposed to getting people back into jobs. The UK Government is now reconsulting, and we will see the results of that reconsultation in the green paper that is meant to be forthcoming.

As Marie McNair points out in her motion, the UK Government's language when discussing disabled people and people with long-term health conditions is deeply concerning, as it seeks to further stigmatise and blame the sick and disabled for accessing social security benefits that they are legally entitled to and on which they rely.

In Scotland, we know that there is a different way to deliver social security. As a devolved nation, we are able to do that, as Maggie Chapman pointed out. The Scottish Parliament unanimously created the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, which enshrines the principles of dignity, fairness and respect, reducing poverty, and advancing equality and non-discrimination at the heart of a radically different social security system. As Stuart McMillan so eloquently pointed out, we must retain compassion at the heart of any social security system, and those are the principles that guide this Government's social security decision making.

While the UK Government is focused on reducing the amount of money that is spent on supporting the disabled and others who need help, the Scottish Government believes that social security is an essential collective investment in Scotland's people, its communities and its future.

It is an investment because, as we all know, inequality is bad for our health, our communities and our economy.

In the recently passed budget, the Scottish Government made a conscious decision to invest in social security for the people of Scotland by investing around £6.9 billion in benefits and payments for 2025-26. That investment will support approximately 2 million people and amounts to around £1.3 billion more than the funding for social security that was received from the UK Government.

In Scotland, we are taking a positive and compassionate approach to delivering the adult disability payment. That approach is ensuring that more disabled people get the support to which they are entitled while making sure that accessing that support is as straightforward as possible. In 2025-26, we will invest around £3.6 billion in the adult disability payment, which is £314 million more than we are forecast to receive from the UK Government through the social security block grant adjustment.

We are also using our limited budget to mitigate some of the UK Government's most damaging policies. Over the past 14 years, we have spent around £1.2 billion on mitigating the effects of policies such as the bedroom tax and the benefit cap, including almost £154 million in 2024-25. Furthermore, from 2026, we will mitigate the effects of the pernicious two-child cap, thereby helping to keep thousands of children out of poverty and reducing the depth of poverty that many more face.

Stephen Kerr: The minister mentions the numbers in the 2025-26 budget—the £1.3 billion more that is being spent over what has been allocated through the block grant. Would she share with members in the chamber exactly how the Government plans to fund its proposed exponential increases in spending in this area?

Would she also accept that the Government should perhaps set its sights on creating jobs and helping people who are currently on benefits to move into work? That never seems to be part of anything that ministers say in this place when it comes to the welfare system. The whole point of the welfare system for many, if not most, people is to help them temporarily while they get back into good work. Why does the Government never talk about that?

Sustainability of budgeting and work—what is the minister's response to that?

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

Kaukab Stewart: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer, for giving me the time back for Mr Kerr's lengthy intervention.

I do not accept that this Government does not support people getting into work. We have a raft of investments in ways to do that.

This debate is uncomfortable both for the Tories and for Labour because their approach to welfare benefits is based on punishment and stigma, and this Government rejects that approach wholeheartedly.

Despite the fixed budgets and limited powers of devolution, we have transformed social security provision in Scotland and we are committed to ensuring that finances remain on a sustainable trajectory. We will publish our next medium-term financial strategy later this year, alongside a fiscal sustainability delivery plan.

In conclusion, as I and many members in the chamber have highlighted, the recent statements by UK Government ministers on welfare reform and benefit cuts show no regard for the reality of people's lives. I will close the debate with a clear and urgent message to the UK Government: remember your pledge of no austerity; do not punish those who most need our help; recognise the hardships that mean that people may require help from the benefits system; and join us, in the Scottish Government, in working to banish stigma from social security rather than amplifying it through aggressive soundbites and rhetoric.

13:25

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

14:31

On resuming—

Covid-19 Day of Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on the Covid-19 day of reflection, which is an opportunity for us, as a Parliament, to reflect on the impact of the pandemic and its effect on communities across Scotland.

14:31

The First Minister (John Swinney): The annual day of reflection for Covid commemoration takes place this Sunday, 9 March. This year marks the fifth anniversary of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Scotland and across the United Kingdom. This is a significant milestone, and I welcome the opportunity to gather in the chamber to remember all those who have been affected.

The day of reflection offers a chance to come together to remember everyone who died during the pandemic. Losing a loved one is one of the greatest challenges that many of us will experience, and we know all too well that those who experienced bereavement and grief during the pandemic faced unique challenges, dealing with loss and grief at a distance.

The day of reflection gives us an opportunity to remember the suffering that was endured during the pandemic, to remember the impact that was felt by all in our society, to remember the fear that we all experienced and to remember the heroic actions of many to support us all.

The day of reflection has its origins in the recommendations of the UK commission on Covid commemoration and in the work of Marie Curie. I put on record my thanks to both groups for all that they have done to support bereaved families and to ensure that, as a nation, we continue to make time to remember those who lost their lives.

Today, as First Minister, I express my deepest condolences to all those who lost family and friends, including those who are able to join us in the gallery today. It is our solemn duty, as leaders and as public servants, to mark the day of reflection and to ensure that those who died are remembered by us all.

In May 2022, it was my great privilege to attend the unveiling of Scotland's national Covid memorial—the "I remember" walk in Glasgow's Pollok park. At that event, I was struck by the dignity and strength of those who had suffered loss in such difficult circumstances. On Sunday, I will attend a memorial in Glasgow and lay a wreath in memory of those who lost their lives. The commemoration is organised by Covid-19

families Scotland, a group of bereaved families that was founded by Connie McCready during the pandemic. I pay tribute to Connie, Peter McMahon and Carolyn Murdoch, who serve as the group's administrators, for all that they do on behalf of the families affected to ensure that the legacy of their loved ones lives on.

To support that legacy, in 2021, the Scottish Government funded the Remembering Together project, which commissioned creative practitioners and artists in all 32 local authority areas to co-create Covid-19 memorial projects. The Remembering Together project is about being part of a process to commemorate those who have lost their lives and those who have experienced loss and whose lives were changed for ever.

The annual day of reflection offers us all the opportunity to remember lives lost, to reflect on the sacrifice of many and to provide space for people to consider their experiences of the pandemic in a way that suits them best. On Sunday, as always, we will remember.

14:35

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): On behalf of my party, I pay my deep respects to the many thousands of people in Scotland, and the many millions of people elsewhere, who lost their lives to Covid. At moments such as these, we reflect on how our world changed so rapidly and dramatically in March 2020. At first, news reports warned of a mystery virus in China, then of its spreading to Italy, and I still remember the sense of unease—even foreboding.

Very quickly, the state passed legislation that required the population and all but essential workers to stay at home. Mixing with friends and family was mostly prohibited, businesses were shut down, masks had to be worn, prisoners were set free and children were told not to come into the classroom. Those measures were necessary at first, but how effective they were and why they continued for so long are questions for the on-going public inquiries.

In April 2020, while working as a journalist, I reported on a group of heroic care home workers in Forfar who spent 32 nights locked down with elderly residents in a bid to protect them. Later, it emerged that elderly hospital patients who were known to be Covid positive were sent into Scottish care homes, where more than 4,000 residents died. The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service said that those deaths are part of

“the single largest investigation of deaths in Scottish history”,

which is on-going.

All of that had, and continues to have, far-reaching consequences. The schooling and social lives of young people were curtailed, with on-going consequences for learning, development and wellbeing. The national health service's pandemic focus meant that other treatments were suspended while waiting lists grew and grew. Many businesses fought for survival but failed—through no fault of their own.

On Sunday, we will mark the fifth anniversary of the pandemic. Our thoughts are with all those who lost loved ones. However, we have now reached a stage at which the Scottish Government can no longer deploy Covid as an excuse for all its failings. Two inquiries are attempting to answer serious questions, on behalf of the public, about why harsher lockdown measures were imposed in Scotland, why ministers deleted messages that they knew would be needed by those inquiries and why elderly people were knowingly sent into care homes after testing positive.

Today, we remember, but we can never forget.

14:38

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Five years ago, our country and our world were turned upside down. After weeks of rising warnings from across the globe, Covid-19 reached Scotland and the UK. We all remember the anxiety and uncertainty of those early days—a country plunged into lockdown overnight, with restrictions on daily life unseen in generations.

Yet, in the face of such upheaval, people came together. Sacrifices were made not out of obligation but out of care for family, friends and neighbours. It was a powerful reminder of our shared humanity and the kindness that defines our communities. However, the human cost of the pandemic was profound: lives were lost, families were separated and communities faced unimaginable challenges.

Amid it all, the spirit of the nation shone through. People stepped up to support one another, looking after the vulnerable in their neighbourhoods; businesses adapted to support their communities; and, week after week, the public clapped to recognise the incredible dedication of NHS and care workers, who put themselves in harm's way to protect others.

As we reflect on the past five years, we must acknowledge the strength that we showed and the lessons that we must learn. The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in our society and placed extraordinary pressure on our public services. Mistakes were made and, too often, people on the front line did not get the support that they needed.

Today, we remember not just the emotional and social toll of the pandemic but the challenges that remain for communities that were once thriving but are struggling to recover. For too many families, the pain of losing loved ones without a proper goodbye remains raw. Perhaps most of all, we remember the children who, even today, are still paying the price for lockdown and who, if we do not act with urgency, will be left to bear the scars of two years of missed learning for a lifetime.

While we reflect today on the human cost of the pandemic, we cannot pretend that it is just a memory. For too many Scots—young and old—the wounds remain unhealed, the pain remains fresh and the support that was promised has, in some cases, not come. Before the last election, this entire Parliament committed to a national recovery, and we must all ask ourselves whether we are living up to that promise.

In remembering the people we lost, we cannot forget our debt to those who live and who contributed so much. That is why, as we honour those we lost, we must also renew our commitment to those who are still in need today. Our reflections must be matched with action, so that we learn from the past and build a stronger future.

On behalf of the Scottish Labour Party, I commit myself to learning the lessons of the pandemic, restoring our public services and ensuring that we honour everyone who lost their lives with meaningful action. Ahead of the day of reflection, my thoughts and prayers, and those of my entire party, are with all the families who lost a loved one and everyone who was impacted by the pandemic.

14:41

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): This year—2025—marks five years since Covid-19 changed our lives, our communities and our world. In March 2020, we did not know what was ahead of us. We could see the rows of coffins in news footage from Italy, and we knew that something was happening, but we did not know how profoundly it would affect our lives or how many friends and family members we would lose.

Some people say, “We made it through the pandemic.” We did not, though, did we? We did not all make it, and I am so sad for everyone whom we lost. Each life taken was a beloved family member, friend or colleague. Their absence leaves a void that words cannot fill, but their memories live on in our hearts.

Today, we reflect on the sacrifices that were required and the ever-changing impact that the pandemic had on the nation and on people’s daily lives. Many people still face debilitating symptoms, with repercussions for their life and work. We pay

tribute to the dedicated work of the health and social care staff and essential workers whose grit, valour and vital work saved lives and kept the country running. We will forever be in debt to the front-line workers who died during the pandemic.

We were all affected by Covid, but, as is always the case, people whose lives were already hard suffered even more—disabled people, people on low incomes, people who live in crowded housing, older people and people with suppressed immune systems. No child or parent will forget the impact of the pandemic on their schooling and family life, and no young person will forget how Covid hampered their start in adult life.

Difficult times can bring out the best in us. We got to see what it looks like when we decide to house the homeless. We got to see who really is essential to our society and how much we take them for granted at all other times. We got extra space to walk in our towns and cities safely, without cars, noise and pollution. We got to show that we care about our neighbours, checking in on them and wearing masks to keep one another safe. We got to see how transformative vaccines are in protecting us from lethal diseases.

Everybody who lived through the pandemic will remember it their whole lives. People affected by long Covid or poor mental health or who lost someone close to them will live with the pandemic their whole lives. Let us take the lessons of respect for essential workers, of helping our neighbours and of making sacrifices to help others, and use what we have learned to build a better future.

14:44

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): My first memory of the threat that was posed to our country by Covid-19 is of the images that were broadcast on the evening news of primary school children passing around a basketball that was covered in chalk dust so that they could learn about viral transmission. Within a matter of days, we had gone from those cheerful and charming images to the Government commissioning the NHS Louisa Jordan and requisitioning private ice rinks to bolster mortuary capacity.

I do not think that anyone in the chamber or in wider public life will ever forget the enormous impact that the pandemic had on all our lives, an impact that reverberates to this day. In some ways, it will always define part of us, just as it has defined our politics and our society for the past five years. Indeed, it has pulled on every thread that makes up the fabric of our communities, dominating our health system and impacting on education and the economy.

So many of our young people are still suffering under the long shadow of lockdown. That is borne out by the huge number who are still waiting for help with their mental health. Waiting times across our national health service have not improved, and 168,000 Scots are still living with the debilitating effect of what Covid can become. Adults and children alike are fighting against long Covid every day.

Moreover, many of Scotland's high streets are still empty compared with how they were before the pandemic. All of us are, at some level, still recovering from the trauma of not being able to see or hug our loved ones, of not being able to attend their funerals when they passed away—as so many thousands sadly did—and of the disaster in our care homes.

We all hope that we will never have to live through such an experience ever again, but in the Parliament, we need to deal with events as we find them, rather than how we would wish them to be. As such, we must be guided by the lessons of the previous pandemic when it comes to dealing with the next. There is a lot that can be said about our response to Covid—for better and for worse—and about the decisions that were made, the transparency of the decision making and the way in which rules were made and followed, but that discussion is not for now.

Today, we remember the many people who have died and the many who fought to keep them alive, including our key workers and our health and care workers. Today, we remember all those who are still living with the pandemic's cruel impact, and we wish comfort to those who grieve and those who still live and toil under its shadow.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

Portfolio Question Time

Net Zero and Energy, and Transport

14:48

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is portfolio questions on net zero, energy and transport. As always, I call for brief questions, brief supplementaries and brief answers, in order to get in as many members as possible.

Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Net Zero Emissions Target

2. Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what recent assessment it has made of the feasibility of its target to achieve net zero emissions by 2045. (S6O-04403)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): The Government's commitment—[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need your microphone moved.

Alasdair Allan: A schoolboy error, Presiding Officer.

The Government's commitment to reaching net zero by 2045 is absolutely unwavering. We are continuing to develop and take forward climate policies ahead of the Climate Change Committee's advice on new carbon budget levels, which is due this May. Once we have received that advice, we will bring forward the carbon emission targets via secondary legislation, which will set a deliverable course towards net zero, with the aim of publishing a draft climate change plan to achieve those targets in the autumn.

Annie Wells: We are beginning to see what happens when the Scottish Government sets ambitious targets for the climate without any concrete plan for how to achieve those goals.

Last year, the Scottish Government ditched its target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 75 per cent by 2030, and, in January, Audit Scotland said that the Scottish Government is unlikely to meet its 2030 target to reduce car use by 20 per cent, due to a lack of leadership. It has now been reported that environmental consultancy Ricardo-AEA has told the Scottish Government that its 2045 net zero target is at risk of being missed. Can the minister assure the Parliament that the Government's failure to keep the 2045 target on track will not lead to higher net zero costs being imposed on Scottish households?

Alasdair Allan: It should be said, by way of response to those important questions, that some

of the commentary that anticipates the missing of the 2045 targets is applicable only if emission reductions from land use, for example, are not considered and if no further policies are brought forward.

As I said, the Scottish Government is entirely committed to the 2045 target. In 2022, the Scottish Government commissioned an analytical report on the estimated projection of Scottish emissions from 2019 to 2045, which is published on the Scottish Government's website. That was a snapshot in time, and since then we have been developing policies for the next climate change plan. The figures for that are available.

Technology reductions were excluded from emission reduction considerations, and land use will form an important part of our forthcoming climate change plan.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): When the Scottish Government dropped its annual and interim targets, Màiri McAllan announced a package of 19 reheated old policies to show that the Scottish Government is supposedly taking action. However, I have received a response to a freedom of information request in which the Scottish Government admits that only four of the 19 policies have been delivered, and that even some of those are questionable. Can the minister outline the measurable actions that are being taken now? Our constituents cannot afford our missing the 2045 target, given the impact on their lives and businesses.

Alasdair Allan: I can certainly list measurable activities in many areas, such as peatland restoration, where good progress is being made, with more than 75,000 hectares having been restored to date. I can also mention forestry—in relation to which we have the most ambitious woodland creation targets in the United Kingdom—farming reform, and many other areas where progress is being made.

As I said, the Scottish Government is committed to the 2045 target, and the next climate change plan is being developed to ensure that we get there.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Scotland is on a journey to becoming a renewable energy powerhouse, facilitated by our just transition to net zero. However, that will require the co-operation of the United Kingdom Government on initiatives such as the Acorn carbon capture and storage project. Will the minister provide an update on engagement with the UK Government on the Acorn project, which is of huge importance to the north-east?

Alasdair Allan: The member is right. Scottish ministers regularly engage with our counterparts in the UK Government to push for a decision on

Acorn. Carbon capture is vital for achieving our climate targets—the Climate Change Committee described it as being a necessity, not an option, that we achieve net zero emissions. The Scottish cluster is essential not just to Scotland's target of reaching net zero by 2045, but to the UK's 2050 target.

So that progress and investor confidence can be maintained, we are pushing for the UK Government to make a clear and meaningful public announcement by return, and certainly ahead of June, confirming that the UK Government is committed to awarding track 2 status to the Acorn project and the Scottish cluster.

Proposed Heat in Buildings Bill

3. Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on when it plans to introduce its proposed heat in buildings bill. (S6O-04404)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): We are considering the responses to our consultation on proposals for a heat in buildings bill and will respond as soon as is practicable.

We also know that further action by the United Kingdom Government in reserved areas is essential for the heat transition. That includes rebalancing gas and electricity prices, clarity on its intentions for phasing out gas boilers in existing homes and a swift decision on the future role of the gas grid, in line with the Climate Change Committee's recent advice.

Meghan Gallacher: I say to the minister that we have only 14 months left, but the housing sector needs certainty about substantial proposals and changes that the Government has suggested. The fact that the Government is no further forward with introducing the bill in the Parliament leaves unanswered serious questions about energy performance certificate ratings.

I understand that the Government is consulting on EPCs. However, the current deadline for landlords to comply with the requirement to have an EPC rating of C is 2028. Is that target achievable when less than half of private homes are EPC C rating compliant and the Government might shift the goalposts on the scope of EPC ratings? Will the Government consider the current timelines to ensure that what it proposes and what it expects of private home owners are in sync?

Alasdair Allan: It is important to separate two issues in that question. The first is EPC reform, which is progressing and on which the Scottish Government has been taking views and will ensure that change is made.

The second issue to which Meghan Gallacher alluded is, I think, whether legislation should require a certain EPC rating of home owners and those who rent out properties. That is a separate question. It is connected to some of the questions around the proposed heat in buildings bill. The Scottish Government will return to that as soon as is practicable.

Approval of Renewable Energy Developments above 50MW (Community Consultation)

4. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that the process for approving renewable energy developments above 50MW encourages developers to carry out high-quality consultations and gives communities sufficient information and opportunity to engage meaningfully. (S6O-04405)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): Meaningful consultation of local authorities, communities and members of the public is key to the determination process for renewable energy developments above 50MW. Developers are instructed to follow our good practice guidance on pre-application consultation involving communities, as that is the best stage for communities to help to shape a development before an application is submitted.

The Scottish Government is committed to further strengthening the engagement process for communities by making pre-application consultations a statutory requirement, as part of the United Kingdom Government's proposed reforms to electricity infrastructure consenting in Scotland.

Brian Whittle: As the minister might be aware, the proposed Rogerhill solar farm near Blackwood is set to be one of the largest solar sites in the UK if it is approved. However, I have been struck by concerns from the community about the impact that the development could have on the area's children, because it borders an outdoor learning facility.

Concerningly, there appear to be conflicting views as to whether the development should trigger a child rights and wellbeing impact assessment under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024. The energy consents unit argues that the decision on the development is exempt and is not strategic in nature, while the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland has said that it sees no reason why the ECU would not conduct such an assessment.

Will the minister consider instructing the ECU to carry out an assessment? If not, will he confirm what the unit considers to be a decision of a

strategic nature, if the construction of one of the country's largest solar farms does not qualify?

Alasdair Allan: As Brian Whittle identified in his question, the case is a live planning application. I am part of the planning process, so he will understand why I simply cannot comment on a live application. He is, of course, entitled to raise issues that are of concern to him and his community as part of that process, but I cannot prejudice matters by commenting on it. I am afraid that that is all that I can add.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The ability to make pre-application community engagement mandatory is reserved to the UK Government under the consenting regime in the UK Electricity Act 1989, which limits our ability to reform energy policy. Will the minister advise me what engagement the Scottish Government has had with the new UK Government on reforms to ensure that planning processes can be taken forward swiftly while giving local communities a voice?

Alasdair Allan: Scottish Government officials have been working—I should say that they have been working positively—with their UK Government counterparts on proposed reforms to the Electricity Act 1989 since February 2024, which is before the current Administration took office.

We helped to inform the content of the UK Government's consultation, which was published in October last year. One of the most important proposals is that we give local communities a stronger voice in the consenting process. For the first time, a pre-application consultation would be statutory, thereby guaranteeing that communities can express their views early in the process to help to shape developments.

Ultimately, the legislation is reserved, so we must wait to see how the proposals are managed through the Westminster parliamentary process.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): New renewable energy developments across north-east Scotland are crucial for Scotland and for the UK if we want to decarbonise our energy supply and ensure that we meet Labour's goal of making the UK a clean energy superpower by 2030.

However, the developments must have the informed consent and support of the communities in which they are built. A best-case example is Aberdeen Community Energy's Donside hydro, which was established and is owned and run by the local community to generate clean electricity for nearby homes. How is the Scottish Government working to promote community ownership and control of new renewable energy?

Alasdair Allan: Mercedes Villalba has raised interesting and important points on those issues. One of the things that the Scottish Government is seeking to do is to open a conversation with the UK Government about mandating community benefits. That is a reserved issue, but I hope that we can have a fruitful conversation on it. The Scottish Government is supportive of all communities that seek, in various ways, to ensure that they get community benefit from projects in their areas.

Road Safety

5. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to improve road safety. (S6O-04406)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is committed to making Scotland's roads safe for all. Backing this commitment is a record £36 million investment, which is set to increase to £48 million in 2025-26, to fund targeted initiatives that are aimed at reducing road casualties and enhancing safety. This includes national behaviour change campaigns, targeted road safety schemes on trunk and local roads, and effective speed management through the national strategy for 20mph and the national speed management review. We are also strengthening expertise by training more than 500 road safety practitioners in the internationally recognised safe system approach by June 2025.

Claire Baker: Addressing driver behaviour must be part of the approach to reducing fatality rates. National speed awareness courses have been in place in England and Wales for a number of years, and studies have shown that they can be more effective at reducing reoffending than a fine and penalty points. The Scottish Government has been asked about this on a number of occasions—most recently today at First Minister's question time—but we still do not have an answer as to why those courses are not available in Scotland. Is the Scottish Government committed to introducing the courses, and what are the next steps?

Fiona Hyslop: As the transport secretary, I am very supportive of speed awareness courses as part of the process of addressing the issue. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs is taking the matter forward with justice and police colleagues, and I will report to Parliament when there is progress.

On the importance of speed awareness courses, I think that they are required as a diversion. After this question session, I will chair the road safety strategic partnership board. Police Scotland is a member of that, and I will press it in order to understand what progress is being made.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): It is clear that councils are doing important work this year, using the Scottish Government budget, on road safety, enforcement of pavement parking restrictions and the roll-out of 20mph limits. However, does the cabinet secretary agree that the success of those measures comes down to improved driver awareness, particularly in built-up areas and particularly about the dangers of speeding and dangerous parking? What national road safety campaigns can be deployed to get the message across that speeding kills, that we should slow down in town and that drivers should park responsibly?

Fiona Hyslop: I have just indicated that there are a number of national behaviour change campaigns, the most recent of which is on distracted driver behaviour. It is alarming that some people think that it is acceptable to look at their phones while they are driving; that is a concern on any of our roads.

There are also campaigns on speed, which highlight among other things the fact that the impact of travelling at speed—in some cases, people also do not even wear their seat belts—not just on the driver but on other people can be extremely severe and result in death and harm. Those aspects are part of the campaigns that I am talking about, and that is why we are putting a record amount of funding into road safety.

ScotRail Services (Cancellations)

6. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how the proportion of ScotRail trains that were cancelled in 2023-24 compares with other rail operators across the United Kingdom. (S6O-04407)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): ScotRail performs better than most operators in Great Britain. ScotRail cancellations in the previous financial year averaged at just over 2 per cent of all services. That means that there were fewer cancellations than there were immediately before public ownership and that the rate was lower than the 2023-24 GB average of 3.8 per cent.

Most recently, ScotRail cancellations were recorded to be at 1.9 per cent, whereas they are at 4.2 per cent for the GB network as a whole. That demonstrates ScotRail's continued progress and its commitment to providing a reliable service for the people of Scotland.

ScotRail also compares favourably with other operators in Scotland. For example, for privately operated Avanti West Coast and CrossCountry, recorded cancellation rates in 2023-24 were around 7 per cent and 8 per cent respectively. For London North Eastern Railway and TransPennine

Express, cancellations were recorded at 4.8 per cent in that year.

Kenneth Gibson: Figures from the Office of Rail and Road show that ScotRail has one of the lowest cancellation rates for train operators in the UK, as we have just heard, and that Network Rail was responsible for more than half of the delayed minutes on ScotRail, with 551,873 minutes being lost last year. Given that responsibility for Network Rail lies exclusively with the UK Labour Government, will Scottish ministers continue to raise with that Government the need for improvements?

Fiona Hyslop: All delays are disappointing. My officials at Transport Scotland are working closely with Network Rail to ensure that it delivers value for the £4.2 billion that the Scottish Government is providing to it between 2024 and 2029.

Responsibility for Network Rail is reserved to the UK Government—that has not stopped the Conservative MSP Douglas Lumsden asking excessive numbers of written questions about it, and I am not sure whether we will get a rebate on them—but I expect ScotRail and Network Rail to work together under the alliance agreement to deliver the best service possible for the people of Scotland. However, I know that the only way to truly ensure the best outcomes for Scotland's railway is through the full devolution of rail to Scotland. That is why Scottish ministers continue to call for that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Rail services that stop at Newburgh in Fife have been cancelled for decades. Will the cabinet secretary update the chamber on when she plans to reopen that railway station?

Fiona Hyslop: I compliment Willie Rennie's attempt to make a question about cancellations over a period, which amount to a closure, into a pitch for a station. He raises an important point. If we look ahead at investment in rail, there are issues not only around the track and the procurement of fleet services but around availability and accessibility. In a cost benefit analysis and in the consideration of a multimodal approach and other alternatives, assessments of investment in stations such as Newburgh should be looked at in the round.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Last week, 70 passengers were evacuated from a ScotRail intercity train, and trains between Edinburgh and Aberdeen were suspended, after a power car caught fire near the Tay rail bridge, which caused disruption for hours. In the light of that, what actions are being undertaken to foster resilience in the ScotRail fleet, particularly at a time when key routes often rely on older trains? Will the cabinet

secretary provide a timeline for when the new intercity fleet will be procured?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I assume that the focus of that question is on cancellations.

