OFFICIAL REPORT
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Wednesday 23 April 2025

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Scottish Parliament

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

Portfolio Question Time

Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions. The first portfolio is Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and parliamentary business.

Members wishing to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant question. There is quite a bit of demand, so brevity in questions and responses would be appreciated.

Local and Regional Museums and Galleries

1. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to protect the on-going viability of local and regional museums and galleries. (S6O-04544)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Although it is for locally elected council representatives to make decisions on how best to deliver services in their local communities, the Scottish Government recognises the significant challenges that the museums and galleries sector is facing.

The Scottish Government is developing a museums capacity and support programme in partnership with Museums Galleries Scotland and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which will invest £4 million in 2025-26, taking a collaborative and strategic approach to enable positive change across the sector. That will ensure that those vital organisations have the resilience to continue to deliver for Scotland's communities and for the nation as a whole.

Carol Mochan: Across South Scotland, there are a number of important cultural artefacts that museums do not have the funding to maintain. If that relatively small amount of funding is not found, those pieces will have to go into storage away from the public, in order to protect them, which will further decrease visitor numbers. Is the Scottish Government sleepwalking into the terminal decline of Scottish culture anywhere other than in our major cities, or does the plan that the cabinet secretary mentioned support culture in our towns and villages?

Angus Robertson: I am happy to confirm that this is a Scotland-wide programme. Carole Mochan has raised concerns about some specific artefacts. I am not aware of those, but I would be grateful if she could let me know, as I want to look closely at those issues and understand whether there is anything that I can do to support their retention and display in the region that she represents.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): I note that, earlier this month, thanks to record investment from the Scottish Government, Museums Galleries Scotland announced new grant funding of £2.4 million for 2025. Can the cabinet secretary speak to how that funding will help to maintain and revive museums and galleries for communities across Scotland?

Angus Robertson: We value the support that Museums Galleries Scotland offers the sector. This year, due to the increased investment from the Scottish Government in the 2025-26 budget, Museums Galleries Scotland has opened the small grants fund to non-accredited museums, increasing support opportunities to more organisations across Scotland. Museums Galleries Scotland has also bolstered its repair and adaption fund, which will support capital costs that directly increase the resilience of museums or improve accessibility through projects that address capital repair issues and adaptations. Further details on the full range of support that is available through Museums Galleries Scotland is available on its website.

Local Museums and Heritage Centres

2. **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on plans to increase funding for local museums and heritage centres, including the Summerlee museum of Scottish industrial life in Coatbridge. (S6O-04545)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government values our local museums and heritage centres, which is why we have increased Museums Galleries Scotland's funding from £2.7 million in 2024-25 to £4.27 million in 2025-26, as well as continuing to support Historic Environment Scotland. Those organisations deliver direct and indirect support to local museums and heritage centres across Scotland by providing expert advice as well as grant schemes, details of which can be found on their respective websites. I encourage Mr MacGregor to share that information with the Summerlee museum.

We are also collaboratively developing a strategically focused brand-new £4 million museums capacity and support programme with sector partners.

Fulton MacGregor: This week, I will be present at two culturally significant events that are being held at Summerlee. On Friday, I will attend the annual international workers memorial day event and, on Saturday, I will speak at the opening of the "Ship Ahoy!" Scottish maritime heritage exhibition, along with Paul Sweeney MSP. Does the cabinet secretary agree that such events highlight the essential role that local museums play in preserving Scotland's industrial and maritime heritage, and that increased funding is needed to support and sustain them in our communities?

Angus Robertson: I agree that such events highlight the essential role that local museums play in preserving Scotland's renowned industrial and maritime heritage, while delivering significant benefits to communities across Scotland.

As already mentioned, that is why we have increased funding to Museums Galleries Scotland from £2.7 million to £4.27 million this year. In addition, the Scottish Government is developing a museums capacity and support programme in partnership with Museums Galleries Scotland and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, in which we will be investing £4 million in 2025-26. I am pleased to say that that increased funding will offer additional support to the sector as a whole.

Creative Industries (Young People's Access)

3. **Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support young people to access the creative industries. (S6O-04546)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government has a long-standing history of supporting youth arts programmes. That includes the youth music initiative and Sistema Scotland. Both will receive a 3 per cent uplift in 2025-26, taking annual investment to £9.78 million and £2.68 million, respectively.

We are also providing £12 million to local authorities to support free instrumental music tuition, and Screen Scotland's groundbreaking film and screen education programme is supporting Scotland's next generation of film makers. We are also calling on the United Kingdom Government to negotiate a youth mobility agreement with the European Union to ensure that young people can access the international opportunities of the creative industries.

Alex Rowley: What discussions does the cabinet secretary and his department have with education and training and skills colleagues? A third of Fife College's provision, for example, is in the creative industries sector. The Scottish Funding Council has announced a rise for colleges of 2.6 per cent. However, I have looked into that further, and it seems to be broken down across the country, with Fife College receiving an increase to the teaching grant of only 1.6 per cent. Therefore, my understanding is that the grant that is being offered to Fife College represents a real-terms cut, despite the fact that a third of its provision is in the creative industries.

Does the cabinet secretary have discussions with colleagues in other parts of the Government to ensure that colleges, which are crucial to the advancement of the creative industries, are able to support people into those industries?

Angus Robertson: The first part of Mr Rowley's question was about whether there are discussions with education colleagues about the provision of support in education and training in relation to the creative industries. The roll-out of the screen sector element of the curriculum across Scotland that I mentioned, which has a positive benefit in Fife too, is an example of that.

Mr Rowley has drawn my attention to a specific issue in the region that he represents. I would be grateful if he could forward the details to me so that I might be able to reply to the second part of his question in a more considered and broader way.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary advise how the access all arts fund will continue to support the creative ambitions of children and young people across Scotland? Can he also provide an update on some of the projects that are under way as a result of the 2025 allocations?

Angus Robertson: The access all arts fund is supported by Creative Scotland and the National Lottery. I would be happy to put Mr Coffey in contact with the youth arts team at Creative Scotland to learn more about it.

Scottish Government funding directly supports the youth music initiative, which includes multi-artform strands. It will receive a budget uplift this year, taking our annual investment to £9.78 million. Within that, we will work with YouthLink, among other partners, to ensure that young people from all backgrounds have access to inspirational creative opportunities.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): A recent survey of participants in the access all arts fund, which benefits children and young people, found that 92 per cent of recipients experienced a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing, while 82 per cent said that

receiving funding helped them to overcome barriers to the arts.

Given the importance of that funding to enable children and young people to flourish in the arts and creative industries sector, what action is being put in place to ensure that that funding continues in coming years?

Angus Robertson: I am delighted to hear Mr Stewart's welcome of the positive impact that arts learning, arts teaching and participation in cultural life has on young people.

We have increased the culture budget in Scotland by the biggest single increment ever and the intention is to continue the growth of that budgetary support for the culture sector. I would welcome Alexander Stewart's support for that. I note that he voted against the budget, so I will work very hard to persuade him next year that he should vote for the continuing increases in culture funding that the Scottish National Party is delivering in government.

Palestine (Humanitarian Response)

4. **Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how its international development work is supporting the humanitarian response in Palestine. (S6O-04547)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Yesterday, the First Minister announced an additional £300,000 to support humanitarian aid efforts in the Middle East through the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal and the Scottish charities the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund and Mercy Corps. That is in addition to our previous contribution of £250,000 to the DEC appeal, SCIAF and Mercy Corps, as well as £750,000 for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East appeal in November 2023. That funding has helped to deliver life-saving food, shelter and medical assistance for people across Gaza and the wider region.

Humanitarian needs continue to escalate. The DEC appeal has so far raised £3.8m in Scotland and the Scottish public can continue to make a donation to it.

Maggie Chapman: The cabinet secretary will be aware that, in addition to the important support that he outlined, many other organisations have made contributions—sometimes in kind—to support those who are trying to cope with occupation and genocide. One example is the International Fire and Rescue Association, a Scotland-based charity that has donated a fire appliance to Dundee's twin city of Nablus. However, the appliance has been impounded by Israeli military customs since last July. Is there anything that the cabinet secretary can do to press for the release of the appliance so that it can be used as intended to aid communities in Nablus?

Angus Robertson: Maggie Chapman is right to raise the fact that there is a broad range of Scottish charitable and third sector organisations that want to assist Palestinian people in their present time of great need and distress. It is not just the fire engine that she has talked about that is being prevented from entering Gaza; much of the aid that the international community would wish to provide to people in Gaza is not getting through either. I will use every and any opportunity that I can to add my voice and the Scottish Government's voice to appeal to authorities everywhere that have a locus in this to allow aid to get through to help the people of Gaza.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): On the Scottish Government's international development work, following the previous portfolio questions with the cabinet secretary, he stated in a letter to me that

"none of the grants awarded under the climate justice fund have gone to for-profit entities."

However, the 2024 annual report for one of the three organisations that received money from the climate justice fund appears to show net profits and proposed dividends. Will the cabinet secretary look into that again? In the meantime, will he tell the chamber what his definition of "non-profit" is?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The supplementary question does not relate directly to the initial question, but is there anything that the cabinet secretary can add?

Angus Robertson: I will try my best, Presiding Officer.

We are very careful to make appropriate decisions in relation to the humanitarian response in Palestine. However, as Mr Bibby has drawn my attention to, there is wider funding that is provided beyond disasters and emergency relief. I will look closely at the point that he makes and write back to him. I will look at the issue, but I am sure, Presiding Officer, that you would wish me to focus my remarks on the humanitarian response in Palestine, which I have done already.

Arts and Culture (Geographic Spread and Representation)

5. **Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is ensuring that its work to support and promote Scotland's arts and culture is geographically spread and representative. (S6O-04548)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus

Robertson): We are proud that our record funding to Creative Scotland this year supports a wide range of exciting new entrants to the multiyear funding programme, serving smaller, often rural communities. That includes Glenkens Community and Arts Trust in Dumfries and Galloway and the Lyth Arts Centre in the Highlands, which join existing members of the geographically diverse cohort such as Deveron Projects in Aberdeenshire and Dance North Scotland in Moray. It demonstrates that we are committed to ensuring that our support for the sector is distributed across Scotland, reaching the communities who need it most.

Emma Roddick: The Highlands and Islands region has a lot to be proud of in the realm of arts and culture, but I am aware that many organisations often feel that they are at a disadvantage, because it is not as easy for them to mix with officials or funders when informal conversations about what people are doing well frequently happen in the central belt. Will the cabinet secretary go into more detail on how the Scottish Government ensures that opportunities are available across the country?

I reiterate my very warm invitation for the cabinet secretary to come to Eden Court and hear for himself about the role that the theatre plays not only in fostering local talent and promoting arts and culture in Inverness and the Highlands but in ensuring that it is firmly embedded in the wider community.

Angus Robertson: I assure Emma Roddick that the voices, views, needs, interests, concerns and expectations of arts organisations throughout Scotland, regardless of where they are, are important to the Scottish Government and to Creative Scotland. Where we have strategic partnerships, round-table events and on-going dialogue, I am very keen to ensure that everybody who can and wants to take part is able to do so.

As a parliamentarian who represented a north of Scotland constituency for a long time, I know how important Eden Court theatre is. All organisations that meet established criteria are considered equally for funding, irrespective of the interactions that they might have in person with Creative Scotland. Meeting the criteria is the sole factor that determines a funding decision, and I urge Eden Court theatre to get in touch with Creative Scotland directly if it has any concerns.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Pam Gosal to ask a brief supplementary question.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): The Tower Digital Arts Centre in Helensburgh, which is in my region, was saved from closure last month due to the hard work and determination of campaigners. Since 2014, the facility has provided regular cinema screenings and has served as a venue for concerts, election hustings and other community events. The potential closure of the venue would be devastating for the local community, which has limited cultural venues. Will the cabinet secretary congratulate the Save the Tower campaign group for its hard work? Will he outline what more the Scottish Government can do to support cultural facilities in the West Scotland region?

Angus Robertson: I am absolutely delighted to join Pam Gosal in commending the campaigners. One of the underreported developments in recent years, with the financial distress that has been felt in the cultural sector here and elsewhere in the United Kingdom, which has been existential for many, is that a great number of important cultural venues have been saved from closure. We should all be grateful to those who have been involved in the campaigns to retain them.

I assure Pam Gosal that, like me, colleagues in Creative Scotland are absolutely seized of the need to ensure that the funding streams that are available can go to venues and organisations around the country. That has already been rolled out in part through Creative Scotland's multiyear funding programme. Other funding streams are also available.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Beatrice Wishart—please be even briefer.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The VisitScotland national events funding programme aims to support events outwith the central belt. However, one of the eligibility criteria is that there be more than 1,000 in-person attendees. That is an unreasonable ask for many small, rural and island communities. What can the Scottish Government do to enable a review of that requirement to ensure that such communities can access the fund?

Angus Robertson: In replying briefly, I note that VisitScotland and the national events strategy falls in the orbit of another ministerial colleague, but I will ensure that the point that Beatrice Wishart has raised is passed on to my departmental colleagues, because her point is, of course, entirely relevant for smaller areas or parts of the country that are further away from major population centres.

European Union (Policy Alignment)

6. **Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with EU member states regarding Scotland's alignment with EU policies, in light of the election of President Trump. (S6O-04549)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): Regardless of the outcome of any

US presidential election, and following the strong deregulatory impact of Brexit, the Scottish Government has always had a policy of aligning with the EU where it is possible and meaningful to do so.

In Scotland, we will continue to pursue that alignment across the full range of devolved policy areas. That will allow us to protect and advance the high standards that our fellow Europeans benefit from thanks to effective EU regulation, and will allow us to keep up with legislation that is in place across the member states of the EU.

Willie Rennie: I agree with the cabinet secretary and note that doing that is even more important following the election of President Trump, considering the volatile effects that his leadership has had.

It is reported that President Trump will visit Scotland in September. What plans does the cabinet secretary have for that visit and for engagement with President Trump? What will he say to him?

Angus Robertson: I can confirm to Mr Rennie that I do not have any scheduled meetings with President Trump in which I could raise the issues that he is outlining. There are also no plans in place or time agreed for any potential state visit, which is a matter for the United Kingdom Government.

Mr Rennie raises points about the challenges that have been thrown up in recent weeks and months, which make it much more challenging for all of us to protect our economic interests and free trade. To go back to the question, we will remain in dialogue on that with our EU friends, neighbours and allies. That is one of the areas in which Scotland house in Brussels does excellent work.

Independence

7. **Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its strategy to further the case for Scottish independence, in light of recent reported polling indicating a majority in support. (S6O-04550)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish Government believes that the best outcomes for Scotland will come if we ensure that more of the decisions about Scotland are taken by and for the people of Scotland. The First Minister is setting out a vision of a country free from child poverty, with higher living standards and with the powers of independence to create the kind of Scotland that we know is possible. We remain committed to publishing a final overview independence paper to give people in Scotland the information that they need to make an informed choice about their constitutional future.

Karen Adam: People in Scotland are recognising the democratic deficit that we face. Given that growing public awareness, will the Scottish Government provide an update on how it intends to build on that momentum and continue informing the public, through civic engagement and public education, about the opportunities of Scotland becoming an independent country?