Fiona Hyslop: As a result of that incident, there was clearly an impact in terms of cancellations across the network. I take the opportunity to compliment the professionalism of everybody who was involved in dealing with that incident and the safe evacuation.

Lessons have to be learned. There will be reporting on the cause of the particular fire, but I was extremely impressed by everyone who was involved in ensuring safety, and I put on record my thanks to them.

On the replacement of fleets, I will be able to update Parliament appropriately. It is important that we progress that to ensure that we have the train services that we require for the modern age.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): How many ScotRail trains were axed in 2022 and 2024 when the temporary timetable was introduced? How does that figure compare with service reduction in the rest of the UK?

Fiona Hyslop: Issues around industrial action were not reserved to the Scottish situation. There were long and on-going extensive cancellations and industrial action in the rest of the UK.

As for the number of services that were cancelled, that was adjusted to by an appropriately amended timetable. The member will be aware that, when changes in timetables are planned, as was the case over the summer, those changes are not counted as cancellations, so I am quite happy to be transparent about the comparison.

The figures that I just relayed still stand. They show service performance by ScotRail that is better than in the rest of the UK.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The cabinet secretary knows that the performance measure does not take account of short-form trains. It is in effect a cancellation for passengers if they are unable to board a train. In my region, across December and January, one train was short formed 65 per cent of the time. Why are those routes targeted for short forming, and when can we see improvements?

Fiona Hyslop: There will shortly be an important improvement in the Fife service, with two trains running an hour, which will relieve pressure on the availability of spaces in trains. That will be an improvement.

For the period that ended on Saturday 1 February, the Fife circle service was performing at 90.2 per cent. That is a stronger performance than in other parts of the network, such as Mr Gibson's

area. The short forming will also be relieved by diesel availability from other parts of the network once electrification takes place, which is more imminent in relation, for example, to the East Kilbride line.

Hydrogen Production and Usage

7. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to promote hydrogen production and usage in Scotland. (S6O-04408)

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): Hydrogen is key to our net zero journey. We remain committed to developing a world-leading green hydrogen sector in Scotland. Alongside our enterprise agencies, we are engaging closely with the sector to support hydrogen production and use. Over recent months, I have chaired the Scottish hydrogen industry forum. That group ensures that Government and industry, working together, can support growth and identify barriers to deployment.

Many levers that are required to develop the hydrogen economy are reserved to the United Kingdom Government. We will work closely with that Government to ensure that the interests of the Scottish hydrogen sector are recognised.

Kevin Stewart: It is a great pity that some of the reserved issues are holding back investment in production and usage in Scotland. We are still waiting for the UK Government to update hydrogen storage and transportation regulations, and that continues to cause investment uncertainty. What discussions or communications have Scottish ministers had with the UK Government to urge it to get its finger oot on this issue?

Alasdair Allan: It is true to say that the establishment of a robust regulatory framework is key to the deployment of hydrogen as an important part of our future energy mix. With that in mind, we continue to urge the UK Government to accelerate its consideration of the regulations that are required to enable the development of hydrogen infrastructure and the establishment of business models that would support hydrogen transport and storage, in order to provide clarity and confidence to developers who are investing in driving forward hydrogen production projects in Scotland.

I would also urge the UK Government to set out the timeframe for an accelerated decision on hydrogen blending in the gas grid.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Hydrogen production is reported to be a key part of project willow, yet the Scottish Government has failed to publish the report on it that was promised

last week. Although Colin Mackay of STV has seen the report, none of us in Parliament has. When will that important hydrogen report finally be published?

Alasdair Allan: The report will be published in due course. However, the member will be aware that the two Governments have been working closely together to strain every sinew to ensure that, in both the long term and the immediate term, intervention is there to support the workforce and businesses at Grangemouth. Hydrogen is part of that. Decisions about carbon capture that are taken at the UK level and the work that we are doing in the Grangemouth community are also clearly part of that.

Reducing Car Use

8. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I remind members of my voluntary registration of trade union interests.

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps it is taking to reduce car use by 20 per cent by 2030. (S6O-04409)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is supporting the reduction of car use by providing free bus travel for 2.3 million people in Scotland, giving £1.6 billion to rail in this financial year, and supporting regional transport partnerships and councils to develop affordable, available and accessible alternatives to car use. We continue to press the United Kingdom Government for a four-nations approach to the reform of fuel duty.

I recognise that car use will remain an important part of rural life. There will be different routes to reducing car use in different parts of Scotland, and I do not expect car use in rural areas to reduce at the same rate as in urban areas.

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has agreed to publish in Spring 2025 a renewed policy statement on car use reduction. Behaviour change takes time. Following the Audit Scotland recommendation to clarify our commitment, we will review the existing target, informed by the advice that we are due to receive from the Climate Change Committee, and develop a new, longer-term target.

Richard Leonard: I thank the cabinet secretary for that reply. However, I ask her: will next month's rise in all rail fares, last year's reinstatement of peak rail fares and this year's cut in railway ticket office opening hours move us closer to, or further away from, the Government's target of a 20 per cent reduction in car use by 2030, or has the Government secretly abandoned the target altogether?

Fiona Hyslop: We have not secretly abandoned anything. It was indicated in May 2024 that it would be challenging to hit that target. I urge the member to note that I will attend the Public Audit Committee on the issue shortly, to explain the progress and what we will do in response to the Climate Change Committee's imminent report.

We are now expecting there to have been 88.5 million passenger journeys in the year to the end of March 2025, which is an increase from the 82 million passenger journeys in 2023-24. Although the peak fares pilot scheme has ended, demand has grown by an average of 4.5 per cent in each four-week periods this year, compared with the same period last year in which the peak fare removal pilot scheme was running.

Despite the end of the scheme, we are seeing passenger growth, which should be welcomed.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the Scottish Government has absolutely no chance of achieving that target?

Fiona Hyslop: As the member heard me say in my answer to Richard Leonard, we indicated to the Parliament in May 2024 that there was a serious risk that that target would not be met. I have addressed that in Parliament: I think that we will have to revise our target. To do that, we need advice from the Climate Change Committee. There will be changes that will impact on where we get to in terms of emissions. We need to ask whether that extremely high and challenging target is still required in order to deliver the emissions and changes that we need.

We need a reduction in car use to help to ease congestion. That is a reason why investment in public transport is so important. I point the member to the Climate Change Committee's forthcoming advice, which will help us to shape the way forward.

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

Reducing Drug Harm and Deaths in Scotland: People's Panel Report

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a cross-committee debate on the people's panel report on reducing drug harm and deaths in Scotland. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

15:19

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): As convener of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, I am pleased to have the opportunity to open today's important debate on the people's panel report on reducing drug harm and deaths in Scotland.

First, I offer my sincere thanks to the people's panel for producing such a comprehensive report on the topic. I also thank all the parliamentary staff and members of the stewarding board who helped ensure that the process ran smoothly. In addition, I place on record my thanks to the various stakeholders who took the time to give evidence.

The collaborative efforts of all those who have been involved in producing the report have been invaluable. For three years, members of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee have worked jointly with members of the Criminal Justice Committee and members of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee to examine how drug deaths and drug harm could be tackled in Scotland. Throughout that time, we have taken an holistic approach in looking at issues related to drug harm, and I am pleased that the panel's report has captured how complex and nuanced a subject drug harm is.

The report covers a wide range of issues and highlights multiple areas for the Government to consider, in the immediate term and for the future. I thank the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care for his letter of 10 February to the conveners of the joint committee, in which he outlined the Government's support for the report's recommendations.

Although I will be unable to cover all the points that are made in the report in the time allotted, I will highlight areas that are most pertinent to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's remit.

However, before I do so, I believe that it would be remiss of me not to briefly highlight the extensive work of the people's panel. As is explained in the executive summary of the report, people's panels help to empower citizens to actively contribute and deliberate on key issues. The provision by individuals of innovative and

informed input enhances Parliament's scrutiny and strengthens inclusive democratic participation.

The people's panel that we are discussing today consisted of 23 randomly selected individuals aged 16 to 75 from across Scotland. Those who were selected participated in two residential weekends at the Scottish Parliament and two online sessions, in October and November 2024. That work culminated in a collective statement and 19 recommendations. Only recommendations that secured the support of 87 per cent or more participants were included in the final report.

I believe that that approach highlights the benefit of people's panels, particularly when scrutinising a topic that covers a number of remits. The recommendations reflect a broad consensus, and I again thank the panel for providing a strong foundation for future policy discussion and scrutiny.

I will now focus on specific points made in the report that are most pertinent to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's remit. The panel heard that many people are unwilling to access support, either because of fears of discrimination or criminalisation or because of a general unwillingness to burden services that may not be equipped to respond.

In order to address that, the report recommends the introduction of a well-publicised single point of access for specialised advice and support, or an alternative that would be provided by a third sector organisation. That would allow for service users, as well as families and friends, to have access to immediate support and advice, while simultaneously alleviating the strain on other services.

Similarly, in order to streamline support for people in need, the Scottish Government must act to ensure that all public and third sector services are enabled to share information, with all bodies having a general data protection regulation-compliant information sharing agreement in place that involved service user consent. That would allow for easy sharing of relevant information, which would avoid duplication and remove the need for service users to repeat their stories, which can often be traumatic and affect the consistency of recovery pathways.

It is also important to note that, to further improve consistency across services, the report recommends that medication assisted treatment standards should be extended to cover all drugs that cause harm, to ensure that people have access to the same standards and levels of care.

I also want to take the opportunity to highlight issues around funding and, in particular, the impact that short-term funding is having on access to care and support and its detrimental impact on

the workforce. Indeed, the impact of short-term funding was highlighted throughout the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's budget scrutiny, in which we called for multiyear packages to be implemented to allow organisations to better plan the provision of services.

Those calls have been echoed in the panel's report, which states that there needs to be a guaranteed and protected five-year minimum period of funding for community and third sector services. I welcome the launch of the drugs mission fund and the fairer funding pilot, which I hope will provide much-needed assurances to front-line services.

In conclusion, although the recommendations that I have briefly touched on fall mainly within the health remit, it is clear from the panel's comprehensive report that a multipronged approach to policy making is required if we are to be effective in reducing drug harms in Scotland. Just as the people's panel embraced the need for collaborative working, so must we in this chamber. Cross-party and cross-remit working will be essential if we are effectively to tackle drug harms in Scotland and ensure that services meet a standard that addresses the needs of those who require them.

On behalf of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, I look forward to continuing the work with my joint committee colleagues and with members from across the chamber to effectively scrutinise and help to tailor forthcoming policies to reduce, and ultimately to end, drug harms to people in Scotland.

I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, which says that I hold a bank nursing contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I take the opportunity to advise members that we have some time in hand at this point.

I call Collette Stevenson to open on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee.

15:25

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): I am delighted to speak on behalf of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee on the people's panel report on reducing drug harm and drug deaths in Scotland.

I begin by placing on record the committee's thanks to the people's panel members for undertaking that challenging and complex task and for their considered report. I also thank the members of the stewarding board for the invaluable support that they provided to the panel. Members of the Social Justice and Social Security

Committee have worked jointly for more than three years with members of the Criminal Justice Committee and the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee to look at how to tackle drug deaths and drug harm. I also place on record our huge thanks to the clerking teams for all their on-going support.

That work has enabled us to take an holistic approach to looking at all the issues related to drug use and drug harm. We tasked the people's panel with answering the following question: what does Scotland need to do differently to reduce drug-related harms? The panel's report covers a wide range of issues and I will focus on its recommendations about lived experience and tackling stigma.

It is clear from the panel's report that trusting and consistent relationships are essential to helping people who use drugs access the advice, support and treatment that they need. The panel heard that having services delivered by employees with lived and living experience led to consistently better outcomes. The panel found that involving people with lived and living experience within the statutory workforce would reduce stigma because service users would feel more comfortable seeking support from people who have had the same experiences and can be seen as role models. Panel members recommended that more people with lived experience should provide on-going support and aftercare in the statutory workforce and that pay and fair working conditions for people with lived experience should be equal to those of equivalent public sector workers in the drug and alcohol field.

I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to publishing guiding principles for employers that will aim to address stigmatising practice and to allow people recovering from substance misuse to flourish in the workplace. The Scottish Government is also to publish employability support toolkits that will aim to support people with lived and living experience to enter and pursue careers in the substance use sector, including in statutory services. It is essential that the implementation and impact of those measures are evaluated.

The panel's report highlights the high success rate of community hubs and I have seen how impactful such hubs can be. The Beacons community recovery hubs in my constituency of East Kilbride employ peers with lived experience and embed treatment and recovery in the local community. The hubs also run projects for family members who may be impacted by substance or alcohol use.

Those vital support services improve the health, wellbeing and quality of life of individuals and their families.

An issue that runs throughout the panel's report is the stigma and discrimination that are experienced by people who use drugs, as well as by their family members. The report identifies some of the ways in which stigma negatively impacts on the recovery of people who use drugs. They include not being able to access support and advice, not being able to access treatment, not being provided with a consistent standard of service and not being able to gain secure employment. It is clear that stigma and discrimination remain barriers to people accessing the help that they need, and tackling that unacceptable stigma and discrimination is central to bringing about the culture change that the panel recommends.

People who use drugs and their families should feel able to seek out and access advice, support and treatment without fear of judgment or criminalisation.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am really interested in tackling stigma as well. As a former healthcare professional, I think that it would be valuable to also provide stigma education to healthcare professionals who do not work in drug and alcohol services. Does the member agree?

Collette Stevenson: I whole-heartedly agree with that. I will say more about stigma and trauma training in my speech.

The panel recommends that there should be appropriate anti-stigma training for staff across all public bodies and not just those who work in alcohol and drug partnerships, and that that training should be led and delivered by those with lived and living experience. As I touched on, I and members of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee received training last week on how to take a trauma-informed and responsive approach when speaking with vulnerable people. I think that all those who work in the public sector would benefit from being trained in trauma-informed practice.

The Scottish Government has confirmed that it will publish a drugs and alcohol workforce knowledge and skills framework, and I am pleased that it will be accompanied by training and learning resources that are aimed at reducing stigma. Again, it is essential that the implementation and impact are evaluated.

I thank the people's panel members for their report. I hope that their recommendations will result in more people with lived and living experience being included in helping people with their recovery and will bring an end to the unacceptable stigma and discrimination that are experienced by people who use drugs and their family members.

15:33

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee in this debate on the people's panel report on reducing drug harm and deaths in Scotland. I extend our sincere gratitude to the people's panel members for their commitment to this complex issue and for producing a thoughtful and comprehensive report. Their insights are invaluable as we strive to address the multifaceted challenges of drug-related harm in our communities.

I commend the participation and communities team and members of the stewarding board for their excellent work in making the people's panel happen. I also thank all the committee clerks, the Scottish Parliament information centre and other colleagues for their support in assisting the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee and the Criminal Justice Committee to work together in support of efforts to tackle drug use and its associated harms.

As we have heard, the people's panel made a range of recommendations, and I will discuss in further detail those that are pertinent to the Criminal Justice Committee. The panel emphasises the necessity of sustained support for individuals who are transitioning from environments such as prisons in order to prevent the cliff edge effect whereby support diminishes and external pressures resurface, increasing the risk of relapse.

We know how important prison release plans can be, as we hear a lot of anecdotal evidence from prison mentoring groups about what can go wrong and how easy it is for someone to relapse unless proper plans are in place. I am pleased that the Scottish Government has accepted that recommendation. I know that the cabinet secretary is aware of the importance of pre-release planning.

The committee welcomes the implementation of medication assisted treatment standard 5, which ensures that people receive support to remain in treatment for as long as they desire during critical transition periods. In addition, more than £3 million is allocated to third sector partnerships, which provide voluntary throughcare services. A new national third sector throughcare service is set to launch in April this year, which will extend support to those who are leaving remand for the first time. Unplanned release from remand is a significant issue. I am delighted that that provision is being introduced, and I seek reassurance on the longer-term sustainability of the funding.

The proliferation of illicit substances—especially potent synthetic drugs—in our prison system poses significant challenges. The panel recommends that our cross-committee collaboration intensifies efforts to curb drug supply in prisons, aiming to create a safer environment for prisoners and staff. In response, the Scottish Prison Service has established an incident management team in collaboration with Public Health Scotland, the Scottish Ambulance Service, Police Scotland and national health service partners. The team has problem assessment groups to provide rapid responses to emerging issues in correctional facilities. The Scottish Prison Service is also partnering with the University of Dundee to gain deeper insight into the nature and extent of drug use in prisons. Innovative technological solutions are also being explored to detect and prevent contraband entry.

However, we must ensure that we are striking the right balance between enforcement and ensuring that prisoners who are living with drug harm receive the support that they need. The Criminal Justice Committee has scheduled a formal meeting on 23 April to deliberate on the matter, and I hope that that may initiate a further inquiry based on the panel's recommendations. The panel advocates for an expanded public awareness campaign regarding naloxone, a life-saving medication that can reverse opioid overdoses. The goal is to empower individuals to administer naloxone confidently, knowing that there will be no legal repercussions. My constituency team and I have undergone training to administer naloxone, and I—like my colleague Collette Stevenson—would encourage anyone to consider doing likewise as it could save a life.

The Scottish Government supports that recommendation in principle, too, and it is engaging with partners to broaden the reach of naloxone distribution. Efforts have led to a substantial increase in naloxone availability, with 70 per cent of at-risk individuals now equipped with kits. Although the increased availability of naloxone is positive, I am aware that there is still room for greater awareness and for use to broaden out even further. I know that the Government is fully behind widening access to and use of naloxone, and I would welcome reassurance that that will remain a key area of delivery.

At the joint committee meeting on 20 February, the cabinet secretary committed to providing an update on several fronts. First, there is progress on the single shared assessment. Efforts are under way to streamline assessments between the NHS and third sector organisations, ensuring cohesive support for individuals. I am interested in what timelines the Government might be looking at for full implementation of that.

On naloxone campaign developments, plans are being formulated for a comprehensive naloxone awareness campaign, as we have already referenced, which aims to educate the public and reduce overdose fatalities. I would like to know whether that will be a sustained campaign.

Finally, on general practitioner engagement with MAT standards, initiatives are in place to ensure that GPs have access to and are utilising MAT standards information and training that are available online, but how many GPs are actually engaging? Will there be an evaluation to ensure that that translates into better patient outcomes? Although I understand that the issue sits more in the health space, access to primary care services for people who are living with drug harm can often be an important protective factor that prevents them from entering the justice system.

I thank the people's panel again for this really important piece of work. The Criminal Justice Committee remains steadfast in its commitment to addressing drug-related harm through our scrutiny work, in collaboration with our colleagues on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee and the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. The insight from the people's panel provide a clear road map, and we are committed to translating those recommendations into tangible actions that will save lives and foster healthier communities across Scotland.

15:40

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): As I continue to take on Christina McKelvie's ministerial responsibilities, I hope that I do so with members' love and best wishes for her during her on-going treatment. *[Applause.]*

Following the recent publication of the people's panel report, I welcome this opportunity to update Parliament on actions that we are taking as part of the national mission to reduce harm and to improve the lives of those affected by drug and alcohol use.

Like the committee conveners, I extend my sincere thanks to the people's panel, the stewarding board and all those involved in giving evidence for their dedication and diligent work in producing the report. As Clare Haughey said, the people's panel is a true example of deliberative democracy, which is evident in action, and I am sure that members have found the report helpful and insightful, as I have. I also take the opportunity to thank all those across the joint committee, including the staff and clerks, for their work.

I begin with a reminder of the stark reality that we face. In 2023, we lost 1,172 lives to drugs and

1,277 lives to alcohol. Those are not just numbers—they represent individuals, families and communities affected by grief. Every life lost is a tragedy, and we must never become numb to the impacts of those statistics—having met too many bereaved families, I certainly have not.

The people's panel report outlines some of the persistent challenges that we face in tackling the crisis. I am pleased to confirm to Parliament that the Scottish Government supports all the recommendations, many of which align to work that is already under way. We should reflect on the successes that are highlighted in the panel's report. I remind members that Scotland was the first country in the world to introduce a naloxone programme nationally. The latest figures show that an estimated 79 per cent of those at risk of opioid overdose now have access to a life-saving kit. I pay tribute to Audrey Nicoll and others who have taken up the opportunity for training.

The establishment of Scotland's first safer drug consumption facility in Glasgow marks another milestone. Although it is still in its early days, research and evaluation from similar facilities around the world have found consistent evidence that they can help to save and improve lives and reduce harm. Early anecdotal feedback from the Thistle has been positive, which reinforces the need for a harm reduction and public health-based approach.

As members will be aware, we have continued to put those with lived and living experience at the heart of our approach. That is reflected in the charter of rights, which was published in December. The charter supports people who are affected by substance use to know and understand their rights in accessing support services, which I think addresses a point that was well made by Clare Haughey, around people self-denying support due to stigma, a lack of information or, more worryingly, a lack of self-worth.

I know that more needs to be done. The people's panel report calls for further and faster action on cultural change, stigma and prevention.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): There is a recognition pretty much across the chamber that we must work collaboratively on the issue. I have asked this question before in previous years but I have yet to get an answer. If we are really to tackle the issue, we must understand why Scotland is such an outlier. Is any work being done to find out why that is the case?

Neil Gray: Brian Whittle and I have engaged on that point. Strong evidence points to a direct correlation between levels of poverty, deprivation and deindustrialisation and levels of drug and alcohol harm and deaths. Beyond that, it is difficult

to ascertain exactly why Scotland has had such a problem. However, I am focused on the areas that can provide us with salvation and a solution. In the evidence from the people's panel report, we see an acknowledgement—as I was about to come on to—that creating a national mission with a broad scope, rather than picking a silver bullet or one area that will resolve all those issues, is the right approach to take. That is what the Government is committed to, as am I. I will come on to explain why that is the case.

I want to assure the chamber that the priorities that we have set out and that are at the heart of the people panel's report remain at the core of our national mission and cross-Government support. A key part of our response—and something that was a focus of the joint committee's work and evidence session in which I participated—is ensuring that we have a trauma-informed and resilient workforce to support people with drug and alcohol dependencies.

In the coming months, the Scottish Government will launch several resources to support the sector's workforce, which have been developed with our expert advisory group and will set out the knowledge and skills that are expected of those working to support people who use substances. Emma Harper raised an important point about that in her intervention. The suite of resources will support learning and training and, crucially, support people with lived and living experience to pursue and sustain careers in drug and alcohol services and beyond, which is something that Collette Stevenson rightly focused on in her speech.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Scotland is blessed with some of the hardest-working and most passionate drugs workers in the world, and I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to supporting them through knowledge and training. Does he recognise that they have a massive battle ahead of them, as we see an ever-increasing uptake of nitazenes and other synthetic opioids on our streets?

Neil Gray: Alex Cole-Hamilton rightly points to the challenge that we face because of the diversification, toxicity and layering of drug availability across Scotland. I join him in paying tribute to those who work in our alcohol and drug partnerships, who are, as he said, remarkable. Those workers whom I was able to meet in the Thistle—who were picked having gone through an interview with a panel of people with lived and living experience—are absolutely committed to responding to the challenges that we face.

In my recent statement on the progress of the medication assisted treatment standards, I stated that change is happening and I stand by that. Over

the past few months, I have met individuals and organisations driving that progress, and their dedication is clear. Access to treatment and support is improving and we will continue to work to ensure that services are responsive to the needs of those people who rely on them.

As we approach the conclusion of the national mission in 2026, we are already looking ahead. Our work has not concluded. We have started consulting with stakeholders to shape the next phase—one that builds on our progress, remains rooted in evidence and is flexible enough to address emerging challenges. That plan will be shaped by those with lived and living experience to ensure that it reflects the realities on the ground. I will also seek to have cross-party discussions on that work so that we continue to lead the boldest possible response for the remainder of the mission and beyond.

We are working in a challenging landscape. Alex Cole-Hamilton referenced one of the reasons for that. Indeed, the latest rapid action drug alerts and response surveillance report, in January, warns that the drug supply in Scotland remains

“highly toxic and unpredictable, requiring ongoing vigilance and a heightened response”.

Audrey Nicoll raised that concern, too. That situation demands continuous vigilance and an enhanced response, and we are working closely with our counterparts across the UK to address evolving drug trends. We cannot afford complacency.

I recognise that delivering change requires sustained investment, which is why the proposed funding for alcohol and drugs has been increased by £2.5 million, bringing our total proposed funding, including health board baseline funding, to more than £160 million. The increase in funding will support work on alcohol and drugs, and will allow us to go further and build on the national mission. The budget will provide more than £112 million for alcohol and drug partnerships, £13 million for grass-roots organisations funded through the Corra Foundation, and continued investment in residential rehabilitation. We are also allocating £2.3 million to support the Thistle centre safer consumption facility. That adds to the significant investment over the past four years, giving me confidence that we will meet the national mission commitment of £250 million of additional funding over five years.

However, transforming services and embedding new practices and approaches to tackling drug deaths requires not just increased investment or even structural changes, but a fundamental shift in culture across the whole of society, including through the justice system, as Audrey Nicoll mentioned in her speech. It is an area where the

participative approach of the people's panel has added a unique, valuable contribution, and we are committed to addressing its recommendations over this period.

Although we recognise the scale of the challenge that is before us, we remain determined. The commitment from members across the chamber in addressing the challenge is clear, and we will continue to act decisively, compassionately and with a clear focus on delivering real change.

15:51

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Across nearly a decade in the Parliament representing Scotland's largest city, I have spoken to many people with a harmful relationship with drugs, and to their families, and almost every time, the message is the same—they just want to stop. They want to end their harmful relationship with drugs, rebuild their lives, contribute positively to society and have a meaningful life once again.

Those people want that more than anything, but much of Scottish Government policy seems to go against that ambition. Everything is geared to making it easier to take drugs, lessen the consequences for those who do and strip away resources from the people who are there to help them, which means fewer opportunities for rehabilitation. That is eating away at the justice system, not least Police Scotland, which is tasked with keeping drugs off our streets and out of our communities.

It is therefore little wonder that the people's panel on reducing drug harm and deaths was so critical of the Scottish Government and its record on the topic. The panel, which was representative of Scottish society and featured participants of varying ages and backgrounds, was shocked at the Scottish National Party's lack of urgency in dealing with the drug deaths crisis. It said that the SNP Government, which, let us not forget, has been in charge for the best part of 18 years, has not acted despite being well aware of the evidence.

The most powerful evidence of all is the figure of 1,172 drug deaths—all of those people a loved one—in Scotland in 2023, which reaffirmed our shameful position at the top of the international league table of drug deaths. Scotland has sat at the top of that table since 2018. Since the SNP came to power in 2007, the annual drug deaths total has increased by 158 per cent, and it seems that nothing is getting better. The panel stated:

"the same conversations keep happening, with the same actions being agreed but not enough has been implemented."

It also stated:

"There is no stability for service providers and users and no consistency of approach."

The panel was severely critical of the Scottish Government for failing to keep up with the speed with which drug trends are evolving and changing. One theme running through the panel's report is that people who have a harmful relationship with drugs should be listened to, that they should help to guide future policy and that they should be involved in new projects and support schemes. I gather that the Scottish Government agrees that that is a worthy objective.