Angus Robertson: I agree with Karen Adam. It is important to say that the Scottish Government has set out and will continue to set out the opportunities that will come from being an independent country. We have set out our plans for the economy of an independent Scotland; for rejoining the European Union; for a new constitution with democracy, rights and equality at its heart; and for an inclusive and welcoming approach to citizenship, as well as a migration system that meets Scotland's needs. The First Minister is also setting out our four priorities for government through a series of speeches. We will continue to speak about the issues that matter to the public so that people can have an informed choice about the future options that are available to them.

European Union (Membership)

8. **Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will change its policy position in relation to an independent Scotland seeking to rejoin the EU, in light of the potential impact of US tariffs on the UK and the EU. (S6O-04551)

The Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The increased global economic volatility following President Trump's announcements on tariffs reinforces more than ever the importance of Scotland having the security, stability and opportunity that come with EU membership. The EU is a rules and values-based organisation, with a single market of around 450 million citizens. Given the present global uncertainties, the importance of sustaining a Europe of countries working together for peace, prosperity and progress has never been greater. For those reasons, we are profoundly committed to Scotland achieving membership of the EU as an independent nation.

Christine Grahame: I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer, with which I agree. Recent analysis by the office of the chief economic adviser estimated that Brexit trade barriers could impact Scotland's economy by £4 billion. With the unreliability of the Trump pronouncements on tariffs, which are almost daily, does the cabinet

secretary agree that we were better off in the EU than we are out of it?

Angus Robertson: Indeed, I agree. Brexit has been a huge backwards step that has sharply reduced access to our greatest international trading market while bureaucracy, costs, delays and complexity have been imposed on Scottish businesses. Recent Scottish Government modelling estimates that leaving the EU will reduce Scottish gross domestic product by at least £4 billion in the long run, measured against today's GDP, compared with what the figure would have been under continued EU membership.

The Scottish Government is doing what it can to mitigate the damage of a Brexit that Scotland did not vote for, to minimise divergence from the EU and to ease Scotland's return to the EU as an independent country at the earliest opportunity.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I was hoping that we would get some Brexit realism from Christine Grahame but, sadly, we were disappointed on this occasion.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that, given the impact that we are already seeing of US tariffs on Scottish exports, good relations with the US have never been more important? Does he share my concern about the potential closure of the US consulate in Edinburgh, which is being mooted by the US Department of State? Does the cabinet secretary acknowledge the excellent work that the consulate has done over many years? Will he join me in calling on the US Department of State to reconsider any plans to close that vital resource?

Angus Robertson: I join Murdo Fraser in paying tribute to the work of the consulate of the United States of America in Edinburgh. It has done a tremendous job over the more than 200 years that a US consulate has been in Scotland. Since 1798, there have been diplomatic relations between US diplomats and Scotland, and we very much value that.

I met Kathryn Porter, the consul general, this morning. The closure is a decision for the US Administration's Department of State, but I observe that, in recent years, we have seen a significant increase in consular representation in Scotland. Many people would be extremely disappointed if the US were not part of the wider consular family of the international community that is based in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on constitution, external affairs and culture.

Justice and Home Affairs

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is justice and home affairs. I remind members that questions 4 and 8 have been grouped together, so I will take any supplementary questions after both substantive questions have been asked. Members looking to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak buttons during the relevant questions. Again, there is quite a bit of demand for supplementary questions, so I make the usual appeal for brevity in both questions and answers.

Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023

1. **Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government, regarding any implications for its work on tackling rural crime and preventing the theft and resale of machinery in Scotland, when it was first made aware of the proposals for the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023, which applies to England and Wales. (S6O-04552)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I know that the member has raised this issue before due to her interest in rural crime. It was previously thought that Scottish Government officials became aware of the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Bill, which was a United Kingdom Parliament private member's bill, in May 2023. Ministers have now been made aware that there was some limited contact from the UK Government at official level in November 2022, which was not highlighted again until May 2023.

Rachael Hamilton: I thank the minister for the answer, because she previously told me that the Government was only informed of the bill's existence in May 2023, which gave it insufficient time to fully consider the bill's implications for Scotland. However, she has just confirmed, and I am pleased to say, that the Home Office contacted the Scottish Government several months before. In February of that year, it contacted the Scottish Government to discuss the bill and the policy position in Scotland. Instead of agreeing to discuss the bill, the Scottish National Party wrote back to say that it did not have any comments to offer, which I find extraordinary.

Given the threat of cross-border criminal movement of farm machinery, which impacts many farmers in the Scottish borders, will the minister engage urgently with the UK Government to ensure that we can replicate the 2023 act as soon as possible?

Siobhian Brown: The legislation has not yet been implemented down south, in England and Wales. My officials have been told that the Home Office is drafting the regulation, but the Labour Government cannot indicate a timeframe for that at this stage. Before considering potential implications for Scotland and what options might be available for Scottish ministers in order to

replicate the measures, my officials have requested updates from the Home Office on the regulation's progress and, once it is implemented, its effectiveness in mitigating equipment theft.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Many members across the chamber recognise the serious threats that rural crime poses to the communities that we represent. Will the minister outline how the Scottish Government is delivering on its commitment to continue to work with Police Scotland and the Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime in order to develop and implement strategies to combat those who perpetrate rural crime, such as equipment theft?

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Government recognises the harm that is caused to individuals, communities and businesses by rural crime, and we fully support the efforts of the Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime in aiming to tackle rural crime across the country. SPARC is chaired by Police Scotland and draws together key organisations and stakeholders from across the justice and rural sectors to provide a robust multi-agency approach to rural crime. The most recent SPARC update, from January this year, shows that the number of incidents of rural crime and the monetary costs of such incidents are both down compared to the figures at this point last year.

Prisoners (Early Release)

2. **Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that the prisoners released under the Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act 2025 included some who had broken prison rules. (S6O-04553)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act 2025 allows most short-term prisoners to be released from prison after serving 40 per cent, instead of 50 per cent, of their sentence. A breach of prison rules does not form part of the exclusion or eligibility criteria for a person's release from custody, as the process of using prison rules to amend a person's liberation date ceased in 2001.

Tim Eagle: Figures that were uncovered by the Scottish Conservatives revealed that almost a fifth of prisoners who were released as a result of the Scottish National Party's early release scheme broke prison rules while serving time. Our communities are rightly worried about the heightened risks of reoffending that come with that. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is important that we do not have a perceived soft-touch justice system? What is she putting in place to ensure that our communities are safe?

Angela Constance: With respect, I advise Mr Eagle that, given that Scotland's prison population is in excess of 8,100, there is nothing soft about our justice system, but the reality is that it could certainly be smarter in rehabilitating people and, when appropriate, shifting from the use of custody to the use of custody disposals.

As I said in my original answer, it is now many decades—more than 20 years—since the system in which additional days were added to someone's sentence ceased. We have to remember that our prison rules are subject to legal challenge. Nonetheless, they are always kept under review. It is important to recognise that, as a result of the correct planning that took place with the 2025 act and the earlier emergency release provisions, the return-to-custody rates were lower than the reconviction rates.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the assessment that has been made thus far of the impact of the 2025 act in relieving some of the acute pressures that are currently being experienced in our prison estate?

Angela Constance: The implementation of changes to the short-term release point that were made by the 2025 act resulted in the release of 312 individuals, and the act will have a sustained impact, with the sentenced population expected to be about 5 per cent lower than it would otherwise have been. Taking that action was essential to supporting the health and wellbeing of those working and living in the prison estate, and the implementation of the act has eased some of the immediate pressures in our prisons. However, the prison population remains at a high level, and the act is only one of a range of actions to get a more sustainable approach to the use of custody.

Antisocial Behaviour (Mid Scotland and Fife)

3. **Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking, including through work involving Police Scotland and local authorities, to address antisocial behaviour in Mid Scotland and Fife. (S6O-04554)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): We are committed to supporting Police Scotland and local authorities, which lead local responses to antisocial behaviour, involving prevention, intervention and enforcement. That enables a partnership approach that focuses on community safety as a whole and takes into account local need.

I recognise the impact that antisocial behaviour can have on local communities, which is why we have increased police funding to a record £1.62 billion this year. In addition, since 2008, through

our cashback for communities programme, we have provided £130 million to support young people who are most at risk of being involved in violence, antisocial behaviour and crime. For example, between 2023 and 2024, £354,462 was invested in diversionary work with young people in the Fife Council area.

Claire Baker: The minister may be aware of a number of recent reports of fire raising in Fife. More than 100 deliberate fires were recorded in March, with more incidents taking place throughout April. In the course of one day, seven deliberate fires were started, despite the extreme risk warning for wildfires that was in place. Fire raising creates huge risk of endangerment and damage to property, and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has said that the increase has put a needless drain on resources. I know that the police and fire services are doing local work to run high-visibility patrols and engagement with local schools, but how is the Scottish Government engaging with local services to ensure that they are properly resourced and supported in that work? How is it ensuring that its approach to addressing antisocial behaviour is able to respond to local challenges such as those?

Siobhian Brown: I recognise the direct impact of those incidents on communities, especially antisocial behaviour and fire raising, as Claire Baker has raised. I engage regularly with the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, as it is in my portfolio remit. As yet, the issue of fire raising has not specifically been raised with me in those meetings.

The independent working group on antisocial behaviour published a report in February this year, and I am working with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and Police Scotland to see how we can implement the report's recommendations to tackle all types of antisocial behaviour.

Gang-related Activity (Young People)

4. **Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps the justice secretary is taking to prevent young people from becoming involved in gang-related activity. (S6O-04555)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): We have invested more than £6 million over three years to support the implementation of the violence prevention framework. That includes supporting Medics Against Violence to engage with young people on the consequences of violence, and YouthLink Scotland to deliver the no knives, better lives training programme to hundreds of practitioners and young people across Scotland. Through our cashback for communities initiative, we have provided £130 million since 2008 to support young people who are most at risk at being involved in violence, antisocial behaviour or crime. To date, the programme has reached around 1.3 million young people in Scotland.

Evelyn Tweed: Organisations across Scotland are working hard to tackle the root causes of the rise in gang-related activity. What steps is the Government taking to support organisations that are working in that area to collaborate, strategise and share learning?

Angela Constance: I am thankful for the multiple organisations that are working extremely hard nationally and locally to tackle the root causes of gang-related activity. The organisations that we are funding through the violence prevention framework are working with local communities and multiple organisations, including in place-based work that is undertaken by the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit in Edinburgh, Fife and Glasgow. YouthLink Scotland works to co-ordinate and deliver the no knives, better lives training programme and resources to support, crucially, front-line practitioners, and the delivery of the Medics Against Violence navigator programme helps individuals and families to access the services that they need. The learning from that work is shared with others.

Gang-related Crime

8. **Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is working with partners to tackle gang-related crime. (S6O-04559)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Disrupting organised crime groups, diverting individuals away from organised crime and reducing the harm that is caused by organised crime to individuals, communities and organisations remain priorities for the Scottish Government and its partners. Partnership working is a crucial part of the approach to tackling organised crime, as set out in Scotland's serious organised crime strategy. The serious organised crime task force, which I chair, brings together law enforcement partners and representatives from the public, private and third sectors. The Scottish crime campus at Gartcosh enhances collaboration between key partner organisations in detecting and disrupting serious organised crime and terrorism.

Ben Macpherson: I thank the cabinet secretary for all the on-going, important and impactful work that is taking place. The Parliament will be aware of the reports in recent weeks and months of the very serious situation in central Scotland, including in my constituency, with targeted instances of organised crime related to gang violence. Police Scotland is doing a remarkable job in Edinburgh, and I pay tribute to it and thank it for its actions

and updates. However, I have had a concern for some months about the number of young people who are getting involved in gang-related crime in my constituency, in this city and across central Scotland. Building on the investment that was mentioned in a previous answer and the cashback for communities programme, is there any more resource for youth work providers at this really difficult time?

Angela Constance: Ben Macpherson raises an important point. It is crucial to reinforce the message—as he has done—that Police Scotland has given the people of Edinburgh and those elsewhere that it is in pursuit of criminals. They are being tracked down. Police Scotland is on it and has made arrests, but I cannot say anything more about live proceedings. It is crucial that the police have our full support, because although they will always rise to the challenge, everyone needs to play their part by providing information to the police. People can do that anonymously via Crimestoppers.

It is also crucial that multiple agencies are focused on prevention. I mentioned the cashback for communities programme, and many other programmes are active in the Edinburgh area. I would be happy to provide information on those to Mr Macpherson or any other member. The cashback programme currently supports 16 projects and helps more than 3,000 young people in Edinburgh.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The Scottish Government treats criminals under the age of 25 with kid gloves however serious their crimes are, but senior police officers have said that criminal gangs are exploiting that. At the recent summit, young people themselves said that actions should have consequences regardless of age. Will the Scottish Government reconsider its attitude to criminals under the age of 25 and scrap its two-tier sentencing guidelines?

Angela Constance: I say to Ms Dowey for the umpteenth time that it is imperative, particularly in relation to our young people, that we take appropriate approaches. We see that with the independent Scottish Sentencing Council approaches, which are based on evidence and what will actually work to deter our young people from crime.

I would have hoped that Ms Dowey would have joined this Government in condemning the criminal exploitation of our children. Those offences and the exploitation of our children are somewhat hidden and underreported. It is very clear to me and others that some of our young people are being exploited by serious organised crime and are viewed as disposable resources. It is imperative that we all stand together to combat the exploitation of our children for criminal purposes.

HMP Stirling (Noise Disturbance)

5. **Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what the timescale is to adapt the HMP Stirling estate to address the ongoing noise complaints, in light of reports from residents that the noise disturbance is getting worse. (S6O-04556)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): I am aware that the member attended a constructive meeting at HMP and YOI Stirling on 24 March to discuss the matter directly with Scottish Prison Service senior officials, during which SPS provided a comprehensive update on solutions. Scottish Prison Service proposals that are now in the final stage will change how particular rooms have access to fresh air. A timeline for the project is being developed and it will be shared with the member and other local representatives, including the local residents association, as soon as possible. SPS will then seek final comments prior to seeking formal planning permission from the local council.

Mark Ruskell: I absolutely welcome the work that SPS staff do at HMP Stirling—that is not in question at all. However, the quality of the building absolutely is in question, and there needs to be an absolute cut in the noise disturbance. I have three constituents who have sold houses as a result of that in recent months, others who have declining mental health and others who have simply given up because they do not believe that change is coming.

Will the cabinet secretary ensure that the programme will be accelerated, that the trial noise reduction measures will be put in place immediately, that the planning application to make the measures permanent will be lodged immediately and that a clear date for the completion of the project will be provided, as she has already outlined?

Angela Constance: I express my on-going appreciation to Mark Ruskell and to other MSPs including Alexander Stewart and the constituency MSP, Keith Brown, for pursuing the issue constructively and with sensitivity. I reassure the member that I will be meeting the chief executive of the Scottish Prison Service after portfolio questions and that we discuss the matter regularly.