The panel made it clear that those people should be involved in designing new projects and support systems, yet I am approached by former drug users all the time who all tell me that more needs to be invested in drug rehabilitation. There is too much pressure on people to remain on methadone instead of being supported towards true recovery, and far too little effort is being put into tackling root causes in the environments where drugs take hold, including areas such as Springburn, where I come from, and the streets in poverty-stricken communities across Scotland. People do not just need treatment; they need opportunities, hope and a real way out.

The families that I speak to who have lost loved ones to drugs or who are supporting loved ones through drug dependency want support to allow them to help the people who mean so much to them. Families and communities across Scotland feel let down by the Government and feel that they are not being listened to. Will the Scottish Government start listening to those people, their families and the communities that they come from?

The scourge of drug use throughout our society runs deep. Understandably, we focus much of our attention on drug deaths and those who are in the most desperate of circumstances socially, financially and emotionally. However, in a report in *The Scottish Sun* this week, we learned that drugs are infiltrating other areas, too. Last year, the police found that more than 3,000 drivers had drugs in their system. The most astonishing part of that was that the police tested only 6,000 people. More than half of those who were suspected of drug driving were committing that selfish and dangerous crime. They need help and support, too.

For context, the positive rate of those who were breathalysed for drink driving was closer to one in 20, and drug driving eclipses drink driving by three to one in Scotland. Given how high profile and correctly reviled drink driving is, that shows the extent to which Scotland's drug problems run right through society. I was pleased that, during First Minister's question time today, the First Minister committed to look at how we can ensure that we

focus more on drug driving, as we did with drink driving many years ago.

One action that the Scottish Government could take right now is to back the Scottish Conservatives' Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill. The bill would achieve a number of things but, crucially, it would enshrine in law an individual's right to access the treatment and care that they need. It would immediately put a vulnerable individual whose life has been wrecked by drugs on to a positive path. It would allow them to hope—possibly for the first time—that they can have a future without drugs. In contrast, the Scottish Government's policies are designed to take away hope and to regard those individuals as people who are, and always will be, caught in the scourge of addiction.

The panel was clear in its verdict: the Scottish Government simply has not done enough. It seems that SNP ministers will not listen to Opposition politicians; they will not listen to the very best campaigners in the field; and they will not listen to vulnerable users. That being the case, I urge the Government at least to listen to the damning verdicts of the people's panel report.

15:57

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to open the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. The people's panel on reducing drug harm and deaths has produced some excellent work that analyses the current action to tackle drugs and what more can be done to reduce drug deaths and tackle problem drug use, which we all agree are prominent public health issues.

The people's panel was set up to make recommendations and to answer the question,

"What does Scotland need to do differently to reduce drug related harms?"

That is an important question, because Scotland remains in the grip of a drug deaths health emergency, with lives being lost needlessly.

The tragic rise in drug-related deaths is a clear sign that the Government's plan to tackle the crisis is not working. Voices of those beyond just those in the Parliament must scrutinise and push the Government on the issues, and the people's panel is a robust way to do that. I know that every member in the Parliament believes that every individual who has lost their life through drug dependency has been lost before their time. It must always be remembered that behind every statistic is a friend or family member who has lost a loved one. I pay tribute to all the friends and families who campaign across Scotland on the issue.

Despite that work, and despite the national mission, Scotland remains in the grip of a drug deaths health emergency, with figures remaining stubbornly high. I recognise that that is not due to the Government's lack of will to tackle the issue. I believe that it wants the situation to change but, unfortunately, it has lacked the ability to deliver. It is fair to say that the report from the people's panel confirms that.

Society's approach to drug addiction must be evidence based and should be one that shows compassion and kindness, and any solution must include the voices of those with lived experience. Therefore, my party and I support the engagement with the people's panel and the recommendations to fully include those with lived and living experience in further work that is done.

To move Government to a position of action, I think that we in Opposition have a responsibility to be clear and honest. I will repeat the figures that the cabinet secretary raised—an act that showed his commitment to that approach, too.

If we are to understand the situation that we are in, we must acknowledge that Scotland continues to have the worst rate of drug-related deaths in Europe, with 1,172 people dying of drug misuse in 2023. That is a stark reminder of the public health challenge that we are facing, and a stark reminder to the Government that it is currently failing Scotland on the issue. As the report puts simply, Scotland faces a significant drug and alcohol problem, and it is important that addiction services, for both drugs and alcohol, are adequately funded and supported.

The report also highlights important points on funding and accountability, which were raised by the previous speaker. At the moment, there is no stability for service providers and no consistency of approach. The Scottish Government must acknowledge that and give assurances that the recommendations in that regard will be met urgently.

We cannot discuss this topic without acknowledging the fundamental truths behind the figures. We see vast inequalities in drug deaths, with people in Scotland's most deprived communities 15 times more likely to die from drug misuse than those in the least deprived areas. Drug misuse disproportionately affects those who are already experiencing disadvantages in the underlying social determinants of health, including poverty, homelessness, trauma and stigma. The panel recognised that all those issues have an impact, but it also recognised that those issues are wider than its remit.

I recognise that there is no simple solution, but I welcome the panel's report, which offers a fresh perspective on this complex issue. The report

contains a collective statement and 19 recommendations across five themes. The conveners have spoken about many of those themes already. In the interests of time, I will not go over them, but I hope that other members might pick out some specific points. For my part, I will discuss some feedback from participants and make some general comments.

Feedback from participants highlighted the benefits and effectiveness of deliberative engagement, and it was welcome to hear that, overall, people felt that the experience was informative and allowed for collaborative discussion.

The report acknowledges the frustration of those on the ground with the fact that the problem is not about recognising the issue. It is not that the Government does not recognise the issue; rather, the problem is with the Government's implementation of effective action. The Government's response to the report indicates that it understands that there is a problem, but it is not moving to action. The report notes that that is the case. It is clear from the report that there is a lack of urgency when it comes to delivery on the part of the Government.

Due to pressures of time, I will stop there.

16:03

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I express my thanks to the committees, clerks and, especially, the members of the people's panel and all those who facilitated and supported their work. The panel's report and the evidence that was given to the recent joint committee meeting were thoughtful, sensitive and wise.

Grass-roots democracy is central to the Scottish Greens' vision of a fairer, safer and more sustainable future. Democracy is not just about voting every four or five years for a representative and then letting them get on with it; it is about trusting people with decisions about their lives, their communities and their environments. Panel members spoke about the value of their deliberative discussions and about the ways in which they were able to reach consensus, contrasting that in a way that should give us all pause for thought in relation to the adversarial, sometimes antagonistic, forms of debate towards which parliamentary politics impels us.

The question that the panel was asked to consider—what does Scotland need to do differently to reduce drug-related harms?—is a painfully salient one, especially with the rise of new synthetic drugs, such as nitazines, which carry an increased risk of overdose and death. However, as panel members pointed out, the

question had really been answered before their deliberations began. The problem is not with finding solutions but with finding the political will to implement those solutions and prioritising them. It is not a matter of not knowing enough but one of not caring enough.

Legal and illegal drugs are used by people across society—the rich at least as much as the poor—but it is overwhelmingly the poor who are harmed by them, who are further impoverished and are criminalised, disabled, killed and bereaved. Poverty, inequality and destitution were not within the remit of the people's panel, but its members returned time and again to their reality.

There are, of course, places in Scotland in which those situations are especially acute. One of those is Glasgow, where the Thistle safer drug consumption facility was opened last year. It was visited more than 1,000 times during its first seven weeks of operation. It is saving lives directly, by reducing immediate risks and responding quickly and effectively to overdoses, and indirectly, by enabling greater engagement with sources of support. I am proud of our Scottish Green councillors in Glasgow, who campaigned for the facility for so long and with such dedication.

Another such city is Dundee, where I have my regional office. The challenges that we face in Dundee are acute. They are closely entwined with experiences of poverty, inequality and multiple deprivation and with people and communities being let down by those who should have protected them. However, at the same time, we have deep resources of fierce compassion, care and solidarity.

There is much quiet work going on—work that is transforming lives. The Steeple church's parish nursing project began in 2008 with only one part-time nurse. Over the years, its nurses and volunteers have provided holistic support, especially for people who might have good reason to be wary of statutory agencies. The Reconnection Project offers skills-based training workshops across Dundee city and Arbroath, including work with RSPB Scotland that explores and uses the benefits of nature in growing and strengthening recovery. I will return to the work and recommendations of the Dundee drugs commission in my closing remarks.

All the recommendations of the people's panel are vital. They are set out in each section of the report in order of how many participants approved them. The first recommendation in the section on participation, rights and lived experience, which has 96 per cent support, is:

"The Human Rights Bill needs to be passed by Parliament before the Parliamentary session ends".

We now know that that will not happen and our disappointment is still bitter, so I echo the question that my Scottish Greens colleague Gillian Mackay asked: in the absence of that bill, how is the charter of rights for people affected by substance abuse adequately to be realised?

Human rights are universal, but they are closer to fulfilment for some of us than for others. We know from panel members' testimonies the stifling effects of stigma and silence. My constituents who are struggling with substance issues—struggling through poverty, exclusion and indifference—know that stigma and silence all too well. The panel has reminded us of much, not least the point that drug harm is a matter not only of public health but, centrally and crucially, of human rights.

16:08

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western)

(LD): It has been a great debate so far. It is rare that the Parliament speaks with such consensus, but we all want to strive for success in the matter.

As we all know, Scotland has the invidious claim to have by far the highest drug-related death rate in Europe. We have heard the statistics: 1,172 people died in 2023 alone. Each of them was a son, a daughter, a brother or a sister, and each death was a tragedy.

That is why Liberal Democrats are committed to treating Scotland's drug deaths crisis as the public health emergency that it is and, if needs be, appealing to Westminster to devolve to the Scottish Parliament the powers that are necessary for tailored, Scotland-specific solutions for what is clearly a particularly Scottish problem.

Brian Whittle: The member says that we need specifically tailored responses to a Scottish problem. Does he agree that, in order to provide those, we need to understand what the problem is? We still do not seem to understand why Scotland is such an outlier.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: That is certainly part of it, but we know—through the work of the task force and of the drugs agencies and charities—that the problem is linked to poverty and unresolved childhood trauma; in some communities, drug use is a rite of passage. Work is still needed to better understand the problem. Nevertheless, there are particularly Scottish solutions to this particular Scottish problem.

The member will be aware that, as a result of Liberal Democrat research—this is why the impact of drugs has been such a key focus for the Liberal Democrats in this year's budget negotiations—we also know that, since 2017, at least 1,500 babies have been born with neonatal abstinence syndrome. They have been born addicted to

drugs, showing signs of addiction through uncontrolled distress, crying, blotchy skin and uncontrollable shaking, because their mothers were taking legally or illegally prescribed drugs during their pregnancy.

Investment totalling £2.6 million will now go towards helping and comforting those babies once they are born. This is personal for me—it is why I am in politics. When I was a youth worker, I saw just how important such interventions are and how effective they can be. I am in this place to support them. My party also continues to be committed to measures that will improve public safety and save lives. Those include the roll-out of naloxone; like Audrey Nicoll, I am one of the MSPs who attended the training session on naloxone delivery, and I carry it in my briefcase and in my car. Those measures also include drug-checking facilities, heroin assisted treatment and diverting people who are caught in possession of drugs for personal use away from prison and towards help.

I now turn to the people's panel's report on reducing drug deaths and drug harm. I echo others' thanks to the panel. It is an innovative approach. We have used it before, but we do not use it enough in this Parliament, so I am glad to see it. I have long been a supporter of citizens assemblies, which would operate in a similar fashion to the people's panel, so I would like to see more of this good practice.

The report includes some sensible recommendations, which I support. The panel made an important point about the need for fair pay for those with lived experience who are working in the drug and alcohol field. Their pay and conditions are not equivalent to those of other public sector workers. That is a critical oversight, and we will see people burn out as a result of that. It is vital that their significant and invaluable contribution is recognised in their remuneration and that they are given security of employment. Many people with lived experience are expected to work on a voluntary basis, despite the reported high level of success that they are having in helping people. That situation often leads to burnout. These people, whose knowledge and understanding of the issues cannot be replaced, are highly motivated to make a difference in the lives of others. It speaks to their character, and we lose them from the sector at our peril.

In the battle against drug deaths, we need to empower all those who are battling to save lives. That includes many voluntary organisations that do such vital work. Life-saving services are constantly under threat or worry that their funding might be cut. Funding is often guaranteed for only a matter of months, and that lack of stability has an impact on staff, recruitment and service users. Drug services have raised that problem with me,

too. It is right that the people's panel is pushing for progress, because the level of funding certainty has a direct impact—there is a correlation with the quality and experience of the practitioners who staff our services.

It is also right that the panel has added weight to the calls to divert those who are caught in possession of drugs for personal use—people who are struggling with personal drug use—away from the criminal justice system, and away from prisons, which are awash with substances. I thank the panel members for their time and their contribution.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): We move to the open debate.

16:14

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I, too, thank the cross committee and the people's panel for their work in this area. As Alex Cole-Hamilton said, we need to do more of that type of thing.

The people's panel was tasked with answering a pivotal and crucial question: what does Scotland need to do differently to reduce drug-related harms? I thought about that question night and day during my time as Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy.

I came into that role two years into the Scottish Government's national mission to save and improve lives. Coming from a background in which I worked directly with people who use drugs—and being an affected family member—I had already been able to see and tangibly feel the paradigm shift from treating drug issues as a criminal justice matter to seeing them through a public health lens, with an understanding of the underlying social determinants of health that are all too pernicious in our country.

I recognised the transformational power that lay in the full implementation of the medication assisted treatment standards, whereby people were to be empowered by immediate access to treatment, including by being offered a range of options and the right to make their own informed choices. That was a shift away from the all too often stigmatising nature of addiction services, where stigma and lack of autonomy had felt stubbornly baked in and intractable over many decades. I encountered that time and again when trying to help people to access vital services.

Although great strides have been made in culture change, access to same-day treatment and increasing capacity in residential rehab—we exceeded our target to provide 1,600 placements last year—I recognise that we need to do more. We need an increase in stabilisation provision, as

well. We have seen flourishing recovery communities across the country, and we cannot understate the positive impact that recovery hubs have at the heart of our communities.

Carol Mochan: I did not have time to touch on the point that Elena Whitham is making about rural communities. How might we bring more such services to those communities? That is perhaps a bit more difficult.

Elena Whitham: In my constituency, we have several recovery hubs, which are instrumental in allowing communities to come together. We should help to roll them out across the country as much as we can.

We have heard about the roll-out of naloxone provision and the opening of the Thistle, Glasgow's second—but its first official—safer consumption facility, which has already been having positive impacts. Since it opened, there have been more than 1,000 visits to the facility, although we have heard that, over the past few weeks, emergency services have been called out on several occasions. That tells me that the facility is helping to save lives, especially now, when there is a highly toxic drug supply in circulation. It is incumbent on all of us to make sure that people across the country realise that there is a really potent supply out there at the minute. If that safer consumption facility had not been there, I am sure that some individuals would have lost their lives.

I remain convinced of the need for more radical pilots, including more drug testing and different models of safer consumption facilities. The people's panel recognised that in its recommendations and in its thoughts. As we have heard, it made 19 recommendations that provide a strong foundation for future policy discussions.

I will focus on a couple of the recommendations that chime with my thinking. The panel strongly supports the passage of the proposed human rights bill for Scotland and the incorporation of the charter of rights for people affected by substance use. That would ensure equal access to health and quality services. I whole-heartedly believe in the charter of rights that was drawn together by the national collaborative over many months. It should enable people to make their rights real, but, in order for it to do so, we need to have the underpinning of the human rights bill, which must be taken forward as soon as possible.

It is also imperative that we continue to scrutinise the Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill. All ideas must be considered.

It is critical that more individuals with lived experience form a large part of the workforce. When I was the minister, I was privileged to attend graduation ceremonies for those who had completed their training, and they are now working

on the front lines. That brings a depth of empathy and understanding that no policy can replicate. Empowering those individuals helps to reduce the stigma surrounding addiction and makes recovery journeys more accessible and sustainable.

I briefly highlight that there are dual frustrations that I have felt for ever: an implementation gap and an accountability issue. That can be heard loud and clear in the panel's report. We have brilliant policies, brilliant ideas and consensus, but we need a framework to assess how policies are being implemented on the ground, because it does not always feel like they are to the people who access the services. There is still much more work to do in that area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that the time that we had in hand has now been pretty much exhausted, so members will now need to stick to their time allocations. I am sure that there is no one better to do that than Sue Webber.

16:19

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): That does not feel fair at all.

I am pleased to have the chance to speak in this afternoon's debate. I was lucky enough to attend one of the people's panel sessions last year.

Let us remember that, as Annie Wells outlined in her opening remarks, under the SNP, Scotland has had the worst drug deaths rate in Europe for the sixth year in a row. Our country's drug death rate is 2.7 times higher than the rate in England and Northern Ireland, and it is 2.1 times higher than the rate in Wales. The number of drug deaths has increased by 158 per cent since the SNP came to power—there were 455 drug deaths in 2007, compared with 1,172 in 2023. Every life lost is a tragedy, and those figures are truly unacceptable.

Despite that, the SNP Government has cut the alcohol and drugs policy budget for 2025-26 by almost £1 million in real terms. It is little wonder that alcohol and drugs partnerships, which tackle drug misuse at the local level, say that they are underfunded and have no confidence in the SNP Government's leadership. Seventy-two per cent of ADPs say that the amount of funding that they receive is not enough to deliver the national mission.

The SNP must listen to the people's panel. It must take responsibility and finally act with urgency to stop Scotland's national shame. The panel was clear that the Government has not acted, despite being aware of the evidence. It said that the same conversations keep happening without any change in results.

Having attended one of the panel's sessions, I agree with two things in particular that it said in its report. The panel was

"shocked to learn about the lack of urgency and implementation, given the scale of the crisis",

and it said that

"the same conversations keep happening, with the same actions being agreed but not ... implemented".

The panel was concerned that

"the evidence they have heard has been previously presented by experts yet has not been acted upon by the Government. There is no stability for service providers and users and no consistency of approach."

Carol Mochan also made those points in her opening speech.

As I listened during the panel's session, one of my main concerns was that the people who stood up and presented were the same voices as usual, but no action was being taken on those issues. We need to hear new voices—those who are involved directly and who have lived experience of the recovery community.

That was clearly reflected in the people's panel's findings. There was very little talk of doing something more, different or innovative, despite a culture change and the requirement for "brave and bold" action to tackle the "public health emergency" that has been created by drug use in Scotland.

As a Conservative MSP, I say that that action should include passing the Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill, which has been backed by front-line experts and would enshrine in law the right to receive life-saving drug addiction treatment.

We do not support the decriminalisation of drugs, and none of the report's recommendations advocates that. Decriminalising class A drugs will not help to tackle Scotland's drug deaths and could make it more difficult for the police to stop the supply of drugs getting to our streets. Instead of investing in recovery, the SNP continues to advocate decriminalisation, which will only flood our communities with more drugs.

The SNP Government's priority continues to be harm reduction, but let us remember that harm reduction alone does not reduce addiction. Relapse rates remain high, and interventions such as supervised consumption rooms aim to prevent immediate harm but do not provide a pathway to recovery.

Neil Gray: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It is too late. The member is just about to conclude.

Sue Webber: I am afraid that I cannot take the intervention—I am in my dying seconds.

If the Scottish Government is serious about improving the statistics and the lives of those who are affected by drugs, it needs to be bold and innovative and to act on every one of the people's panel's recommendations.

16:23

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I remind members that I chair the Moving On Inverclyde local recovery service.

I welcome the joint work that has been undertaken by three of the Parliament's committees, and I express my appreciation to all those who took part in the people's panel events for doing so and for producing this important report.

Scotland loses too many people to drug deaths. We can all agree on that. The 1,172 drug deaths in 2023 were 1,172 too many, but that was the second-lowest number of deaths since 2017, with there being the lowest number in 2022.

The Scottish Government is working hard, within its powers, to reduce the number of drug deaths, and a public health approach is the correct way to do that. I believe that the adoption of a public health approach instead of a judicial approach has helped to change some societal views regarding the challenge that society faces in helping people with drug addiction. However, there is clearly still a lot more to do.

The 19 recommendations and the level of support for each of them clearly highlight the engagement of the panel members. Before I get to some of the recommendations, I want to touch on the funding section, on page 31 of the report. The phrase

"lack of urgency and implementation, given the scale of the crisis"

was stark reading. The Scottish Government's national mission on drugs involves £250 million of funding over this parliamentary session. That is not an insubstantial amount of money, and it incorporates the investment in the safer drug consumption facility pilot in Glasgow. There is evidence that such facilities are helping to save lives.

A key aspect of the national mission that I welcome is the investment in more than 300 grass-roots projects to help our constituents and communities. The public sector cannot do this alone, so a partnership approach between public and third sector organisations is crucial in order to help people, save lives and help our communities.

The second half of that funding section chimes with my own views:

"There should be more care provided by the Third Sector; funding should be allocated accordingly and based on need; funding should be ring fenced and prevention should be prioritised."

Finally on that issue, I highlight that the Scottish Government's budget for next year, which some of us in the chamber voted for last week, included £150 million of funding.

I will give further consideration to the recommendations, but I whole-heartedly welcome the following ones. Recommendation 2 is about

"ongoing support and aftercare in the statutory workforce."

Recommendation 3 is on "anti-stigma training". Recommendation 4 says:

"There needs to be consistent financial support and training for the workforce, especially for support workers and people with lived and living experiences."

Recommendation 6 is on

"continuation and consistency of de-penalising minor drug offences and not imprisoning people for short periods."

Recommendation 9 says:

"All bodies must have an information sharing agreement in place which is GDPR compliant."

Clare Haughey touched on that in her opening comments.

Recommendation 10 asks for a protected "five year minimum" of funding. The challenge with that is that the funding for this Parliament is not always consistent, as Audit Scotland highlighted in its "Fiscal sustainability and reform in Scotland" report, which the Public Audit Committee discussed yesterday.

Recommendation 17 is on

"continued support for people in recovery, such as supported temporary accommodation and key workers".

Recommendation 19 is on

"an additional public awareness campaign"

on naloxone, which has been touched on. Some of my staff, like Audrey Nicoll's, have already undergone such training.

Our country has still got a long way to go to save the lives of our constituents who need assistance. I welcome the findings of the people's panel and the work that it has undertaken to produce its report. I thank the three committees for their work, which will help to shape future delivery and actions.

16:27

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I begin by thanking those who took part in the people's panel

on drug deaths and the cross-committee work on the issue. With a problem as complex and wide ranging as this, it is key that there is cross-portfolio collaboration.

The first sentence of the people's panel collective statement is a damning assessment of the current situation. It reads:

"The panel strongly believe that the same conversations keep happening, with the same actions being agreed but not enough has been implemented."

That is right; indeed, some of the panel's recommendations were made in 2022 by the national task force. The time for talk should be over.

Regardless of that, some of the recommendations are welcome, and I want to discuss two of them. First, on recommendation 17, which is on giving

"continued support for people in recovery ... following referral to services",

I want to highlight the Midlothian aftercare group as a positive example. It supports graduates from the Lothians and Edinburgh abstinence programme for as long as they need it.

The Scottish Government's response to the report states that continued support is part of medication assisted treatment—or MAT—standard 5. Although the standard has been implemented in most alcohol and drug partnerships, we need to ensure that its spirit is being followed. The Public Health Scotland review of MAT standard 5 uses the retention of cases for more than six months as a benchmark. Given that we know that addiction can be a lifelong battle and that crisis can derail recovery, we should consider how to ensure that graduates of rehabilitation receive support over a longer timeframe.

I also welcome recommendation 15, which recommends a move away from a zero-tolerance approach. When I met people from the North Edinburgh Drug and Alcohol Centre, I heard about the impact of its high-tolerance, holistic approach not only in treating addiction and improving wellbeing, but in saving money for other public services.

Individuals with complex needs can sometimes be labelled as "non-compliant" or "treatment resistant". Services must meet the needs of individuals so that they can retain them in the long term, and moving away from a zero-tolerance approach is a step towards that.

I know that the minister will talk about funding, but members will have seen the news about the £450 million gap in funding for integration joint boards, and they will also be aware of the financial situation that councils face. Those organisations will be looking to make savings in their funding for

alcohol and drug partnerships and services, and we must be clear that there should be no cuts to drug and alcohol services by proxy.

I repeat the people's panel's remarks on the actions that need to be implemented. Much has been done and much has been said, but it will be meaningless if the level of deaths remains high and the organisations that prevent drug deaths are not properly supported.

16:31

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the work of the people's panel and its excellent report. Ahead of the debate, I received a briefing from Professor O'Gorman and Gillian McElroy at the University of the West of Scotland—and I should, at this point, thank everyone for their briefings.

I and other members of the joint committee are grateful to the members of the people's panel for their diligence in taking the time to put together a thoughtful and direct series of recommendations on drug misuse and what we as a society could do better to help save and change lives. I cannot do the full report justice in the few minutes that I have, but I want to highlight a few of the issues that the people's panel addressed and a few of the effects of drug misuse that we are seeing in our communities right now.

First, I want to pick up on what Elena Whitham said about the interesting effects of some of the new drugs that we are seeing. Just last week, NHS Dumfries and Galloway issued an alert in which it warned of sudden onset overdoses as a result of the almost instantaneous effects of heroin contaminated with synthetic opioids. Street heroin is now being cut with nitazenes, a more potent and powerful form of synthetic opioid that is around 600 times stronger than street heroin. The consequences are tragically predictable. Overdoses are massively more likely; the effect of naloxone is sharply reduced, which means that multiple doses of it are needed to counteract the effects of an overdose; and the additional doses take more time to administer in a situation in which seconds are vital.

Last October, my office team was trained in the use of naloxone nasally or in injectable form by Ruth McCall, a specialist addictions nurse who works for NHS Dumfries and Galloway. We were happy to receive that training.

Many folk still see drug misuse as being purely about heroin addiction, but the huge growth of synthetic opioids, which I have mentioned, and the speed at which the use of illicit benzodiazepines has spread show that that is not the case. As others have mentioned, there is the issue of polydrug use, but polymethod drug use is a factor,

too. The people's panel highlighted the rapid changes in drug supply, along with the need to ensure that people with direct or indirect lived experience of drug misuse are at the heart of decision making on policy and practicalities.

Another thing that comes through consistently in the panel's recommendations is the importance of tackling stigma. I mentioned that issue in my intervention on Collette Stevenson, which I thank her for accepting. We have spoken here about stigma on numerous occasions. If we agree that drug misuse is a public health issue, as I hope we all do, it must be treated as exactly that. People should not be put off going into treatment, or even taking a first step towards treatment, because they fear judgment, stigmatisation or discrimination when they first pick up the phone or arrive for an appointment.

Judgment sometimes occurs when users encounter other health services outside of those for drugs and alcohol. I have repeatedly raised that issue here and have had meetings with ministers on it. I was recently pleased to find out about a brand-new e-learning programme on the NHS Turas platform that has been created and developed in collaboration with people from the Scottish recovery consortium who have lived experience. The programme, which is free to any healthcare professional, covers stigma, among other subjects. It is so important to involve and include people with lived experience as we proceed.