E-bike Misuse

6. **Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, regarding its work on antisocial behaviour, what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government about tackling the misuse of e-bikes. (S6O-04557)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): I completely understand the concerns over the misuse of e-bikes and other vehicles, and we are committed to collaborating with the UK Government where we can. I have therefore asked for work to be taken forward as a priority to develop a cross-party approach to the UK Government on how we can do more work together to tackle antisocial behaviour involving vehicles. We are also committed to supporting the police to tackle these issues, including by providing record funding of £1.62 billion to Police Scotland for 2025-26, to enhance its response.

Kevin Stewart: This is the second time that I have raised the issue in the past couple of months. I am really concerned about antisocial behaviour in my city and elsewhere. The UK Government's inactivity in dealing with the increasing problem of antisocial behaviour by e-bike users is galling, and I am afraid that its intransigence may lead to serious injury or even death. Has the Scottish Government asked the UK Government whether it will consider a licensing scheme to control e-bike use?

Siobhian Brown: Antisocial behaviour involving vehicles is a shared challenge across the whole of the UK, and some powers, including those over vehicle licensing, are reserved. We are committed to working with the UK Government to improve community safety and to achieve our shared goal. E-bikes exceeding 250W or 15.5 miles per hour are classified as motor vehicles and require a driving licence, insurance and vehicle tax. Privately owned e-scooters cannot be legally used on public roads or pavements in Scotland, and off-road vehicles such as quad bikes require a licence to be used on public roads.

While the Scottish Government has not so far specifically requested an additional licensing scheme for e-bikes, I recognise that there are calls for further legislation. That is why I am keen to work with the UK Government on a cross-party basis to explore practical solutions. The member says that he has raised the matter twice, and I know that several members in the chamber have also raised it. Jim Fairlie and I have set up a group with interested MSPs, and I am happy to invite Kevin Stewart to the next meeting.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Sue Webber to ask a very brief supplementary question.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Any e-bike that does not meet the electrically assisted pedal cycle requirements is classified as a motorcycle or a moped, as the minister has stated. That requires that it be registered and taxed, and the rider requires a valid licence and must wear a helmet. However, we have seen some e-bikes exceed the speed for electrically assisted pedal cycles, and they should be classified as mopeds—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question.

Sue Webber: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Can the minister outline how she is working with Police Scotland to ensure that e-bikes that do not meet the EAPC requirements are being—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister.

Sue Webber: —seized by—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister.

Siobhian Brown: I assure the member that we support Police Scotland and its partners in dealing with the misuse of vehicles. Enforcement is a matter for Police Scotland, and local policing teams are best placed to identify misuse and work to prevent future incidents. Police have the powers to enforce the law using public disorder or dispersal powers. I have reached out to the member to be part of the group on off-road vehicles, along with other MSPs.

Drones (Prison Infiltration)

7. **Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in response to reports of criminals using drones to infiltrate prisons. (S6O-04558)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The use of drones to introduce illicit items into our prison estate is a current and credible threat, and it is one that the Scottish Prison Service and I are taking very seriously. I am pleased to inform the member that the Scottish Prison Service has been trialling preventative measures to negate the risk that is presented by drones and it is evaluating their effectiveness before finalising a targeted approach to this clear and obvious threat to safety in our prisons.

Alexander Stewart: Information obtained from prisons shows that criminals are increasingly using state-of-the-art technology to avoid security. One drone was found to be full of mobile phone SIM cards, syringes and needles, together with tablets and suspected drugs. Violence among inmates will be an inevitable consequence of drone deliveries. What action can be put in place to ensure that the lives of hard-working prison officers are protected?

Angela Constance: It is a fair and valid point. I will point to three specific actions among many that are being taken. There are measures to improve infrastructure, such as the piloting of the implementation of new window grills in some of our larger establishments. There are targeted reactive measures that involve the piloting of

covert technology to detect when a drone is approaching or entering SPS airspace. There is also the drone detection pilot called Dedrone, which ended earlier this year. SPS is currently exploring other software and technologies that are on the market.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on justice and home affairs. Before we move to the next item of business, there will be a brief pause to allow a change of members on the front benches.

United Kingdom Government Welfare Reforms

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-17242, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on the UK Government welfare reforms. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible. I call Shirley-Anne Somerville to speak to and move the motion. Cabinet secretary, you have around 13 minutes.

14:51

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I open this important debate with a message of solidarity: I want all disabled people to know that this Government stands with you in opposing the planned UK Government benefit changes. I hope that everyone here in the Scottish Parliament can come together today to condemn the really callous reforms that aim to save money on the backs of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

It is important that we begin by reflecting on the purpose of social security and on what the duty of the Government is to its citizens. Social security is an essential safety net made available to everyone. The word “everyone” is key, because any of us might find ourselves, at any point in our lives, needing help from that collective safety net if we are unable to get paid work due to sickness, or if we have a disability, with all the extra financial costs that disability brings, or, indeed, because we are caring for a loved one—such care reduces demand on wider health and social care resources.

The Scottish Government’s position stands in sharp contrast to the damaging cuts that are being proposed, and which have begun to be implemented, by the UK Government. It would seem that the UK Government is utterly intent on really unforgivable and stigmatising rhetoric, which is already causing great concern and distress, in particular towards people with mental health conditions and other people who are entitled to help from the benefits system. As we devolved our benefits system, we put so much effort, collectively as a Parliament, into reducing stigma and encouraging people to apply for what they are entitled to. It is deeply disappointing to see the UK Government on a different track.

I have been in politics for a long time now, but I never thought that I would hear Labour ministers referring to people in need of support as “taking the mickey”, and, in the case of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, going on national television and equating disability benefit payments

to the “pocket money” that he pays his children. Such reckless language makes life all the harder for disabled people. It increases the barriers to—

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): He apologised!

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Oh, he apologised, I hear Mr Marra saying from a sedentary position. Well, that makes it fine, does it not? That makes it absolutely fine to say things like that, or even to have those thoughts about a disabled person.

Such language also increases the barriers to accessing support that people are entitled to. I am encouraged by the amount of cross-party opposition to the UK Government’s rhetoric. I welcome comments from some Labour MSPs and MPs who have stood firm in their values and called on the UK Government to scrap these immoral plans. I am saddened, however, that a number of them have remained silent.

The decisions that the UK Government has taken with its publication of “Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper” and its subsequent spring statement not only weaken the UK social security system but target some of the most vulnerable people who rely on it. People who do not meet the new personal independence payment threshold will receive far less than they would otherwise be entitled to and will be subject to pressure to enter the workforce, despite the challenges that society puts in their way.

The changes to PIP were announced by the UK Government in advance of any proper consultation. The current consultation has been described by Benefits and Work as “an entirely bogus” consultation in which the Department for Work and Pensions refuses to consult

“on almost everything that matters most to claimants.”

It is important to examine in detail just how damaging the proposed cuts are and the impacts that they will have, not only on people in Scotland but on people across the UK. The Office for Budget Responsibility has confirmed that the UK Government will cut £4.8 billion from benefits in 2029-30. The DWP’s impact assessment highlights that, by 2029-30, 3.2 million families will lose out as a result of the proposed cuts, with each family losing an average of £1,720 per year. A particularly damning aspect of an already damning set of circumstances is the fact that 96 per cent of the families who will be made worse off include a disabled person.

It is astonishing that, despite the UK Government’s stated aim of reducing child poverty, its analysis estimates that the reforms will push a further 250,000 people, including 50,000 children, into relative poverty by 2029-30. Where that leaves the current UK Government task force on child poverty, I honestly do not know.

Given that half of all children in poverty in Scotland live in a household with a disabled person, the proposed changes threaten to seriously undermine the progress that we are making here in Scotland to end child poverty, and they should have every member of this Parliament united in condemnation of the cuts and their impact.

I also find it astonishing that, in undertaking this exercise, the UK Government is balancing the books on the shoulders of vulnerable people and that it is doing so because of so-called fiscal rules, which are nothing short of totally self-imposed. That point, which has been made by many leading economists, has been echoed by former Bank of England deputy governor Charlie Bean, who described the Government’s position as

“a frankly pretty ridiculous position”.

The UK Government’s position is ridiculous, but it will also be calamitous for those who will be affected. It is no wonder that the charities and stakeholders who know most about the impact that the cuts will have have rightly called on the UK Government to think again. Macmillan Cancer Support, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Scope, Mencap, Citizens Advice and dozens more all wrote a joint letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the eve of her statement, in which they urged her to change course. On the day of the statement, End Child Poverty said:

“This government came to power with a commitment to significantly reduce the numbers of children living in poverty. Yet ... the recent proposed cuts to disability payments ... will ... pull more families into hardship.”

Despite our fixed budget and our limited powers, we have transformed social security provision in Scotland. We have established a radically different system that is actively and vigorously working to ensure that as many people as possible get the support that they are entitled to. I am delighted to say that, yesterday, we completed the national launch of the pension age disability payment, which means that people of any age in any part of Scotland will be able to apply for disability assistance from Social Security Scotland, not the DWP.

That is an important distinction, as our approach is to ensure that disabled people get the support that they are entitled to, while making sure that the application process is as straightforward as possible. Once an application has been submitted, it will go through a robust decision-making process.

In 2025-26, we will invest £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 block grant adjustment. However, the UK Government's planned cuts will lead to further cuts to our budget. We need to take time to work through and fully consider the significant impact that those cuts will have, but it will be significant. The Scottish Government estimates that the proposed reforms will result in the loss of £400 million from the block grant adjustment by 2029-30.

That said, I reassure the people of Scotland that the Scottish Government's social security system will ensure that our fundamental principle of treating people with dignity, fairness and respect will continue to guide our approach.

While the UK Government is focusing on reducing the amount of money that is spent on supporting disabled people and others who need help, this Government believes that social security is an investment in the people of Scotland, in our communities and in all our futures. It is an investment because we know that 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 people in Scotland by investing £6.9 billion in benefits and payments for 2025-26. Behind that big number are the disabled people, the carers and the low-income families whom we support. When people question how much we spend on social security in Scotland, they need to be honest with everyone, if they are asking us to cut that amount, that they are asking us to cut the amount of support that we give to disabled people, carers and low-income families. They need to be up front with everyone about which of those groups they would wish to see those cuts coming down upon.

The investment that we have made is around £1.3 billion more than the funding that we received from the UK Government for social security, and it supports around 2 million people in total. I make it clear that our principles of dignity, fairness and respect also apply to our employability system, and our aim is to support people into the right job for the right circumstances at the right time. Through our no one left behind approach, person-centred employability services are available in every local authority for people of all ages who experience structural barriers to participation in the labour market. We want our services to be seen as opportunities for participants, not as threats.

Furthermore, we are committed to halving the disability employment gap and supporting disabled people to access and sustain fair work. That is why we are introducing specialist employment support for disabled people for summer 2025, which will enhance existing provision and support more disabled people to access and sustain meaningful employment. That is in contrast to the contradictory plans of the UK Government, which is looking to push as many people as possible into employment while simultaneously cutting the number of work coaches who are available to support people. That, to me, does not make sense.

We are also using our limited budget to mitigate some of the most damaging policies of the UK Government—

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will if I can get some time back. Can I, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes.

Craig Hoy: I accept the cabinet secretary's point in respect of the UK Government, but has the Scottish National Party Government not made the same mistake at various points, when it has cut funding for employability at the same time as the benefits bill has been rising?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Our benefits bill is not related to whether people are in or out of work—with the greatest respect to Mr Hoy, I think that he is conflating different issues. Our benefits bill is dictated by whether people are disabled, are carers or are on a low income. Unfortunately, as we often see, many of those who rely on the Scottish child payment have parents who are in employment. It is important that we bear in mind the eligibility criteria for our benefits. Of course we want to see people going into employment—that is exactly why we have put £90 million in the budget to assist with that.

It is important that we recognise the impact that mitigation has on the Scottish Government budget, amounting to £210 million this year. The modelling estimates that as we move forward to mitigate the two-child cap in 2026, that will reduce the number of children who are living in relative poverty by 20,000, which will also have an impact on our budget for social security.

We are committed to ensuring that Scotland's finances remain on a sustainable trajectory, and we will publish our next medium-term financial strategy later next month, alongside a fiscal sustainability delivery plan. In conclusion, however, it is time for the UK Government to wake up to the reality and the impact that its reforms are already having on people in our society, in particular disabled people. That is not a viable or credible way to create a strong economy. It is not too late for the UK Government to change course and listen to the experience of those who will be impacted, and to the evidence from charities and academics, and change its mind.

I call on the UK Government to follow the Scottish Government's lead to protect and

enhance the social security safety net rather than dismantling it and stigmatising people who need support. I go back to the question that I raised at the start: what is social security for, and what is Government for? It is there to protect and to support people, and that is exactly what this Government will continue to do.

I move,

That the Parliament calls on the UK Labour administration to immediately scrap its damaging social security reforms, as announced in the *Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper*; highlights the UK Government's own impact analysis, which shows that 250,000 people, including 50,000 children, will be pushed into poverty under these plans, and notes the Resolution Foundation's report that lower-income households are set to become £500 a year poorer, following the UK Government's Spring Statement 2025.

15:04

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will put party politics aside for a minute, Presiding Officer. The recent debates about Labour's welfare changes, highly charged as they have been—and I am sure that there will be more of the same during this debate—have also raised questions about the administrative relationship between reserved and devolved social security policies. That is because there are legitimate questions to be asked about how well benefits can be delivered in what has become a highly complex system in which many claimants are dependent on benefits that are paid by both Westminster and Holyrood.

Of course, what matters is how effective we are in delivering benefits to help those who are most in need, in ensuring that the system is fair and non-discriminatory, in providing a genuine helping hand rather than a disincentive to work for those who are able, and, of course, in ensuring that the system is affordable. A great deal of debate has taken place around that topic and will continue to do so.

As my colleague Jeremy Balfour has said on more than one occasion, we find ourselves in a tangled web of payments from one agency that are contingent on the claimant's receiving benefits from another agency. Despite the better working relationship between Social Security Scotland and the DWP, that entanglement makes difficult the possibility of some changes to benefits in Scotland, because of the impact on reserved policy making. For example, under the changes to PIP, which are designed to save £5 billion in 2026-27, claimants must score more than four points in at least one activity area to qualify for the daily living component. At the same time, the eligibility criteria for the health aspect of universal credit will now be determined by PIP assessment. That risks a conflation of the additional cost of disability with out-of-work income replacement payments.

As we know, the eligibility criteria of the DWP and Social Security Scotland have, largely, been the same, irrespective of the process of engagement between agency and claimant. However, there is now a question whether the DWP will be able to effect a transfer to the adult disability payment or will reinstate PIP assessment in Scotland.

All of that might seem very technical, but it matters hugely to our constituents. There has been very unhelpful confusion and uncertainty, which means that many constituents—rightly, as the cabinet secretary has said—are unsure of where they stand.

This is where we come to the politics. Some believe that the problem would be resolved if social security was fully devolved to this place. Others take the opposite view, thinking that the issue should be rolled back to Westminster. We can all argue about our different perspectives—no doubt, those will be part of the manifesto discussions for the forthcoming 2026 elections. However, the fact is that, whatever our views, here is where we deal with the current status quo. It is therefore important that, in today's debate, we focus on that context.