Carol Mochan: Will the member accept an intervention?

Emma Harper: I will take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Harper, you are just about to conclude.

Emma Harper: My apologies. I say to the member that I would have let her in—no problem.

Finally, destigmatisation is an absolutely key measure in helping people on the first steps towards treatment. Once again, I welcome the report and all the work of the committee members, clerks and panel participants.

16:36

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I am glad to be able to take part in this debate to examine the findings of the people's panel. We find ourselves in the relatively unique position of debating the views of members of the public, as opposed to the those of the usual experts and professionals, or even of each other.

We all know about the desperate drug deaths situation in Scotland. The people's panel does not shy away from the severity and impact of the

situation, but its report also provides a useful and productive take on many areas, which I will examine as part of today's debate.

The panel is clear that the time for talking is over and that action is required, and it provides helpful details about funding structure, reducing stigma and the role of people with lived experience in the process of reducing drug-related harms.

Emma Harper: Will the member accept an intervention? I will be brief.

Sharon Dowey: I would like to make some progress first.

Some of that work is already under way in Scotland. In the region that I represent, we have River Garden Auchincruive. Those involved say that it is not only the people being rehabilitated who benefit; the facility has a positive impact on their families and friends, too. We know that when someone with addiction issues has a strong network of supportive friends and family around them, with the care and stability that that brings, their chances of long-term recovery are far better.

There is much talk of the cost of rehabilitation in its own right, but we should be thinking about the preventative costs too. When someone successfully rehabilitates, it can save money further down the line by reducing crime and cutting down attendance at accident and emergency—and it can potentially even save the cost of a prison space. Of course, the most valuable saving of all is that of a life, not only in preventing a drug-related fatality but in ensuring that someone's life can be positive, productive, enjoyable and worthwhile. That is what most drug users ultimately want—to be free of their addiction and to integrate back into society.

However, we must also ensure that the money spent achieves the best possible outcomes. Audit Scotland has highlighted the importance of assessing where funds are going and whether they are delivering results. We need robust methods to evaluate the effectiveness of our spending and to ensure that resources are being directed to the most successful initiatives.

That is why facilities such as River Garden Auchincruive in my region are so vital. Its model of recovery is refreshingly different, giving residents not only the time to reflect and rebuild but the skills and support to reintegrate into society. I take this opportunity to invite the cabinet secretary to visit River Garden Auchincruive to see the great work that is being done there and the support that it gets from the local community.

The people's panel also discussed other initiatives across Ayrshire, including community hubs that have been running successfully in Kilmarnock for almost two decades. The real value

of such places is that service users can speak to people who have had similar experiences and have come out the other side. In many ways, that is preferable to units that, as the panel says, treat such matters as more of a tick-box exercise.

It is important to note the good work that is going on to reduce drug-related harm. Of course, the issue is emotive and can be politically charged. We might disagree about the best way forward, but we all share the same ambition of reducing the number of drug deaths in Scotland. Bringing in the views of the wider public is helpful, as it allows us to gain perspective and learn more about what people really think.

Undoubtedly there are lessons for everyone in the report. I hope that we will use the best of it to ensure that drug users across the country receive the support that they need and that Scotland's regrettable position in terms of fatalities is finally addressed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final speaker in the open debate is Bob Doris, who has up to four minutes.

16:40

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I am pleased to be the final speaker in the open debate on the people's panel report on reducing drug harm and deaths in Scotland. The panel was commissioned by the Criminal Justice Committee, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, and the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, on which I sit.

The panel has done us a clear public service by considering and reporting on the question,

"What does Scotland need to do differently to reduce drug-related harms?"

By and large, it looked for consensus and it set a very high bar for accepting recommendations. At least 87 per cent of the panel had to agree to a recommendation, which meant that 20 of the 23 members had to be in agreement. If only we had that level of consensus in the Parliament.

It was also a representative panel, and not just demographically or in terms of income groups and so on. Significantly, the recruitment process aimed to ensure that the views of the people who made up the panel had a similar distribution to broader public opinion. Quite frankly, if they could get together outside the Parliament and get a consensus, we can get a consensus in here without the party politicking.

I will now discuss some of the recommendations. Recommendation 2 states:

"More people with lived experience should provide ongoing support and aftercare in the statutory workforce."

I absolutely agree. The panel said that that would reduce stigma and offer role models in statutory services. We all know from our work in our constituencies the credibility that lived and living experience can bring.

I also welcome the Scottish Government's response to that recommendation, which notes that

"the Drugs Deaths Taskforce Action 129"

spoke about

"pathways for people with lived and living experience to enter the workforce."

It also mentions the imminent publication of

"a 'Guiding Principles' document for employers"

on employment support, as well as a toolkit and a £480,000 fund.

Although the response is welcome, I am not left with total clarity on how it will all be taken forward, and I also wonder how it will be monitored. I want an assurance that a pathway into the statutory workforce would not stagnate but would be a real progression pathway. I note that recommendation 4 mentions that, as well. I am keen to understand what cultural benefits could arise from refreshing the statutory workforce in that way. I also want to make sure that increasing the number of statutory staff with lived and living experience would not undermine such provision in the third sector.

Recommendation 10 states that

"There needs to be a guaranteed and protected five year minimum period of funding for community and third sector services ... so that organisations can better plan provisions",

retain staff and reduce uncertainty in provision. I absolutely agree. I note that there has been some progress in relation to that, and I give Shirley-Anne Somerville a special mention for the work that she has done in partnership with the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. There are now 45 organisations in a pilot scheme in relation to getting longer-term funding. I say to the cabinet secretary that it would be good to see that working on a cross-sector basis in order to make sure that more organisations in the field get longer-term funding.

I was hoping to squeeze in a comment on recommendation 17, which identifies the need to support people in relation to key aspects of their lives, such as

"release from prison, completion of rehab, hospital discharge"

and

"isolation in supported temporary accommodation."

However, as I have only 30 seconds left, I will talk only about temporary accommodation.

We have to ask how we can prevent people who are living with addiction from being in temporary accommodation in the first place, given that 19 per cent of the 435,000 people who were assessed as being homeless in the 15 years up to 2016 showed evidence of substance abuse. The Housing (Scotland) Bill, which is going through the Scottish Parliament, contains ask and act provisions. If we think that someone is at risk of becoming homeless, we should act to prevent that. Perhaps we can do something in the live legislation that is going through the Parliament to meet some of the aspirations of the people's panel, which in my final few seconds I commend.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I note that Alex Cole-Hamilton, who participated in the debate, is not here. I will expect an explanation as well as an apology.

16:45

Maggie Chapman: I thank all those who have participated in the debate. It is clear that there is consensus across the chamber that we need to act. That consensus is welcome.

When I was on the Smith commission representing the Scottish Greens, we were the only party calling for drugs policy to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. During the past decade, the need for that devolution has grown horribly evident. In its absence, for now we must do what we can, and I thank the people's panel again for illuminating the path ahead.

During the debate, members have spoken of the report's recommendations and their urgency in relation to particular issues and places, and of the ways in which those recommendations can and must be made a reality.

It is heartening to hear the clear agreement from across the chamber that the panel's report must be a catalyst for action, because as the panel made clear, we have been here before. In 2019, the Dundee drugs commission published its first report, "Responding to Drug Use with Kindness, Compassion and Hope". That report focused on key areas including the need for strong leadership and accountability; cultural change that eliminates stigma; inclusion of people with lived and living experiences in decision making and service design; comprehensive holistic models of care; prevention; gender-sensitive and trauma-informed support; and measures that tackle poverty.

The panel is right to be frustrated. Why has there been so little progress on the recommendations, which were developed six years ago? Many of the panel's recommendations echo those that we have received before. We know what needs to be done: we need a public health approach to tackling drug-related deaths

and drug harms. The so-called war on drugs has failed, comprehensively.

We need evidence-based measures, safer consumption rooms—such as the one in Glasgow—drug-checking facilities, holistic support and a well-publicised single point of access for specialised advice and support.

We need universal provision and policies, not postcode lotteries that govern services, support and prescribing practices in different parts of Scotland.

We need to ensure equitable pay, fair working conditions and employment support for people with lived and living experience of drug-related harms.

We need adequate and long-term funding, especially for third sector organisations, which can reach so many people whose needs are unmet by statutory services.

We need justice reforms, including substantial decriminalisation, and an end to the tragic spirals of incarceration and intensified drug use in prisons, and we need education and effective data sharing that does not require already traumatised people to tell their stories over and over again.

I believe that we need most of all to recognise and fulfil the human rights of all, including rights to a decent standard of living, and to freedom from the poverty and destitution that kill so many, including with the weapon of illegal drugs.

The people's panel has done phenomenal work, but perhaps not quite the work that it or we expected. It has not so much opened a window to a view that had not been seen before as it has held up a mirror to our political systems, institutions and agencies, and shown us our shortcomings.

In his closing speech, I ask the cabinet secretary to provide clear assurances on and timescales for when we will see action on the panel's recommendations, because we cannot be here again in one, two or three years' time, asking for—calling for—the same things.

We need many more people's panels, as well as other forms of deliberative democracy, to shine a light on our shortcomings, our institutions and our agencies' failures. We need them to address the most acute issues that challenge us, but also, and more important, we need them to challenge our assumptions, our exclusions and our spoken or unspoken prejudices, because then, with people who have lived and living experience, we can create a better and more equal world that works for everyone.

16:49

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. I am grateful to the people's panel for its time and engagement in considering this national emergency, and to the committees for commissioning the work.

As Bob Doris said, the panel was asked to come to a consensus on an issue that has been identified as a national emergency for a number of years, and on proposals that have been discussed in the chamber on a number of occasions. The report is very interesting in showing us what a group of that nature made of the issue.

Although the issue has been identified as a national emergency for a number of years, the latest figures show a 12 per cent increase in drug deaths from the previous year. As the cabinet secretary said, we lost 1,172 people to drug-related deaths in 2023, and we all know that those deaths were preventable. We owe it to the loved ones of those people who have died to take immediate and radical action. That is what members expects from the Scottish Government.

As a number of members have said, Scotland remains the worst nation in Europe for drug deaths. An emergency of such severity is the result not only of underfunding of drug prevention and rehabilitation services, the criminal legal framework and our health services, but of a far wider societal crisis.

The cabinet secretary accepted the link to deprivation. Carol Mochan spoke about the range of factors involved and the complex nature of the challenges. It will come as no surprise to anyone in the chamber that the mortality rate of people who live in the poorest areas is more than double the Scottish average. The council areas that are bearing the brunt of the crisis are the urban centres and the post-industrial heartlands that have also suffered the sharpest decline in their public services following years of austerity.

It is political choices that cause communities to crumble. People in desperate situations sometimes see no other option than to turn to drugs, and that is where Governments have let them down. The cabinet secretary and Elena Whitham spoke of the highly toxic drug supply that is in circulation, particularly in Scotland. I welcome the opening of Thistle, the United Kingdom's first safer drug consumption facility, which I hope will prevent further deaths and create a rise in the number of people who choose to move towards rehabilitation. However, we must recognise that the facility is in Glasgow and it will do little to help those outside Glasgow city who suffer from addiction. As Annie Wells pointed out, the Thistle

is a small part of the solution, and the real challenge is how we address the root causes.

I am pleased that the people's panel made 19 recommendations and that the Scottish Government and the cabinet secretary have indicated acceptance of them all. However, I agree with Maggie Chapman that the problem is not that we do not know what needs to be done but that we need political will.

Alex Cole-Hamilton spoke of the consensus, and I think that there is a consensus across the chamber about what needs to be done. Clare Haughey made an important point about the need for multiyear packages. It is impossible for organisations to plan if they do not know what their funding is. Collette Stevenson spoke about trusted relationships and the importance of lived experience, and that point was also made by Sue Webber. Members have previously discussed the significant issue of stigma.

Audrey Nicoll spoke specifically about the criminal justice aspect. As a member of the Criminal Justice Committee, I am aware of the massive challenge that drugs pose in our justice system.

This is a complex debate. However, we cannot say that we accept what the Scottish Government is doing on the issue. The reality is that the number of deaths continues to get higher, and urgent action needs to be taken to address that.

16:55

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I rise on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives to close the debate. I am grateful, as others are, to the people's panel and the committees for producing such a comprehensive report. It has been a really good debate, and it has been consensual, in that we all agree on the direction of travel.

I remember very well that the last debate in the previous session of Parliament was on drug deaths. We voted with the Government, as did the whole chamber, on a motion that included safe consumption rooms, even though I still have great reservations about that. I remember saying at the time that we cannot keep having the same debate over and over. This is a crisis, and we are prepared to try whatever is needed. I look forward to the report on the safe consumption room—

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the member give way?

Brian Whittle: Of course.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Your microphone is not on, Mr Cole-Hamilton.

Mr Whittle, can you just continue, please?

Brian Whittle: Sorry, Mr Cole-Hamilton.

With regard to the things that were said today, I was pleased to hear Clare Haughey mention the importance of the third sector as an access point to services. I hope that I can go back to that point if I have time.

Collette Stevenson talked about the significance of lived experience to the provision of support and aftercare. That is absolutely critical. She also talked about the impact of stigma on those who are potentially seeking recovery and treatment, and about the stigma that prevents people from getting into employment.

Audrey Nicoll talked about the transition from prisons and pre-release planning, which I have worked on. In fact, I was once again let out of Kilmarnock prison on Monday—it always surprises me when they let me back out—where I had been talking with others about that exact topic. In that pre-planning interface, it is often the third sector that is so important.