As we do that, we must have in mind two things: our ability to help those who are to most in need and our ability to ensure more sustainable routes back into employment. What is important in that regard is that the assessment of the evidence—and not just our party-political perspective—tells us what the answer should be. Which benefits are working well when it comes to better outcomes and why, and which benefits are not working so well? To be honest, as we must be, it is a very mixed picture, as members of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee know only too well.

I come to Labour's welfare reforms. I agree with Liz Kendall that there are very serious issues in welfare. The first is the growing number of claimants and therefore the speed of the increase in the benefits bill. We should not forget that the backdrop to that in Scotland is the fact that we will face a deficit of £1.3 billion in the block grant adjustment.

The second issue is that the current system is not addressing the growing problem of economic inactivity. We know from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that only a fifth of countries have a higher rate of inactivity than was the case pre-pandemic, and we are on the wrong side of that line. Our economic inactivity rate is a problem.

We also know that, in the results of the Scottish health survey and the DWP family resources

survey, both conducted two years ago, 34 per cent of Scotland's population was classified as having a disability, compared with 24 per cent in England. Liz Kendall is quite right to raise the concerns that she has raised, and I do not believe that anyone in any party should deny that, because it is high time that we addressed the issue of how the current system is creating perverse incentives. That is something that we cannot have.

If social justice is the defining philosophy of the Labour Party, as many of its founding fathers and current members of Parliament have claimed, it is pretty hard to square that with the spring budget—or the mini-statement, as many commentators rightly prefer to call it. That is because, as virtually all social policy commentators have said, the Government's policies are disproportionately hitting the poor and the more vulnerable.

The issue goes further than that, however, as there is a lack of coherency and planning around Labour's policy making. For example, as moves are made to get more people back into work in some areas, why would we burden employers with higher national insurance charges, which serve only to increase their costs, making it more difficult to hire new labour, and why would we allow new employment legislation—the Employment Rights Bill—to make it more difficult for employers to take on workers? That does not make sense to me, nor does it make sense to people who genuinely want to get back into the labour market or to all those entrepreneurs who are willing to invest in the necessary training schemes. Craig Hoy was quite right to point out the employability aspect of the issue that we are discussing.

As well as that, there is a lack of coherent strategy for the future role of the state, especially in terms of public sector reform. Our Finance and Public Administration Committee knows all about that because, of course, the same can be said about the situation in Scotland, where there is a lack of joined-up thinking when it comes to industrial policy. All of that leaves the public rather bewildered and, in some cases, very angry.

I do not pretend for a minute that the previous Conservative Government can take any of the moral high ground when it comes to stimulating necessary economic growth, which is so desperately needed to increase gross domestic product. I have spoken before about the damage of the Johnson and Truss years with regard to the relationship between Government and financial institutions—exactly the same problem that is now to the fore in the United States, with politics getting in the way of sound economics. That is what is happening with regard to the current serious debate about higher education funding in Scotland, where sound economics tells us exactly what should be happening but, because of politics, it is not happening.

Last Friday, the latest quarterly economic indicator from the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, published in partnership with the Fraser of Allander Institute, revealed that business confidence has taken a serious dent as a result of soaring taxes, increased labour costs and increased energy costs, to say nothing of the impacts of the international trade wars. Doug Smith, the vice-president of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, went as far as to say that

"The cost of doing business is simply unsustainable"

and that

"Employers are being punished in every direction".

Doug Smith believes that Scotland is losing out on major UK and international contracts because we are increasingly seen as uncompetitive. He also cites severe warnings about the fact that Scotland does not have anywhere near the trained workforce that we need to have in order to ensure that we can move forward.

It is all very well for the SNP to have a go at the Labour Party about its welfare reforms—I agree, up to a point—but it also needs to look closer to home, not just in terms of the ballooning welfare bill in Scotland, about which Scottish ministers seem remarkably complacent, given the effect on the Scottish budget, but with regard to the news that, in the current economic conditions, we are struggling to bring people back into the workforce, which is not acceptable to me.

Finally, the Scottish Fiscal Commission has warned of the introduction of light-touch reviews in Scotland and the deliberate avoidance of in-person checks, which is a big factor in rising costs. It points out that only 2 per cent of reviews in Scotland are turned back, whereas 16 per cent are turned back in England.

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

Liz Smith: I will, but I think that I am nearly out of time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Very briefly, cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank Liz Smith for her contribution so far, much of which I agree with. However, the comparison that she has just made is unfair, because the 2.2 per cent figure is to do with cases that were not due for a renewal and were moving from PIP to ADP. That is why there is a difference. I take Liz Smith's point, and we need to be careful about the issue, but I caution against that comparison.

Liz Smith: We do need to be careful, because the point has been raised by the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

I am very aware of the saying that all political careers end in failure. That is an adage that I am trying to avoid for at least another year, but it is a message to those who are leading Governments just now. When we do not listen to what the public, business and some of the best advisers are saying, that is exactly what happens—our careers will end in failure. I strongly urge us to guard against that.

We must take the issue of social security very seriously, whether we are in Scotland or the rest of the UK, because we simply cannot go on as we are.

I move amendment S6M-17242.3, to leave out from "calls" to end and insert:

"notes the most recent concerns highlighted by both the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Scottish Fiscal Commission about the projected substantial increases in UK and Scottish welfare budgets, the resulting fiscal pressures, and the unsustainability of these budgets in the current economic circumstances, and expresses its deep concern that neither the UK Government nor the Scottish Government has delivered policies that will address the high levels of economic inactivity or policies that will promote sustained economic growth."

15:15

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): During the debate, we have already acknowledged the complexity of social security and the complexities of having a devolved system and a reserved system that interact and interlock. Liz Smith outlined much of that in a credible way, as she always does, which perhaps helps us to focus our thoughts and comments.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the reform of social security and employment support. We have debated such issues many times in the chamber. Each time we have done so, I have called for a serious debate on the issues. I have done that consistently throughout my time in Parliament, particularly in relation to the devolved social security system, which we as a Parliament are collectively responsible for and on which the Government brings forward its policies.

There are serious questions to be asked and answered about how we support people into good work and about how our social security systems can be built with resilience for the longer term. We know about the significant challenges that will exist in relation to demographic pressures and wider issues.

I recognise the concerns that have been expressed about some of the proposed reforms, and I acknowledge, as I have in my amendment, the need for consultation and listening. We must ensure that any reform to social security, whether across the UK or here in Scotland, is fair and is balanced by considering how we support people into work, because that is a right and good thing to do—it should be the aspiration of us all in this Parliament—how we help people to thrive when they are in work, and how we support those who cannot or will not work.

Liz Smith: I entirely agree with that point, but how does that sit with the UK Labour Government's intention to put more and more costs on to employers, who are the very ones who can help people back into work?

Paul O'Kane: Liz Smith and I have debated the national insurance increase before, as she has with Mr Marra and other members in the chamber. That choice was made so as not to put the burden of taxation on to working people and other individuals and to ensure instead that, for example, the Parliament could receive a £5 billion uplift in the budget. Those are decisions that we have made and that we have debated in the chamber. We must look at the issues and the system in the round. That is what part of the debate today should be about.

I recognise the concerns. If we are to have a serious debate on the issues, I do not think that the Government motion, which effectively calls for the UK Government to scrap the green paper in its entirety, is a particularly credible way to go about it. We should look at the separate reforms that are proposed—the cabinet secretary outlined in her speech her issue with many of them—because I do not think that we can just take the entire paper and throw out everything that is contained in it.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The day before the proposals were unveiled, Mr O'Kane and I were on a panel together, and he did not want to speculate. We do not have to speculate any more—we know what is being proposed and what is being consulted on. I will pick one example. Does he agree that no health top-up should be paid to people under 22? If he agrees with that, what are those people supposed to do in that time period, if they have no money coming in?

Paul O'Kane: The point that I was about to make is that the green paper contains a range of proposals. The cabinet secretary now wants to pick and choose and debate individual proposals, but, in her motion, she says that she wants to scrap the paper in its entirety and not have a broader debate about the issues that are contained in it.

There are nuanced issues in relation to the cohort of young people under 22. We have to look at how to go about increasing the age at which people receive support and at how they can

receive differentiated support—for example, by moving the age from 18 to 16—and at how people are more supported in the round. That is important.

On supporting people into work—I will come on to talk about this—we must ensure that the investment of £1 billion that the UK Government is planning to make is focused on young people. We know that there is a huge challenge with that cohort of young people, because, if they do not work by the time they are 24, it is very unlikely that they will ever work. As I have outlined, it is important that those people who cannot work are given the support that they need to live.

I am concerned that we are not having a rounded debate and that the Government has decided, as set out in its motion, that the green paper should be completely dismissed out of hand. That would mean, for example, that we would not consider increasing the payment rate for the standard allowance of universal credit, which will benefit people who are out of work. It would mean abandoning any proposals to scrap the work capability assessment, which has long been called for by many campaigners who seek reform of the social security system. It would mean failing to progress any proposals to introduce a right to try work, which would allow individuals to attempt employment without the risk of losing the social security that they rely on. As I have said, it would also mean failing to advance the plan to invest £1 billion into employability support to ensure that people are properly supported in sustainable, well-paid employment. I am disappointed that we are not having that broader debate today.

It is right that we focus on what is happening in Scotland. The cabinet secretary made reference to employability and the work that is being done in that regard in Scotland. However, we know that, at present, 84,000 young people in Scotland are not in education, employment or training. We also know, thanks to research by the Scottish Parliament information centre and the Fraser of Allander Institute, that the disability employment gap in Scotland is wider than it is in the rest of the UK. We know that nearly 300,000 working-age people in Scotland are out of work because of illness.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): We all want more people to be in employment, particularly those with a disability. However, does Paul O'Kane recognise that getting more people into employment does not necessarily mean a reduction in ADP or PIP payments? The point of ADP and PIP is to help those with a disability to get into employment, thus there would not necessarily be a cut in ADP just because more people were in employment.

Paul O'Kane: I was just coming on to talk about ADP and PIP and trying to understand our devolved context in relation to ADP. The reforms to PIP are at UK level; we have already explored that in the opening speeches. ADP is devolved to this Parliament, and it is for this Parliament to decide where ADP goes in the future with regard to its sustainability. I accept the points that have been made about the interconnectedness of payments, including gateway payments, which Liz Smith and other members have referred to. There will have to be proper consultation and communication on that from the DWP to the Scottish Government.

I return to employability, because it is extremely important that we have a focus on that in Scotland. At the same time as we have faced the challenges that I was outlining prior to Mr Balfour's intervention, the uptake rate of the devolved job start payment has been only 21 per cent. In addition, in recent years, there have been significant cuts of around £30 million to the Scottish Government's employability budget. There is a serious debate to be had about the need for reform of the system more generally, and it is a shame that the Scottish Government is not particularly stepping up to that debate, either today or more widely.

Labour believes in the dignity of secure employment, recognising that it is the most sustainable route out of poverty for those who can work, but that we must protect those who cannot. I encourage everyone to engage constructively in the consultation and the process, even on the reforms that will be carried out at both UK and Scottish levels.

I move amendment S6M-17242.1, to leave out from "calls" to end and insert:

"agrees that any reforms to social security policy must respect the dignity of work, while also being fair and protecting the most vulnerable who are unable to work; notes the *Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper* and that its proposals are currently under consultation; recognises that a number of the areas covered in the Green Paper are devolved to the Scottish Parliament and will therefore not change as a result of the Spring Statement; notes the proposals within the Green Paper to support and encourage people into good work and to reduce bureaucracy for those in receipt of social security; welcomes that this is backed up by a £1 billion commitment for employability services across the UK; acknowledges that well-paid, secure work is the most sustainable route out of poverty; welcomes, therefore, the action taken by the UK Labour administration to increase the National Living Wage and improve rights for workers through the Employment Rights Bill, and is concerned that the disability employment gap in Scotland is wider than elsewhere in Great Britain, that one in four people in Scotland rely on welfare spending from the Scottish Government to cover their living costs and that there are as many as 84,000 young people in Scotland who are not in work, education or training."

15:23

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): This afternoon's debate is a call to conscience. The Scottish Green Party believes in building a society in which everyone can live with dignity; in which compassion, equality and social justice are embedded in every aspect of public policy; and in which we stand up in solidarity with those who are marginalised and minoritised by various intersecting systems of oppression.

The UK Government's latest welfare reform proposals betray that vision. The reforms are not only technically flawed but morally indefensible. If implemented, they will devastate the lives of millions, particularly those of disabled people, carers and young people who are already teetering on the brink of—if they are not already in—poverty.

Let us be clear about what is on the table. The UK Government's "Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper" outlines sweeping changes to disability benefits that would result in the most brutal package of cuts since George Osborne's austerity years. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, the reforms aim to cut nearly £7 billion annually from benefits paid to disabled people and carers. Savings for the Treasury mean staggering losses for real people.

Nearly half of all recipients of personal independence payment—1.3 million disabled people—stand to lose their daily living component. That is not a minor policy tweak; it is a mass removal of essential support from people who, for example, cannot dress, wash or feed themselves or use the toilet unaided. Imagine telling someone who needs help to eat or shower that they no longer qualify for support because they did not score four points in a specific bureaucratic box. That is cruelty by spreadsheet.

The devastating consequences ripple further. Under the reforms, only those who qualify for the PIP daily living component will be eligible for the health element of universal credit. In one cruel stroke, more than 1.4 million disabled people will be denied both forms of support. Those individuals face losing upwards of £8,500 a year. That is not a policy adjustment; it is an engineered descent into poverty.

In Scotland, we talk about leaving no one behind, but the proposals flip that on its head. They punish those who are too unwell to work, often stripping them of the minimal support that allows them to survive. There is no evidence—none at all—that the cuts will achieve the UK Government's stated goal of getting people into work. Even the Office for Budget Responsibility could not estimate any employment gain from the reforms. In fact, previous benefit cuts of similar scope led to only a 3 per cent rise in employment among disabled people.

The proposals also disproportionately impact carers, the vast majority of whom are women. Up to 150,000 carers stand to lose carers allowance or the carers element of universal credit. That is not just bad policy; it is gendered injustice, stripping away the financial independence of those who already shoulder an immense burden of unpaid labour.

Scotland, with its devolved powers, has tried to chart a different course. The Scottish Government has rooted its approach to social security in dignity and respect, and programmes such as the adult disability payment reflect a commitment to compassion. It is not the panacea that we need, but even that progressive framework is under threat.

As Scotland's funding for ADP is tied to eligibility rates for PIP in England and Wales, any reduction in the number of claimants there will mean massive funding shortfalls here, which are estimated to be more than half a billion pounds. Unless the Scottish Government follows suit with equally harsh eligibility cuts, it might not be allowed to use ADP as a passporting benefit for universal credit. That would leave thousands of disabled Scots unable to access much-needed financial support.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that the reforms could push an additional 400,000 people into poverty, including at least 50,000 children. Let us not forget the wider context: disabled people are already overrepresented among those in poverty, with 63 per cent of people experiencing destitution reporting a disability or long-term health condition. The reforms will only deepen those disparities.

This is not just about policy. It is about human dignity. It is about the lived reality of people such as the disabled Glasgow Disability Alliance member who said:

> "Every day is a battle ... from the moment I wake up I am continuously faced with these awful decisions … I'm hungry but I've nothing much there ... Can't really get out anywhere ... nae money to do anything anyway."

When we talk about welfare, we must remember what that word means: the wellbeing of people. It is not fiscal manipulation or political point scoring but real human wellbeing. The UK Government's reforms offer none of that. It does not see the person behind the form. It sees only numbers to be reduced and lines on a balance sheet to be erased. We see differently. We see people. We see families. We see communities. We see the truth: the cuts will devastate lives. That is why I

and the Greens will oppose them with everything that we can.

This debate is not just about benefits; it is about what kind of country we want to be. Will we let the most vulnerable pay the price for political cowardice and economic misdirection, or will we rise in solidarity to say, “Enough”?

Now is the time to choose justice. With countless lives hanging in the balance, now is the time to fight for dignity and to stand with disabled people and carers. We cannot let them fall.

15:29

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The debate is about a number of competing challenges. It is about dignity for disabled people—particularly those in poverty. It is about balancing the books and being able to pay for that. It is about the value of work and the contribution that work makes to the individual’s wellbeing, but also to society’s wellbeing. It is also about the country’s long-term financial sustainability. Those are all very difficult competing challenges.

My starting point for this debate on the green paper is that the paper’s title, “Pathways to Work”, is a good one, because work is a good thing. However, I am afraid that the paper quickly loses direction, because work is not its primary focus; its primary focus is financial. I wish that we had a much longer-term approach to welfare, social security and work instead of making short-term decisions that do not lead to the long-term benefits that we seek. The “Pathways to Work” green paper simply transfers the financial stress that the country is feeling on to individuals and the households in which they live.

The increases in poverty, which I think the UK Government has acknowledged will happen, will become real, but the approach also displaces the costs on to the national health service, social care, food banks and charities in a number of areas. Therefore, we are not saving money; we are just transferring the problem somewhere else.

It is a green paper, and Paul O’Kane is right that there is a consultation and that people should engage with it. However, it is pretty clear what the UK Government wants to do, which is causing significant anxiety for a number of people who literally feel helpless in the debate. The many organisations that have contributed briefings for today’s debate have set out clearly what the consequences will be. We are told that 70 per cent of households with a disabled person in them are on some of the lowest incomes. Citizens Advice Scotland has said that people already struggle to make ends meet when they are on support. The Resolution Foundation has talked about the PIP entitlement and the direct cost to individuals as a result of the changes.

All of that is pretty stark, but there are positives in the green paper. The right to try work is a good thing. The fear that many people feel when they think about going for an employment opportunity is about what will happen if they try to get back on to benefits. I understand that people who are entitled to disability benefits get those on the basis of their disability rather than their work situation, but there will be many other benefits that they are entitled to that they fear losing. The right to try work is a good initiative, and I hope that that message gets through. The extra employment package of £1 billion is a good thing, and the disabled facilities grant is also good.

At the centre of the debate is the country’s financial sustainability. We face a number of challenges. The demographic challenge has been known about for decades. Frankly, we have not done an awful lot about it, but it has been there and it continues to face us, and its financial consequences will be severe. However, we now also have the economic inactivity challenge that is coming. We have 16 to 64-year-olds, plus older people who are retired, who are not in the workplace and contributing to the country’s financial wellbeing. Meanwhile, our demands are ever greater, which poses a significant financial challenge to the country.

In the 1980s and 1990s, it was middle-aged white men, primarily from working-class communities, who found themselves on various forms of incapacity benefit. Those people were lost to the workforce but also to the financial wellbeing of the country. As a result of being on benefits, they were not paying their taxes. Now the challenge has changed. It is younger people who have mental health issues, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and a variety of other conditions. If those young people are not in the workplace for the rest of their lives, the financial challenge will be enormous, and we are not set up to tackle those issues.

I will give a particular example about the national health service. Health inequalities are not all about health, but the NHS has a big role to play in getting people back into the workplace. However, autism services are just nowhere, and no proper support is in place across the country. In fact, when it comes to people—particularly young people—getting autism support, we are going in the wrong direction. In mental health services, waits have come down, but that has been replaced by long waits for autism services.

Recently, I heard about a young man who was receiving support for his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder when he was at school. When he became an adult, support was

withdrawn. He went off the rails and was out of the workplace, though he was a talented young man who could contribute significantly. He is trying to get back on the list to get medicine and support, but he has a three-year wait before he can even see somebody. He could be contributing to the workplace, but he is not able to, because the NHS is not set up for that.

I challenge the decision makers in the NHS to make the right decisions about the real challenges that we have around economic inactivity. We need to shape the support to get all those people who are capable of working, if we can give them the right support, back to work.

I wish that there was as much energy about debating that as there is about debating other social security aspects. It is right to debate those aspects but, unless we deal with the economic inactivity in the country, we will double our problems alongside our demographic challenges. I am pleased that the health secretary is here to listen to the debate, because it is really important that we fully understand the financial challenge that the country faces. Unless we deal with it now, we will have many problems in years to come.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): We move to the open debate. Back benchers will have speeches of up to six minutes.

15:36

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Since the election last year, the Labour UK Government has failed to compensate the WASPI women—women against state pension inequality—and has scrapped winter fuel payments for millions of pensioners, and it is now plotting to cut disability benefits. Labour should listen to poverty groups, disabled people's organisations and many others and scrap those outrageous cuts. If it ploughs ahead, the Westminster Government will harm the most vulnerable, push more disabled people into poverty and mark the start of a new era of austerity cuts under the Labour Party.

Despite offering change in the election just last year, Keir Starmer's Government has kept some of the worst aspects of Tory welfare reforms—in particular, the two-child cap and rape clause. It has also kept strict Tory fiscal rules, which has meant cuts that go further than even the Tories dared—to winter fuel payments and, now, to disability benefits.

The Resolution Foundation highlighted that the Labour chancellor was

"wrong to concentrate the pain so heavily on a relatively small number of disability benefit claimants."

Its analysis also shows that the poorest 50 per cent of households are set to become £500 a year poorer over the next five years thanks to Labour's spring statement.

Let us look at what is happening under the SNP Scottish Government. According to experts at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Scotland is set to be the only part of the UK to see a decline in child poverty rates in the coming years, and there is a growing gap between child poverty rates in Scotland and those in Labour-run England and Wales. The JRF has said that that is in large part due to Scotland-specific policies, such as the game-changing Scottish child payment.

This year's Scottish budget gives funding to develop the systems that are necessary to in effect scrap the two-child cap next year. That SNP Government decision will lift a further 15,000 children out of poverty. In contrast, Labour's decision to keep the two-child cap puts over 100 more children into poverty every single day.

Jeremy Balfour: I agree with the cabinet secretary that social security is a social investment, but a social investment has to be paid for. We have a £1 billion deficit coming down the road. If we are to continue with such policies, which budget does Collette Stevenson suggest that money is taken from in order to pay for the social security investment? Is it education or transport? Which budget would she take money from to pay for such reforms?

Collette Stevenson: The heart of the issue is about political choices, with social security being a human right. I will touch on that later.

The DWP's analysis has shown that its welfare reform agenda will push another 250,000 people into poverty, including 50,000 children. The Labour Government has been criticised for its announcement on welfare reform and the lack of detail.

It is disappointing that the UK Government failed to engage with the Scottish Government in advance of its announcement, and the results could be disastrous. The Westminster Government seems to have glossed over the fact that Scotland, thankfully, has some powers over social security, so there are practical issues relating to how Scottish disability benefits will tie into the UK Government's universal credit system. As well as that, Scotland's budget could be reduced if we get yet more Westminster cuts.

Glasgow Disability Alliance is completely against the proposals and has said that the

"attacks on disabled people are many, are brutal and are multi-faceted".

In an excellent but hard-hitting briefing, it sets out the severe consequences for disabled people's household finances and states that it will be

"extremely difficult for the Scottish Government to fully mitigate these changes".

On a practical level, Glasgow Disability Alliance mentions that the UK Government's green paper fails to set out how disabled people in receipt of the Scottish adult disability payment will qualify for the health element of universal credit. It estimates that Scotland's budget could be cut by £1 billion per year, and it warns that the DWP might try to claw back money from Social Security Scotland if Scottish disability benefits remain better than those that are on offer south of the border.

Marie Curie has called for clarity from the UK Government on whether terminally ill people who claim universal credit will be required to take part in any work-related activity or otherwise be at risk of sanctions. I do not have time to mention other stakeholders, but it is clear that the Labour Government's proposed welfare reforms are ill thought out, both in terms of practicality and in terms of being abhorrent.

The UK Government should not make those cuts. Keir Starmer, Liz Kendall and Anas Sarwar should listen to disabled people's organisations and poverty groups and think again. By taking those decisions, the Labour Government has chosen to box itself in with its Tory austerity rules. Instead of reviewing PIP assessments and reintroducing mandatory reassessments, the UK Government should follow the Scottish Government's lead and treat disabled people with respect. With the Labour UK Government showing no signs of changing course, the need for Scotland to become an independent country is more urgent than ever, so that we have the full powers that are needed to tackle poverty and create a fairer and more equal Scotland.

15:43

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I will direct my remarks to the Scottish Conservative amendment, in the name of Liz Smith.

The amendment correctly highlights the concerns of the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Scottish Fiscal Commission

"about the projected substantial increases in UK and Scottish welfare budgets, the resulting fiscal pressures, and the unsustainability of these budgets in the current economic circumstances".

That is the fundamental issue before us.

Regardless of which Government proposals we are discussing or the tone of the debate—which has been conciliatory up until now—the debating vigour that is displayed in the chamber and even the verbal tongue lashings and contained heckling will not make an iota of difference to the people of Scotland. That will do nothing to stop their lives becoming harder, nothing to stop them becoming poorer and nothing to reinstall their faith in the decisions that are made by their Governments on their behalf.

In the current economic climate, there are simply insufficient funds. In January this year, the Scottish Fiscal Commission estimated that, in 2029-30, the Scottish Government would be spending £1.7 billion more than it received to pay for devolved welfare. Coupled with Labour's welfare cuts, that has the deficit growing to £2.1 billion. It will be hard-working, middle-income taxpayers who will be made to pay. They will be squeezed yet again to support the ever-increasing welfare state, and it will be done at the expense of everything that they are trying to do to make their lives and their children's lives better. Surely, it would be better to increase the number of taxpayers and grow the economy, rather than forcing those who are already stretched to pay more.

We have already heard comments about economic inactivity and, once again, I find myself speaking in a debate on welfare in Scotland and returning to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee report on parental employment. It is a good report, with a clear direction of travel to help parents back into employment. It highlights three specific areas that the Government could focus on that would help parents to get back into work. Not only would parents be earning a living that, statistically, would boost their disposable income and enhance their mental health, but that would add to the Government's revenue by increasing tax take and reducing the number of those who are dependent on welfare payments.

We agree that welfare payments are an investment in our people and that the returns and benefits for society are evident, but part of that investment must be to better people's lives in all possible ways—and one of those ways is self-sufficiency. There is a pride that comes from being self-reliant.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Does the member agree with her colleague Jeremy Balfour, who pointed out earlier in the debate that the ADP is not linked to employment, and nor should it be? It is about the additional costs of a disability or long-term condition. It is claimed that savings will be made that will impact the Scottish Government's budget, but we are talking about two different things. That is really important, because we cannot pretend that a saving on the ADP or PIP will help people to get into work.

Roz McCall: The cabinet secretary and Mr Balfour have made that point exceptionally well. I am not trying to state that my point is connected to that, but there is a need to look at economic inactivity. Getting parents back into work is part of that.

There is a pride that comes from being self-reliant and from providing for yourself and your family. Unfortunately, the holistic approach to moving back to work is simply failing. I call again on the Government to actively make the necessary changes to transport, childcare and education to rectify those issues. It is simply not possible for parents to get back to a fulfilling position or job if we do not get the basics right. So many jobs start before buses are even running, or shift patterns finish when local transport drops to intermittent services. Pre-7 am shift starts are commonplace for hospitality, retail, warehousing and manufacturing, but getting to work is a nightmare for someone who relies on public transport. That needs to change. Childcare provisions for those jobs are completely useless. Drop-off and pick-up times will simply not accommodate shifts, which adds additional expense and unnecessary inconvenience. That needs to change.

Let us say that a parent wants to retrain in a much-needed profession. The courses are there and the colleges will do what they can to modify the times and days for teaching—Fife College has done exactly that—but, once again, the double whammy of transport and childcare will make it almost impossible for parents to attend without being financially penalised in some way. It cannot be right that people who want to work are being forced out of taking a job because we in the Parliament do not fix the issues, especially when it is in our gift to do so.

We can call on the UK Government to reverse its plans, we can wax lyrical about the injustice, and we can sow yet more division, obfuscate and play the blame game but, all the while, the people of Scotland are being pushed to breaking point. Instead of standing in the chamber mud slinging, we should be looking at what we can do to make people's lives better. We can look at what we control and ensure that what we do supports the people we are charged to work for.

If the solutions have been provided and the outcomes are not only clear but will help people to achieve what they want for themselves, and those outcomes will support our economy, grow Government revenue and reduce the reliance on the state, as well as benefit Scotland and Scots alike, I urge the Government to look at them again.

15:50

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I have to say that am a bit incredulous at the lack of humility in the debate this afternoon, given that Labour has said that it is making the cuts because of the ridiculous Liz Truss budget that crashed the economy and left additional black holes that even Labour did not anticipate when it came into power.

Let us not dance around it—these welfare reforms are appalling. Shamelessly trying to balance the books on the back of the sick and disabled is just not plausible. To channel Mr Kinnock from a Labour conference debate that I remember well, that is coming from a Labour Government—a Labour Government—that is abandoning the most vulnerable.

The strategies and cuts to social security that it used to oppose when the Tories were in charge, Labour now enthusiastically supports. The only change that I see is the final erosion of Labour values. Those cuts will hurt people hard in my Motherwell and Wishaw constituency. I quote:

> "Partly owing to our industrial heritage, my constituency has relatively high levels of disability and chronic illness—as a result of old injuries from those days—and that has made my community particularly vulnerable to the welfare cuts."

Those are not my words, but the words of Labour MP for Airdrie at the time and now Labour MP for Motherwell, Wishaw and Carluke, Pamela Nash. Those words of condemnation of cuts came when George Osborne and the Tories were cutting critical social security support for disabled people. Now that the Labour Party is doing it, many Labour MPs have abandoned their principals and their constituents.

I have been accused of scaremongering on the issue, but this is not about scaremongering. It is about standing up for people who are facing the imposition of poverty by design and by Labour. Are anti-poverty charities scaremongering? Are sick and disabled people who fear for their financial security scaremongering?

It bears repeating that the UK Government's own analysis has shown that its welfare cuts will push 250,000 people into poverty, including 50,000 children. The Resolution Foundation said that the cuts would result in between 800,000 and 1.2 million people losing support of between £4,200 and £6,300 a year by 2029-30.

The cuts will fall hard on disabled families. From previous work in this Parliament on the Tories' welfare reform, we know that it will have a significant impact on single-parent families, many of whom are women.

Evidence from the Citizens Advice network in Scotland shows that disabled people already find

that their income is not enough to live on. The proposed reforms will result in a reduction of £5 billion in social security expenditure. In the words of Citizens Advice Scotland,

"this will further entrench the disproportionate impact of poverty and destitution on disabled people. It will also result in costs elsewhere: crisis care, NHS, poverty, homelessness."

We have become too used to talking about mitigation in the chamber. I have often talked about it under the guise of devolution. The notion of devolution is about making different policy choices, but some people of the unionist persuasion often make that argument while casually ignoring the impact on Scotland of budgetary decisions made at a UK level. The UK Government cuts spending, there is a reduction in Scotland's spending and we are just told to lump it.

We have almost become numb to the concept of mitigating the worst impacts of Westminster policy decisions, so what real choice do we have? We cannot abandon people to the worst excesses of UK Government austerity, so we have to spend that money, but it comes at a cost to our fixed budget.

Labour could end that cycle by taking meaningful actions on policies that are driving people into poverty. Instead, however, it has chosen to cut, cut, cut, just like its Tory predecessors. Labour's rhetoric treats people with hostility and suspicion, rather than compassion or respect.

Over the past 14 years, the SNP Scottish Government has invested a staggering £1.2 billion in shielding Scots from the worst impacts of Westminster policy through discretionary housing payments, the Scottish welfare fund, money advice services and universal credit Scottish choices. We are investing in programmes that counter the bedroom tax, the benefit cap and the worst of Westminster austerity, and we brought in the Scottish child payment to lift children out of poverty. Now, Labour is choosing to push children into poverty. Is that the limit of its ambition when it is in power?

There is another aspect of all this. We may say that getting more people into economic activity would be good. Yes, that would be of benefit to people, who would find independence through the working process. However, we should not stand back and blame them, without asking the question why inequality is rising. The impact is not equal on everyone. The rich are getting richer, and Labour has chosen to try and balance the books on the backs of the most vulnerable.

15:56

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I will begin where I think we can find some level of agreement across the chamber. Employment is good for individuals and their families. Good jobs provide dignity and purpose, and they build confidence. They provide opportunities for advancement and promotion. They bring resources into local communities. They disrupt generational poverty and a reliance on benefits.

Labour is the party of workers, and the UK Labour Government has made clear its commitment to making work pay. This month's increase to national minimum wages and the national living minimum wage by more than inflation has delivered a pay increase for more than 3 million workers, including 1 million in hospitality and retail and many young workers and apprentices. Raising pay for those on lower incomes helps to deliver better job security and more cash in the pockets of workers, with more being spent in our economy.

We can all also agree that our public services are under financial pressure. Our NHS requires more and more resources to support its hard-working staff and to provide services. There are increasing demands on our NHS, which accounts for the largest proportion of our public spending. There is evidence that long waiting times in the NHS are contributing to the number of people who are receiving benefits in Scotland. All other services—in education, justice and transport—are in need of reform to make them fit for a changing world. In that context, both in the UK and in Scotland, we are facing increasing growth in our social security budgets, which experts are warning is unsustainable.

We should be able to agree on the challenge that is faced by both Governments in public spending. The green paper is the UK Government's response, and it is now out for consultation. Other parties may disagree, but they cannot ignore the question, and it is unclear what the Scottish Government's response is to the warnings from the Scottish Fiscal Commission and what it intends do.

Today's Government motion focuses on the social security changes, but it is vital that we consider the matter in the round, not in isolation. The proposals from the UK Government come as part of wider reform of a failing system that was inherited from the previous Conservative Administration—a system that has trapped some people in a life of inactivity instead of supporting them into employment.

The figures that are quoted in the Government motion are calculated on the assumption that everything else stays the same, which is not the

intention. They do not take account of the aims to bring more people into the workplace and reduce reliance on benefits. The child poverty task force will introduce measures to tackle child poverty.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: For the avoidance of any doubt, PIP and ADP have nothing to do with whether or not someone is in employment. The conflation of the two issues and the attempt to think that the savings will somehow help people into employment are incorrect. If anything, that will push people out of employment, as it takes financial support away from them.

Claire Baker: I do not think that the cabinet secretary was listening to me. I am not conflating the two things; I am talking about the child poverty figures and what we doing to address child poverty. I was arguing that we cannot view the figures in isolation.

As I was saying, the child poverty task force will introduce measures to tackle child poverty, such as the roll-out of free breakfast clubs, which the first schools in England are benefiting from this month. That is the kind of promise that will support working parents and mean that every child can start the day ready to learn, as well as helping with the cost of living and impacting on those in poverty. Free, universal school breakfast provision is something that the SNP promised for primary school children ahead of the last election, so I would hope that the SNP would welcome the UK Government's progress in that area.

It should also be recognised that UK social security is due to increase and that more resources will be spent on social security. The £5 billion reduction is in projected spend if no changes were to be introduced: it is a projected future decline in the budget.

The changes proposed for PIP will not apply in Scotland—as has been recognised, we have the devolved benefit of ADP and there is no requirement for us to match the changed policy. Although the funding for those two benefits are connected, there is no change to the Scottish budget this year or projected for next year. If, after that, a funding gap occurs, it will be for the Scottish Government to make decisions about funding allocations and about where they will find the additional resources that would be required.

Areas in the green paper that apply to Scotland include changes to the work capability assessment, for which a solution needs to be found that works with the diverging systems. Although employability support is devolved, the additional investment from the UK Government to create a guarantee of personalised employment, health and skills support is welcome.

After the cuts that we have seen to employability support in Scotland, it is an area on which there needs to be a focus. Scotland has an estimated economic inactivity rate of 22.9 per cent, which is higher than the UK rate. The Scottish Government has a target to halve the disability employment rate gap by 2038, from the 2016 baseline of 37.4 per cent. We have that target because we recognise that many disabled people want to work and, although some progress has been made, there is a clear need for further action to deliver that commitment.

With the right support, people can thrive at work. The green paper's "try first" approach is positive. Often, people will not try work because they worry about losing their benefits and having to reapply for them if it does not work out.

In my time as convener of the Economy and Fair Work Committee, the inquiry into the disability employment gap heard that, although progress was made, it was stalling, and that more focus had to be delivered to groups with learning disabilities and those who are neurodivergent. I welcome that the First Minister recently visited The Usual Place in Dumfries. People from The Usual Place gave evidence to the committee. It is a fantastic project that supports young people into employment but it is under financial pressure. Rather than struggling to stay open, it should be a model that is replicated across Scotland so that all young people have the experience of employment and are provided with the skills to stay in employment. Our inquiry found that neurodiverse people can be among the furthest from the workplace, but they have so much more to offer to it.

I am also disappointed to see that Dovetail Enterprises in Dundee has collapsed into administration, with 47 jobs lost. The business provided valuable work for people who are often, unfairly, unable to find employment. Supported employers are a valuable option for many people and provide dignity, purpose and friendship, as well as a supportive community. However, there has been an erosion of such workplaces for several years, and the chance to maximise the opportunities for public procurement has passed.

Every effort must be made to support workers to find future meaningful employment, if we are to have a strong economy and vibrant local communities.

16:03

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Since 2010, the UK Government—first Tory and now Labour—has embarked on a brutal austerity programme, slashing billions of pounds from welfare payments. The Tories introduced a four-year freeze in benefits between 2016 and 2020, introduced the two-child benefit limit and forced single parents to work when their children

were younger. The Resolution Foundation told us that, under the Tories, each year from 2010, working-age families lost an average of £1,500; larger families with three or more children were hit hardest, losing £4,600 on average; out-of-work households faced losses of £2,200; and the two-child limit pushed 51 per cent of households with three or more children into poverty.

That was not fiscal prudence. It was a calculated assault on those who were least able to bear it. We finally got rid of the blue Tories last year, but the hope that Labour promised in the run-up to the general election has turned into a nightmare. It appears likely that the red Tories will continue to inflict further misery on the most vulnerable in our society. The people of Edinburgh Pentlands and in communities across Scotland will bear the brunt of this UK Labour Government's callous and misguided cuts to welfare benefits.

Let us be clear: a cut of £6.5 billion from ill and disabled people by 2029-30 is not a mere adjustment or a tweak to a system that is in need of reform. We are talking about deliberate ideological choices that strike at the heart of our social fabric, which will erode the safety net that protects our most vulnerable and punish those who can least afford it. That cut is being delivered by a Labour Party that is supposed to be the party of the people.

Former Labour MSP Cara Hilton, who now works for the Trussell Trust, said:

"driving through record cuts to disabled people's social security to balance the books is both shocking and appalling."

Ex-Labour MSP Neil Findlay stated:

"Labour lied to the British people at the last election and with regularity betrays the people who voted for it".

In my constituency, I hear daily from families who are struggling to make ends meet, from pensioners who are forced to choose between heating and eating, and from disabled people whose dignity is being stripped away by a system that views them as a burden rather than valued members of society. They are not faceless statistics—they are our neighbours, our friends and our families. They deserve better than a Labour Government that is intent on balancing its books on their backs.

The Scottish Trades Union Congress agrees. It said:

"the chancellor had choices ... She could have increased taxes on corporations or the wealthy ... Instead, she has rushed through deeply damaging cuts to support for disabled people ... this is policy on the hoof, and it is our most vulnerable who are bearing the brunt."

Leading disabled people's organisations and women's groups are so concerned that they have sent dozens of joint letters to Rachel Reeves about the proposed restrictions on eligibility for personal independence payment, which will impact people with complex and multiple conditions. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that those restrictions will cost some claimants more than £100 a week. It is no wonder that such organisations are concerned, as PIP is supposed to be a non-means-tested allowance to cover the extra cost of disability or health conditions, regardless of employment status.

People in Scotland who receive PIP will be partially shielded, as Social Security Scotland has migrated over to the adult disability payment. However, the Scottish Government and the Fraser of Allander Institute both estimate that, as a result of the proposed welfare changes, the budget at Holyrood will be cut by hundreds of millions of pounds by 2029.

There is also the impact on universal credit. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that the cuts to universal credit and other benefits will push an additional 400,000 people across the UK into poverty by 2026. It is estimated that Labour's freezing of the value of the health element of universal credit until 2029-30 will cost eligible claimants £47 per week, and the restriction of the health element of universal credit to people over the age of 22 means that young claimants face a loss of £97 a week.

Let us compare that with what the SNP Scottish Government has done. With its limited powers, it has introduced measures such as the Scottish child payment, which has lifted thousands of children out of poverty. We have protected free prescriptions, free tuition and free personal care. Those policies reflect our belief in a society that cares for all.

However, we cannot mitigate every blow from Westminster. The block grant, which is squeezed year after year, limits our ability to shield Scots from the worst of such cuts. Members of this Parliament should come together to say that enough is enough. Scotland deserves the power to make its own choices and to build a welfare system that is rooted in compassion and respect, not punishment and neglect. We demand the full powers of an independent nation to protect Scots from the cruelty of Labour and Tory welfare policies.

The people of Scotland are watching. They see a UK Government that prioritises profit over people and that governs for the few at the expense of the many, but they also see a Scotland that dares to dream of something better—a nation that values every citizen and that will build a future in which no one is left behind. Let us stand together, reject the UK Government's shameful cuts and fight for the fairer, kinder society that our

people deserve, which can now be delivered only through independence.

16:09

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The debate so far has been interesting. I listened carefully to Maggie Chapman and her lecture on dignity and respect; it is a pity that she does not show the same commitment to dignity and respect for the rule of law to our Supreme Court and to the women who need and want safe spaces in Scotland.

I also listened carefully to Clare Adamson. Until that point, the debate had been fair-minded and reasonable, but—to quote Neil Kinnock back to her—it was sad and regrettable that she sought to

"play politics with people's lives"

and people's benefits. The same goes for Gordon MacDonald, who sought to turn this important and complex debate into a constitutional one.

I share the cabinet secretary's concern about the tone, timbre and technical nature of the spring statement. It was an emergency budget in all but name, and it proves the point that Labour—just as we have seen with past Labour Governments—cannot be trusted to run the economy or to keep to its word.

I also share some of Liz Smith's concerns about the nature, and more importantly the timing, of the welfare cuts. It is clear that the Labour Government has been forced into taking those decisions because of the black hole in the budget that it has created since it came to office last year. These measures reek of desperation—they were not planned.

We would welcome one thing: a debate on the future of welfare, not just in the rest of the UK but here in Scotland. Nonetheless, let us not beat around the bush—this is just yet another broken promise from a broken-promises Labour Government. It said that it would not raise national insurance, and it did. That will hamper people getting back into jobs and make it more difficult for the Labour Government to achieve its objective of getting people off benefits and back into work.

Appallingly, one of Labour's first acts in coming to office was to take winter fuel payments away from pensioners, which—I remind the cabinet secretary—the SNP has still only partially restored, despite what it claims.

The Labour Party has created a budget black hole of immense proportions, but that does not let the SNP off the hook, either. I will come to the black hole that the SNP has created.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As Craig Hoy wishes to discuss the "black hole", as he puts it, will he, as part of that analysis, talk about the additional money that I think that he wants me to spend on pensioner fuel payments, which he just complained about? We are reintroducing universality. If he wants me to do more, perhaps he can expand on how much he would like to add to the black hole of expenditure that he has identified.

Craig Hoy: As the Government has said in its defence, time and again, it is about priorities and choices. The problem with this Government is that it has the wrong priorities and has made the wrong choices.

Ultimately, the best means by which we can reduce the benefits bill across the whole UK, but in particular in Scotland, is by delivering growth. The SNP Government has failed to do that and, now, the Labour Party is undermining it, too. Only yesterday, we found out that the International Monetary Fund has downgraded UK growth forecasts for this year and next. Inflation is set to rise, and GDP per capita will barely grow this year. Borrowing, and the cost of borrowing, is soaring under Labour.

Labour will say that that is a consequence of tariffs, when we all know that it was Rachel Reeves who talked down the UK economy prior to that first budget, and who fundamentally undermined the UK economy with the budget and then with the spring statement. Those effects—the effects of Labour in Government—will be felt in Scotland. According to the IMF, struggling families—that is, those in work and those on benefits—will be paying the price of a Labour Government in the form of higher prices in the shops and lower wage growth this year and into the future. As the IMF warns, that issue is being faced primarily by the UK and the US, which are the principal outliers in that respect.

We can compare that with the situation under the previous Conservative Government, when inflation was falling, interest rates were on a downward trajectory and Scotland was receiving a record block grant from Westminster. Now, we are seeing the Labour Government—[*Interruption*.]

Michael Marra can laugh about the benign position that Labour was left with that has been ruined by Rachel Reeves, but his Government is now taking decisions that will cut £900 million from the Scottish budget into the future.

However, the SNP cannot simply wring its hands and blame others in respect of the predicament in which it finds itself. The SNP Government's addiction to increasing welfare spend means that public services will now suffer more than they were going to suffer already. Keir Starmer is treating pensioners, business owners, workers and farmers as fools, but the SNP

Government is not levelling with them, either. It cannot simply blame others, because, by 2030, its benefits deficit will be £2 billion.

Willie Rennie, who is not in the chamber at the moment, was right to point out structural challenges that the Government is failing to address because of its approach to benefits. Those challenges relate to labour market trends, Scotland's demographics and economic inactivity, which the SNP Government is still not taking seriously enough.

We all want to live in a society that looks after vulnerable people. That can be achieved alongside and with welfare reform. I say to ministers that realism must prevail in all the budgetary decisions that the Parliament takes. They cannot simply hope that the money will turn up or that the taxpayer will, ultimately, foot the bill. The Scottish Government needs to get a grip on long-term trends in welfare. The Labour Government has made that more urgent, but the Scottish Government cannot in any way say that it is on a sustainable path. It needs to act now.

16:15

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to speak in what is an important debate.

"cruelty is becoming a hallmark of this"

UK

"government. It is simply indefensible."

"They are choosing to penalise some of the poorest people in our society."

"These are reforms that could well have been delivered with a blue rosette."

Those are not my words or quotes from the Scottish Government; they are from the National Education Union, the STUC and the disability charity Scope.

Those organisations are not alone in that thinking. I thank all the organisations that provided briefings for the debate—including Sight Scotland, Scottish Action for Mental Health, Citizens Advice Scotland and Carers Scotland, to name just a few. All of them detailed their extreme concerns and urged that the reforms be reconsidered.

A recent freedom of information request revealed that almost 90 per cent of those who currently receive the standard daily living component of PIP will be impacted by the UK Government cuts. That is appalling.

On 6 March, I brought a debate to discuss the reported intention of the Labour Government to go ahead with its punitive welfare reforms. At the time, so-called Scottish Labour MSPs in the chamber said that the debate was premature and pointless. However, we now see that it was on the knuckle. Disabled people demonstrate outside the offices of Anas Sarwar, Pam Duncan-Glancy, Pauline McNeill and Paul Sweeney—but, for a change, there is silence from them. Instead of a change of direction, a Labour Government in Westminster is intent on making disabled people, children and pensioners pay for austerity.

The biggest lie of any election campaign is the one from Anas Sarwar, in June 2024, when he said:

"Read my lips—no austerity under Labour."

What we see now is just austerity 2.0, and it is crystal clear that the Scottish Labour leader's words count for absolutely nothing.

The UK Government's impact analysis shows that 250,000 people, including 50,000 children, will be pushed into poverty under the plans. The cuts are inhumane and cruel. That has been recognised by the leading disability charity, Scope, which has described them as "catastrophic".

It is not the only organisation to feel that way. Citizens Advice Scotland has stated:

"These reforms will result in a reduction of £5 billion in social security expenditure by 2030. This will have enormous consequences and push more disabled people into poverty."

Across the board, Scotland's charities recognise that the decision puts funding for Scotland's social security system at risk. Less funding for the UK PIP will reduce the amount that is available to the Scottish Government to spend on social security, irrespective of demand for adult disability payment and differing demographics in Scotland.

We now know that the Scottish Government has had confirmation from HM Treasury that, from 2026-27, there will be cuts to Scotland's block grant as a result of the welfare cuts. Initial indications are that the changes will reduce by £408 million the block grant funding that Scotland will receive for social security benefits in 2029-30.

The Labour MSPs who are here today should stand up and call out their UK bosses. First, Labour kept the two-child cap, then it removed the winter fuel payment and abandoned the WASPI women, and now it is targeting disabled people. Children, the elderly, the disabled and low-income families have been left out in the cold by the Labour Party.

While Labour imposes more damage and austerity and threatens the vulnerable, the SNP will stand up for those who need support, by investing a record £6.9 billion in devolved benefits in 2025-26, which will assist disabled people and help low-income families with living costs, and by reinstating winter heating support to pensioners.

By going even further than the Tories with devastating cuts to disabled people, Labour has embarked on a total betrayal of the promises that it made to voters. The Labour Party simply cannot be trusted. Will Anas Sarwar remain silent on this matter?

My colleagues in the SNP and I will stand up for the most vulnerable in our society, and the SNP will continue to prioritise dignity, fairness and respect, in contrast to the Labour Party, which pushes on with its values of humiliation, injustice and disrespect.

The issue that we are discussing is a matter of urgency, and the decision must be reversed now. As it is quite clear that Scotland continues to be an afterthought for successive Labour Governments, it is more urgent than ever that Scotland becomes an independent country, so that we have the full powers that are needed to tackle poverty and create a fairer and more equal society for Scotland.

16:21

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this interesting debate. Before I get into the motion and the amendments, it is important to frame the debate correctly. We are sitting in this devolved Parliament discussing a reserved matter, and we are talking about a consultation paper that is exactly that—a consultation paper that seeks the contribution of the public and other groups in order to seek answers and support the development of the UK Government's policy.

As a number of members have said, this debate is a missed opportunity to discuss a profound issue, which is the reform of social security and how that sits in a jigsaw that the Scottish Government and this Parliament have full responsibility for, including health, education and transport, to mention just three areas that have been discussed.

People's lives in Scotland are complex and complicated, and the debate is a missed opportunity to discuss the interactions between waiting on a health waiting list or being unable to get a GP appointment and the challenge that is felt by a young person who is becoming disengaged from school and sees no future in the usual map into adulthood that others follow.

The opportunity to discuss transport questions has also been missed. It gives me great pleasure to hear so many MSPs raise local issues in the debate, given the challenges that are faced by people I represent in East Lothian with regard to the number 26 bus service and the fact that a village that has a growing population has lost access to public transport for people to get to work.

All those issues sit in a framework of the challenges that people face. The "Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper" addresses exactly what it contains in its title. It presents an opportunity to reshape the social security system in a way that supports and encourages people into good work, while reducing the bureaucracy that is faced by those who are already in receipt of social security.

It is important to recognise, as others have done, that many of the areas that are addressed in the green paper are devolved to the Scottish Parliament and, therefore, will not be affected by the proposed changes. However, the proposals in the green paper aim to create a more supportive environment for all, regardless of the application of devolved powers.

I welcome the £1 billion commitment for employability services across the UK. That is a significant investment that will provide necessary resource to help individuals find and sustain good work. Programmes such as the work and health programme have already shown success in supporting people with disability and health conditions into employment. Well-paid, secure employment is the most sustainable route out of poverty.

I commend the UK Labour Administration for its efforts to, for example, increase the national living wage. A full-time worker earning the national living wage will see their annual income rise by more than £1,000, which will provide much-needed financial relief.

In addition, the Employment Rights Bill aims to improve workers' rights by ensuring fair treatment and protection against unfair dismissal. That will benefit millions of workers across the country.

The green paper specifically seeks views and opinions on how employers can be assisted to follow the existing legal requirement to make reasonable changes so that disabled people can work, and on how that can be taken forward. Those are important questions that need to be asked to shape the position in the future.

A number of members have pointed out that there is a massive challenge coming down the line with regard to those who are economically inactive. In Scotland, 84,000 young people are not in work, education or training. That must be a significant concern. Indeed, the figure now for 16 to 24-year-olds—at 37.6 per cent—is greater than it was in 2008-09, at the time of the economic crash, when it was 30.1 per cent. Both figures are unacceptable, but the current rate of economic inactivity is more than just a seedling—it is a

growing tree of a future catastrophe that Scotland faces.

I welcome initiatives such as developing the young workforce, which was the youth employment strategy that aimed to reduce youth unemployment by 40 per cent by providing tailored support, which target it achieved early. Support through activity agreements, vocational training, modern apprenticeships and graduate apprenticeships has led to notable successes, but several aspects of those initiatives can and should be criticised. I look to the Scottish Government to work on those issues.

A significant number of employers are unable to take part in employer engagement. The rate of participation has decreased and the quality of vocational education has gone down. The long-term impact, particularly in terms of the regional disparities that have occurred across Scotland, has not been monitored or supported.

I am conscious of time, so I will just say that the SNP Government must address those criticisms so that it can enhance what is in place and make sure that the impact is positive. We must not only equip young people with the skills that they need to succeed but help to build a more inclusive and skilled workforce.

As we move forward with the reforms, let us ensure that our policies respect the value of work, that they are fair and that they protect the most vulnerable—those who are unable to ever work—and let us work together to create a society in which everyone has the opportunity to thrive and in which nobody is left behind.

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

16:27

Maggie Chapman: The cabinet secretary opened this afternoon's debate with a message of solidarity with disabled people, recognising their worth as human beings, as members of our society and as people with intrinsic value, regardless of their ability to contribute to the economic machinery of our world. That is something with which I whole-heartedly concur.

This afternoon, we have the opportunity to speak clearly as a Parliament against proposed reforms that will result in some people—our constituents—being pushed into, or further into, poverty or worse, because, as we have been told by many organisations that are concerned about the issue, those reforms, if implemented as suggested in the green paper, will kill people.

I thank all the organisations that have been in touch in recent weeks about the proposed reforms. We have had briefings, research summaries and the modelling of different outcomes, and we have heard the personal stories and real-life experiences of people who are scared of the consequences of the proposed cuts. From the Poverty Alliance and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to Glasgow Disability Alliance, Carers Scotland, trade unions and community groups, I thank them all.

I especially want to thank the local activists in Aberdeen, Dundee and elsewhere in the north-east who are working hard to pull together to provide mutual aid and support for those who are already struggling. Those networks of mutual aid will be much more vital if the reforms are implemented.

As Clare Adamson stated quite clearly, the reforms are not what Labour promised when it was campaigning for power last year. Indeed, Labour campaigned against continuing austerity. It said:

"There will be no austerity under Labour."

We remember those words well. At the same time, Labour also pledged not to increase taxes, and it was obvious to many that it would have to break one of those pledges.

I find it staggering that, in the face of the resources that are needed to support people, Labour has chosen to keep the promise that most benefits those who already have more than enough to live on. To see Anas Sarwar say this week that wealth taxes are "the wrong solution" was gobsmacking.

How is it that the Labour Party would rather punish disabled people and carers—the people who have already borne the brunt of the financial crisis, 15 years of austerity and the pandemic—than back redistributive taxation? Why is there not a green paper on taxation reform from the UK Government, rather than this attack on social security?

Depriving people of benefits—despite what so many people say, and what Labour says over and over again—will not improve people's lives. People cannot just "go and get a job". That is the mentality of the workhouse.

As we have heard this afternoon, attacking carers is counterproductive from every perspective—moral, practical and financial. Who will pick up the pieces? Who will bear the costs? It will be the NHS. It will be our already broken homelessness support system. It will be food banks that already cannot feed all those who have come to rely on them. It will feed the care crisis that we already have.

Proposing cuts to carers allowance also betrays what the UK Government really thinks about the value of caring. Caring is work. Unpaid carers provide a vital service to our society; they save our

public and third sector organisations billions of pounds per year. Caring is perhaps one of the most important jobs that we as human beings can have, unpaid or paid. We should not be going after the pretty poor allowance that unpaid carers get at the moment.

Paul O'Kane said that scrapping the whole of the green paper is not a sensible option, and that we need a proper conversation about social security reform. I do not disagree with that second statement. Let us talk about a minimum income guarantee as a step towards a universal basic income that values everyone for just being human rather than for the economic contribution that they can make. Let us talk about increasing the Scottish child payment and providing universal free school meals. Let us talk about debt relief for those with council tax arrears. Let us genuinely talk about the prevention of poverty.

Let us also talk about the economic transformation that we need to support that—definitely and defiantly around taxation. It cannot be justifiable that, during the Covid pandemic, billionaires saw their wealth grow by 27 per cent, when so many disabled people and others were left destitute. This is the green paper that I wish we had to discuss: one that proposes genuine wealth redistribution to improve the lives of the majority, rather than one that targets those who can least afford to deal with the consequences.

As we know, politics is about choices. Let us choose justice for disabled people, for their carers, for those with mental ill health and for those who are unable to participate in the current economic system. Let us choose to fight for dignity for everyone.

16:33

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank all members for their contributions to the debate today.

I acknowledge the very significant anxiety of many citizens about the reform of social security. Some of the proposals that are set out in the green paper consultation are challenging and are rightly the source of much debate, analysis and consideration, as Paul O'Kane said in his opening speech in today's debate. Frankly, none of this is easy. However, we are clear that change is necessary and required.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the member for recognising—as have others—the challenging aspects of the green paper and the impact that those will have on disabled people. Does he agree that all changes to the support for disabled people must have dignity and respect at their heart, and that involving disabled people in those decisions is absolutely essential?

Michael Marra: I could not agree more with that sentiment. The consultation that is being carried out on the green paper has to hold those principles at its heart. I recognise the huge amount of work that my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy has done over many years as an advocate for disabled people in Scotland and that she has also done in the Parliament.

As a party, we are clear that change is necessary. Far too often, people are being trapped in inactivity rather than being supported into work. People want to work—they crave that purpose—and that work can mean a better life for those in our communities.

Outcomes for people, for our communities and for the country as a whole are not good enough, and they are going in the wrong direction. The number of young people who are economically inactive has surged in recent years. It is a massive problem; some days, I wonder whether it is a bigger problem than Trump's tariffs. The squandering of human potential in our country has a long-term cost; it affects our potential to have a better economy. We know that economic inactivity among young people is higher in Scotland than it is across the rest of the UK; that, in general, we are not supporting enough people into work; and that economic inactivity in Scotland has been higher than that in the UK in every quarter of the past five years.

As colleagues have pointed out, the motion in front of Parliament calls for the entirety of the reform programme to be scrapped. On that basis, the SNP does not support the increases in the universal credit standard allowance. It does not believe that we should scrap the work capability assessment. It does not want to introduce a right to try work with no risk to welfare support. It is also opposed to the £1 billion in employability support that is set out in the green paper. That comes as little surprise, given the cuts that the Scottish Government has made to its employability programmes.

Key themes have emerged in the debate. How the systems interact and some of the challenges that arise from that was a point that was well put by Liz Smith, which I think has been acknowledged by speakers across the chamber.

We can broaden that point—many speakers have—and apply it our public services more generally. For example, one in six people are stuck on NHS waiting lists. We know that 300,000 people of working age are unable to go into work because of illness. That is a function of the interaction between what is, frankly, our illness service in Scotland and the social security system here and across the UK.

There are tensions between the short-term solutions for fixing our NHS and the long-term trends. Willie Rennie spoke about some of those issues. There are tensions between the costs of poverty in the longer run and the actions that might be taken in the shorter run, including whether they might be to reduce costs. That was set out well. There are tensions with regard to where the burden falls on other parts of our public services.

We have to ensure that we see the picture in the round. The sustainability of our public services depends on the sustainability of our public finances. We have to be sure that we can invest in social security. The social security bill in this country and across the UK will continue to rise for years and years to come. That is absolutely clear, and that investment will be made.

Maggie Chapman mentioned the position of the UK Government. I draw her attention to the Office for Budget Responsibility's analysis of the autumn budget, which set out that it was the most redistributive budget in recent history. The people who benefited most from it were in the bottom decile and the people who were paying the most were at the top end of that scale. That is redistribution.

Maggie Chapman: Does the member agree with Anas Sarwar, who said earlier this week that a wealth tax is not an option? If the member is talking about redistribution, we must look at taxation not only of income but of asset wealth.

Michael Marra: I take the point. We know that, across Scotland, we will have to increase the amount of public revenue raised over the next couple of decades if we are to sustainably fund our public services while meeting the increasing demands of demographic challenges and climate change.

In the short run, a wealth tax is not possible. The finance secretary has taken a decade to put in place a tax on sand, which is exactly the same tax as the one that applies in the rest of the UK. The idea that we can solve these problems with a wealth tax in this Parliament in the next few years is, frankly, for the birds. However, the cabinet secretary seems to take that one step further and to fully reject the idea that we should have any fiscal rules. That is of little surprise, given that this Government made £70 billion of spending demands ahead of the autumn budget and rejected £45 billion of revenue raisers. That would be £115 billion of fiscal adjustment—more than double Liz Truss's impact on the UK economy, which laid low the financial system in the UK.

That brings me to Craig Hoy's rather fantastical account of recent economic history in this country. If he does not recognise the economic carnage that was wrought by Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng or the horrendous inheritance that the Labour UK Government received from the Tory Government, frankly, I do not think that he is reading enough of the right papers, and he has his eyes closed and his ears shut.

We must ensure that we can build a better economy that serves far more of the people in this country who require it, and that has to be based on work. We must ensure that we take some of the difficult decisions to make that happen. As my colleagues Pam Duncan-Glancy, Claire Baker, Paul O'Kane and Martin Whitfield have set out, yes, we must make tough decisions but, in doing that, we must ensure that we hold people's dignity at our core.

16:40

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I remind members that I am in receipt of ADP.

It has always been a problem in politics that there are very few easy questions and even fewer easy answers. As Willie Rennie pointed out, social security has never been a simple topic. Since its inception, Governments have had to deal with questions of who gets how much of what, balancing generosity with how we pay for it. However, I can say confidently that, today, we face a landscape that is more challenging than ever before. More people than ever qualify for benefits, creating an ever-growing bill that is becoming less sustainable by the day.

That is due to a number of factors, many of which are out of the control of either the UK or the Scottish Governments. For instance, an ageing population creates more demand for retirement-age and disability payments. However, a number of decisions have been taken that inflate the cost of benefits. The value of awards has increased over the years, and the criteria for various payments have been expanded, meaning that more people are eligible for support today than was the case in previous generations.

Those decisions, which are taken by Governments, have consequences. They are not necessarily bad decisions, but they require sacrifices in other areas to make the cost sustainable.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Jeremy Balfour is on the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, which has considered many Scottish statutory instruments that I have introduced. Can he confirm that he has supported them all and, indeed, that he has lodged an amendment on uprating?

Jeremy Balfour: I am absolutely happy to confirm that, and I will come to that in a moment.

This is not easy. In prioritising certain benefits, we necessarily need to take away from others. That is the reality of government—hard decisions must be made and defended. That is the predicament that the UK Government now finds itself in. It is taking decisions to balance the budget. Unfortunately, a number of decisions that it has taken, such as the cuts to PIP, are at the expense of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

As the Glasgow Disability Alliance pointed out in its briefing for the debate, under the additional qualifying criteria for PIP that are suggested in the green paper, disabled people who are unable to fully dress themselves, unable to get in or out of the shower without assistance, unable to feed themselves without assistance or unable to go to the toilet without supervision may no longer qualify for PIP. In 21st century UK, that must be unacceptable.

Closer to home, we have a Scottish Government that simply seems to be unwilling to deal with the fact that there are difficult decisions to be made. As other members have pointed out, it has been forecast that, by the year 2027, there will be a £1.3 billion deficit in the Scottish social security budget. We are yet to hear anything from the SNP on how it proposes to address that deficit. Social security and welfare are teetering on the edge.

We must have a grown-up discussion on how we will address the looming crisis, which will mean having to lay aside partisan self-interest and dogmatic adherence to ideologies in order to look at pragmatic solutions. It will mean giving up the benefits arms race, in which each party promises more and more unsustainable budget increases in the hope that they can push the consequences far enough down the road that someone else will have to deal with them.

As other members have pointed out, we should instead be promoting economic growth, which would have the dual effect of raising more revenue to sustain lifeline payments while decreasing the number of people who rely on out-of-work benefits—the rising tide of growth lifts all boats. A number of speakers—Liz Smith, Craig Hoy and some from the Labour benches—have pointed to the changes that are set out in the green paper on being able to go in and out of employment. Those are welcome, and we need to take them forward.

As a brief aside to that point, I note that a talking point that seems to be becoming more of a concern in many corners of the Scottish political landscape is the plan to cut disability benefits such as ADP and PIP in order to instead get disabled people into employment. Let us be clear: those benefits are not means tested. They were never intended to be income replacement benefits. They are paid to help disabled people so that they are in a position to take part in society.

In many cases, without PIP or ADP, those people would never be able to go to work or leave the house. Able-bodied people do not require help to get up in the morning and get ready; I, and many others, do require help. Many disabled people would not work without such help. As I have said, those benefits are not an income replacement; they are a field leveller. I hope that we can dispense with the idea that ADP and PIP are in any way linked to income or employment.

If we are to avoid a true crisis in social security, we must start having grown-up conversations about how we make it both generous and sustainable. I agree with the cabinet secretary when she says that social security is a social investment, but we need it to be an investment that we can afford. On a number of occasions, members and the cabinet secretary have failed to say where the money will come from to pay for the looming deficit.

My party and I are committed to being part of the solution, and I am open to being involved in cross-party talks to come up with one. I hope that we can have a much more constructive debate, perhaps after next year, on where social security goes in the decades ahead. We cannot remain where we are; we must be bold in our thinking and protect the vulnerable but also protect the budget that we all need to look after.

16:48

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank all members who have contributed to today's debate.

I begin by mentioning the thoughtful contribution that Liz Smith made—as she always does—right at the start of the debate, particularly when she talked about the complexity of our now having devolved and reserved benefits and the interaction between them. In recent years, there have been a number of examples of that complexity having real and direct impacts on the Scottish Government's ability to administer the devolved benefits system. We have seen the handbrake turn that the UK Government has made on pension-age winter heating payments, and now we see changes to PIP or work capability assessments that will have very significant impacts on the budget and on how benefits are administered. I agree with Liz Smith that we really need to find a better way of doing things, and it is absolutely key that the responsibility lies with both Governments.

For example, when we look to implement any changes that might come from the ADP review that is currently being undertaken, I keenly recognise that we have to be very clear with the UK Government about what the changes are and

what the implications are. We need the UK Government to do the same, but we are not yet at that stage. This morning, I had a very useful and polite meeting—as I always do—with Stephen Timms to discuss some of the issues. As always, there was much disagreement on policy, but, even when there are policy disagreements, we need to find a better way of dealing with the practicalities. We are not there yet. For example, even if we do not make any changes, I do not know whether the ADP will be able to be relied on if the work capability assessment is scrapped. That is not good for the Scottish Government in relation to how we administer benefits and, as many members have pointed out, it is very problematic and concerning for the individuals who will be involved. Liz Smith made an exceptionally fair point that both Governments need to rise to the challenge in that regard.

Many members talked about economic inactivity, and they were quite right to do so, because helping people into fair and sustainable jobs in order to address economic inactivity is exceptionally important. Indeed, it is central to the Government's vision of a fairer and wealthier Scotland. Devolved employability services have a pivotal role to play in providing support. The no one left behind approach is about supporting people into the right job or the route that is best for their circumstances. Statistics have shown that about 20 per cent of participants in the no one left behind programme were economically inactive at their start date, but support is available and the Deputy First Minister is undertaking work to build on that. For example, she has had recent meetings with business and third sector leaders to talk about what additional measures need to be taken to reduce economic inactivity. She and other members of the Government will say more about that in due course.

Willie Rennie: Does the cabinet secretary recognise the importance of autism services and the current concern right across the country that the abandonment of shared care arrangements with private consultancies is having a direct impact on people's ability to get work? What discussions has she had with her colleague Neil Gray, who is sitting next to her, about making that change?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Quite rightly, clinical decisions should not be in the hands of politicians. I was going to come to Mr Rennie's contribution later, but I will do so now. He raised very important points on health and the importance of recognising the link between the health service and economic inactivity. One of the examples that he gave was autism, but there are others. He was quite right to raise those points. That is exactly why we have the operational improvement plan in place and why we are investing to bring down waiting times. The Government, including my colleague Neil Gray, recognises the link between health services and economic inactivity.

Many members talked about the fiscal sustainability of social security, which is integral to the discussions that we need to have. However, I gently point out that some contradictory principles have flowed through the debate. We are told—I presume that this is said to reassure us—that many of the proposed cuts and those that are already starting to be made by the UK Government do not impact on Scotland, so we could take different decisions on ADP. Indeed, we can. However, the member who said that will say in the same speech—or another member from the same party will say—that we need to consider the financial sustainability of our social security system and drive down social security expenditure in Scotland. I gently point out that there is a contradiction in washing our hands of concerns about what is happening at a UK level while, at the same time, insisting that we need to drive down social security expenditure.

Craig Hoy: Will the cabinet secretary concede the point that alarm bells were ringing about the sustainability of Scotland's social security budget before the spring statement and that we put those questions to the Government at that point? How does the Government intend to plug the £1.9 billion gap that we will face by the end of this decade? She cannot simply say that the money will turn up from somewhere; she must start to plan for that now. Will there be tax rises, or will there be public service cuts?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The first thing that we could do to prevent some of those issues would be to come together and send a strong message to the UK Government that it should not make the cuts that it is about to make, which will have an impact on our budget.

However, in a spirit of attempted consensus, I note that Craig Hoy is right to say that we need to manage variations between our expenditure and the block grant adjustments that come from Westminster. As we have done every year, we will do that by producing a balanced budget as part of the annual budget process. Members are quite right to say that it is about decisions and choices, but I will add some context. The proportion of the budget that the Scottish Government has chosen to invest in order to enhance the social security offering, over and above the money that we get from the UK Government, is projected to be less than 3.5 per cent of the Scottish Government's total resource budget in 2029-30. Yes, there is a challenge, but that is the level of the challenge.

I go back to my question: if people wish to see cuts to the social security budget, do they wish us to take the money from the 870,000 disabled people who currently receive benefits, the 806,000

people who are in low-income families or, indeed, the 110,000 carers? When we are talking about the fiscal sustainability of social security, the cuts that have been discussed are cuts for those people.

Many people, including Paul O'Kane, rightly talked about employment. Although employment is a way out of poverty, as Mr O'Kane said, for many people it is not. The UK Government wants more people to be supported into work, as do I, but it will be cutting support for young people and disabled people, which is a concern. It goes back to the point that Jeremy Balfour made very eloquently in his closing remarks. I genuinely do not understand how cutting a young person's universal credit or their PIP will encourage or support them into work. In fact, it will do the exact opposite. That is the genuine frustration that I have when I listen to Labour colleagues in particular, who say that it is all about employability and encouraging people into work while, at the same time, they are cutting support in a way that will take people away from, and present another barrier to, work.

Willie Rennie put it fairly in his contribution when he said that the primary focus of Labour's green paper is on welfare cuts, not pathways into work. He is absolutely right about that. He is also absolutely right that the financial stress resulting from the country's failing is being displaced on to individuals or the health service. That will have an impact not just on reserved benefits but on devolved benefits as well as our health service and social care.

Quite rightly, Maggie Chapman noted the impact on carers. We have not spoken about them much in the debate but, of course, the cuts to disability benefits will also impact them. For a household that is affected by disability, there will be a double whammy as both the disability benefits and the carer benefits will be cut. She is quite right to note the disproportionate effect on women and the gendered analysis that must be undertaken when we look at social security.

Roz McCall made a number of important points about whole-family support and the need to look at a whole family's or whole person's needs rather than just social security. That is exactly why whole-family support is such an important part of our current programme for government and the First Minister's drive to tackle child poverty.

Claire Baker spoke about the UK Government's child poverty task force. I go back to my point that, although the UK Government can launch a pilot for breakfast clubs—the Scottish Government's previous budget announced expanded breakfast clubs in Scotland—it cannot use that to say, "Look how great we're doing" at exactly the same time as media reports yesterday suggested that the child poverty task force will not look to scrap the two-child cap. That is the biggest change that could be made to lift children out of poverty, but it looks as though the UK Government is walking away from that. In the meantime, we will get on with mitigating the two-child cap. I just wish that the UK Government and the child poverty task force would do so.

The UK Government's decisions are another example of a Government with priorities that seem to be all about balancing the books on the back of the most vulnerable in our society. It is vital that the UK Government takes note of the real worry, concern and fear that are being caused by its consultation and, indeed, some of the plans that it is beginning to implement. I wish that the UK Government would listen to the people it is supposedly there to serve. I hope that we can come together to send a very strong message on behalf of disabled people and their carers that this Parliament thinks that the changes that the UK Government plans to make are unacceptable, and I hope that we can unite at decision time to take a strong voice to the UK Parliament against those cuts.

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-17268, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme. I call Jamie Hepburn to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 29 April 2025

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by	Scottish Government Debate: Supporting Scottish Industry During Turbulent Economic Times
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Wednesday 30 April 2025

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic; Finance and Local Government
followed by	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.10 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Thursday 1 May 2025

11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
followed by	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Net Zero and Energy, and Transport
followed by	Scottish Government Debate: Scotland's Hydrogen Future
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

Tuesday 6 May 2025

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Topical Questions (if selected)
followed by	Scottish Government Business
followed by	Committee Announcements
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Wednesday 7 May 2025

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands; Health and Social Care
followed by	Scottish Government Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by	Approval of SSIs (if required)
5.00 pm	Decision Time
followed by	Members' Business

Thursday 8 May 2025

11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
followed by	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Social Justice
followed by	Scottish Government Business
followed by	Business Motions
followed by	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 28 April 2025, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-17269 and S6M-17270, on committee meeting times, and motion S6M-17271, on the designation of a lead committee.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Education, Children and Young People Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament between approximately 1.30 pm and 5.00 pm on Tuesday 13 May and Tuesday 20 May 2025.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Social Justice and Social Security Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament between 2.00 pm and 5.00 pm on Tuesday 29 April 2025.

That the Parliament agrees that the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Commissioner for Older People (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Decision Time

17:01

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

I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Liz Smith is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Paul O'Kane will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-17242.3, in the name of Liz Smith, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17242, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on United Kingdom Government welfare reforms, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Liz Smith is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Paul O'Kane will fall.

We come to the vote on amendment S6M-17242.3, in the name of Liz Smith, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17242, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville. Members should cast their votes now.

For

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

Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-17242.3, in the name of Liz Smith, is: For 27, Against 82, Abstentions 5.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-17242.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-17242, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on UK Government welfare reforms, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Against

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

Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