I was not trying to catch the cabinet secretary out when I again asked him the question that I asked. My concern with the cabinet secretary's response is that it fails to answer why Scotland is such an outlier. As Alex Cole-Hamilton talked about, we know that the reason for drug abuse is, often, childhood trauma, and we know the impact that poverty and deindustrialisation have. However, although those things are no worse here than in any other part of the UK, we are seeing a much worse outcome.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Brian Whittle: Yes, I will.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Does Brian Whittle recognise that this is, as such, a particularly Scottish problem and that we probably need a particularly Scottish solution? To that end, does his party support the further devolution of some aspects of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971?

Brian Whittle: It is a particularly Scottish problem, but my point is that we do not know why. If we do not understand why, how can we come up with a solution?

Elena Whitham: Will the member take an intervention?

Brian Whittle: Let me finish this point.

If we do not identify that, how can we prevent others from taking the place of those who are in treatment? I very much believe in community interaction, which is declining in Scotland—I do not think that that is a coincidence. We need to tackle prevention along with treatment.

Annie Wells, in a very powerful speech—she always speaks powerfully on this topic—talked about people who she had met who just want to stop their relationship with drugs and alcohol. When those people ask for help, they must get it. That is why Douglas Ross's Right to Addiction Recovery (Scotland) Bill, which is going through the committee at the moment, will, I hope, be a help. It is not a panacea, but it is a significant step towards a system that gives hope—which is the word that Annie Wells used—to those people who are looking for treatment for addiction and lets them know that there is support for them. When they are brave enough to ask for that help, it is so important that they get it then and there—it is not enough to say, "Yes, we will help you somewhere down the line," because if we do that, we will lose them.

I was pleased to hear about the impact of River Garden Auchincruive, which was mentioned by my colleague Sharon Dowey. She highlighted the impact not just on people who are seeking treatment but the impact on family and friends who are in that important support network.

In my view, intervention and prevention must begin as early as possible, and they should begin with the community. I agree that a drugs and alcohol prevention curriculum is needed, but that is only one piece of a much larger puzzle. Along with the recommendations in the report, we need to make sure that our children develop healthy lifestyle habits early. I have always said that investment in education is an investment in health and wellbeing.

I am sure that we all know about community programmes in our constituencies, and I am sure that we all know that some have a constant struggle to secure year-on-year funding, especially those that address mental health and recovery, as was highlighted by Sue Webber. That is why I whole-heartedly welcome the recommendation in the report for a protected five-year minimum period for funding for community and third service sectors.

I understand the extreme financial pressures that councils are under, but when decisions on funding are made, all too often the instinct of councils is to bring services in-house rather than supporting services in the third sector, which unfortunately often fail to achieve the same level of benefit in the community.

During my time in Parliament, I have been able to engage with incredible organisations that are able to reach people in the community who need them the most, such as the Ochiltree Community Hub, CentreStage Communities, Recovery Enterprises Scotland and Morven day services, to name but a few. However, each financial year, their contracts and services are at risk.

In closing, I will relate a point that was made to me recently by a founder of a community organisation in Kilmarnock.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly.

Brian Whittle: We often refer to such groups as “the third sector”, but she argued that that does them a disservice. To call them the third sector suggests that they are lower priority or somehow less important than the others. Instead, she suggests that “the community sector” would be a more appropriate title. I am inclined to agree, because if we want our communities to flourish and we want to deal with the corrosive impact of drug addiction and other issues, we cannot afford for them to come third any more.

17:02

Neil Gray: I very much welcome the tenor of the debate. It has been almost universally consensual, which is highlighted by the fact that we all support the recommendations of the people’s panel—in that, the Parliament is united.

Members’ contributions have been thoughtful, and I think that everybody has come to the chamber seeking to answer the question that we are all posing ourselves: how can we overcome the situation that our communities face? I am also heartened by the fact that we have not had a policy debate but a debate about how quickly and how universally we can deliver the services that are part of the national mission. That is of fundamental importance.

Because of the tenor of the debate, I will do my best to respond to as much as possible of what members have contributed. First, in response to Audrey Nicoll’s asks and those of the other committee conveners, I hope that they will have received further correspondence from me this morning. In particular, in response to Audrey Nicoll’s question about single shared assessments, MAT standards 6 and 9 require mental health and drug services to be joined up, and those standards are in the process of being implemented. We are taking forward the joint mental health and substance use protocol, which was published in September.

I will address Annie Wells’s and Sue Webber’s remarks together, because they focused on similar areas. Annie Wells asked us to involve people with lived experience. We are doing that, and the interactions with the likes of the Thistle centre are testament to that and to the asks with regard to people coming through to employment.

Annie Wells also asked us to do more around residential rehab. We had committed to having 1,000 publicly funded residential rehab places by 2026, and Public Health Scotland figures show

that, in 2022-23, we supported 1,033 publicly funded residential rehab places and that an additional 637 were privately funded—so, progress is being made there. There has also been a dramatic increase in bed capacity from 425 beds in 2021 to a maximum of 513 in 2024—that is a 21 per cent increase, which I think we all welcome.

Annie Wells: I appreciate everything that is being done, but we need to move faster. You have referred to figures for 2022-23, but we are not seeing the evidence of people moving through the system. I would like your reassurance that we are monitoring the situation and looking at how many individuals we are supporting and helping through the process.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members should always speak through the chair.

Neil Gray: We are, indeed, which is why I am able to highlight the figures on the number of publicly funded places.

Whether it is residential rehab, harm reduction or the support of our community and voluntary organisations through our funding of the Corra Foundation, which I will come to, there is no single area that we need to point to. I am not sure whether Annie Wells or Sue Webber has been to the Thistle, but I encourage them to visit if they have not, so that they can see the value of it and understand why the Lord Advocate was able to give her statement on prosecution policy. It is a means to attract to statutory or community support services people who have never interacted with them before, and the early evidence is clear that that is starting to happen.

Carol Mochan asked about multiyear funding. We have baselined an additional £19 million this year for ADPs, to provide greater certainty. Carol Mochan and Bob Doris also raised a point about funding for community and voluntary organisations. The Corra Foundation funding is a five-year £65 million fund, and more than 300 projects have been provided with multiyear funding since 2021. Although the terms of the grants vary, three-year grant funding is often available.

Brian Whittle: The report calls for an expansion of services, which are telling us that, without more support, they will not exist. How do we follow the money and ensure that the investment reaches the services that the money is intended for and those that need it?

Neil Gray: Carrying out an assessment such as that is a necessity for all public funding. Public Health Scotland assesses the national mission on an on-going basis in order to provide the assurance that Mr Whittle is looking for.

Maggie Chapman reflected on the tenor of our discussion and the fact that the people's panel provided the space to take the heat out of an incredibly sensitive issue. She reflected on the need for political will, and I think that there has been substantial political will from the Government and the Parliament in delivering the £250 million national mission. We have taken bold action in delivering the UK's first safer consumption facility, we have worked with the Home Office to deliver drug checking facilities, and we have delivered the first national naloxone programme roll-out. I do not think that we can take those successes for granted, but I am also not complacent about the need to do more. Of course, I understand the desire for more to be done, and I will absolutely commit us to doing more as we continue to assess the efficacy of the national mission and consider what comes next.

I welcome the Liberal Democrats' intervention on and collaboration with the budget. I look forward to visiting Aberlour's services in due course, and I welcome Alex Cole-Hamilton's acknowledgement that this is a public health issue.

I pay tribute to Elena Whitham for her time in the role as Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and for her on-going interest in and commitment to the area. She recognised the social determinants of ill health and drug dependency, and I echo the need for the recovery hubs that she spoke about and note the excellent facilities that they provide. The Airdrie recovery cafe in my constituency does such good work and gives value and agency to those with lived and living experience, so that they can be involved in supporting others.

Similarly, Stuart McMillan spoke about community and voluntary interaction. Again, I point to the Corra Foundation investment.

Foysol Choudhury spoke of the need for cross-portfolio collaboration, and I assure him that that is happening. I would go one step further and say that we need cross-society action and all of us to reflect on how, in all aspects of life, we are contributing to stigma with the narrative on drug dependency, especially for those who have lost their lives.

Emma Harper: Will the member take an intervention?

Neil Gray: I am sorry, but I am struggling for time—indeed, I think that I am probably beyond my allocation.

On the point that Emma Harper made, it helps to focus on one of the successes of the national mission that has been relayed to me as such by some of the families I have been able to speak to, which is the reduction in stigma. That means that people are now more willing to come forward and access services.

I recognise the work of River Garden and thank the charity for doing it. I will see what I can do about being able to take up Sharon Dowey's offer of a visit.

Finally, I thank Bob Doris for his suggestion that there is a need for better consensus building.

To conclude, there is absolutely more work to do. I recognise that we are not at the end of the mission. We have to keep working hard to reduce the harm that is associated with drug dependency, and we must continue to do everything possible to save lives. That is absolutely at the heart of the work that this Government is committed to.

17:10

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): As I begin to wind up on behalf of the three committees, I echo the cabinet secretary's sentiment and send the love and best wishes of the chamber to Christina McKelvie.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to close this important debate on behalf of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee, the Criminal Justice Committee and the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. As we have heard, the three committees have undertaken joint scrutiny of the issue of tackling drug deaths and drug harm, and I thank all members of the committees for their diligent work thus far. I also thank all members from across the chamber who have taken the time to contribute to today's debate, and I echo much of the sentiments that have been expressed.

I also want to thank everyone who contributed to the people's panel report, which provides a comprehensive overview of the current landscape of drug services and the issues facing service users and their families across Scotland. The report has highlighted the crucial role that individuals with lived experience play in driving change across Scotland, and I am pleased that the recommendations in the report have mostly been welcomed and agreed by the Scottish Government. I hope that that work will provide a strong foundation for change, and I look forward to scrutinising forthcoming policy actions on the back of that important and comprehensive set of recommendations.

On that point, I take the opportunity, on behalf of the joint committee, to offer my sincere condolences to anyone who has lost a loved one to drugs. I also commend the bravery of all those with lived experience who have taken the time to share their ideas and experience with the committee throughout the process, in particular the participants in the people's panel, whose testimonies and commitment to collaborative

working have set an excellent example and helped to highlight the benefits of participative democracy.

The issue of drug harm and drug deaths has blighted Scotland for far too long, and it is incumbent on all of us in the Parliament to work together to mitigate the damage done to individuals and families, with the ultimate goal of saving lives.

This debate and the work of the people's panel are strong examples of cross-committee collaboration, which I hope will be emulated in the future. For such a complex and nuanced issue, working collaboratively is essential if we are to make progress, and the cross-sectoral nature of the significant challenges that we face in tackling drug deaths and drug harm necessitate such collaboration.

It is clear that there is no quick or easy fix when it comes to tackling drug harm and drug deaths in Scotland. However, what is clear is that progress needs to be measured, and the Parliament will play a key role in ensuring swift Government delivery on the many points that have been raised in the report and in the chamber today.

In her intervention on Collette Stevenson, Emma Harper mentioned anti-stigma training for those who work outside of drug and alcohol services. That is hugely important and reflects some of what we have heard in informal sessions of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. Many of those who spoke to us noted that it was not always drug services that they first got help from. Ensuring that all services are trauma informed is hugely important.

Audrey Nicoll, Stuart McMillan, Carol Mochan and Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned awareness raising around naloxone and increasing the number of people who are trained to use it. I hope that, in addition to increasing the number of people who are trained, the Government is looking at how to train as diverse a group as possible to ensure that everyone who might interact with those who use drugs has the confidence to be able to use naloxone.

Maggie Chapman and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, as well as others, referenced the work that is going on at the Thistle in Glasgow. We should collectively pay a huge tribute to the staff there, who, contrary to some of the coverage of the site, are doing a phenomenal job.

Alex Cole-Hamilton and others mentioned nitazenes, and Emma Harper mentioned the current warnings in Dumfries and Galloway. I hope that we can see progress on drug checking soon. Elena Whitham was entirely correct about the need to roll out more safe drug consumption facilities across Scotland.

From my perspective as a member of the Health and Sport Committee, the debate and report have been useful in highlighting the importance of ensuring that everyone is able to access the services that they require. I echo the points that the convener raised in her opening speech. It is essential that a collaborative approach among all relevant public bodies is in place to tackle the crisis. A single point of access to specialised services would go a long way to reducing the stigma that is associated with accessing assistance for service users and their families, as would ensuring that GDPR-compliant information sharing agreements are in place to allow more streamlined assistance for service users.

It is vital that front-line services and third sector organisations that play a crucial role in tackling drug harm have certainty about funding to allow for long-term planning. I, too, am grateful for the Scottish Government's commitment to strengthen that and I look forward to ensuring that initiatives such as the drugs mission funds and the fairer funding pilot have the intended effect of providing those services with the assurances that they need.

As Turning Point Scotland highlighted in its response to the people's panel report, there has been a notable shift in public opinion and growing support for a health-based approach to drug use. That is most welcome, and I share Turning Point's hope that that shift in attitude will be the impetus that is needed to create a system that is focused on support rather than punishment when it comes to tackling the drugs crisis in Scotland.

I thank the conveners of the Criminal Justice Committee and the Social Justice and Social Security Committee for their opening speeches and for highlighting the recommendations that come under their committees' remits. I share the sentiment that they expressed about, and the commitment to continue, our collaborative approach to scrutinising future policy, which, by necessity, will cross into various remits.

As evidenced by the people's panel, which has provided an excellent road map for progress with the report, it is essential that we all work together to tackle the crisis. Only through cross-party and cross-remit working can we ensure that services are to the standards that are required for service users.

I again thank everyone who contributed to today's debate. It has been an open, honest and frank discussion. I share the commitment made by members across the chamber to ensure that promises made by Government in the wake of this important report are delivered swiftly and efficiently for the people of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the people's panel report on reducing drug harm and deaths in Scotland.

Decision Time

17:17

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): There are no questions to put as a result of today's business. That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:17.

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

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

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba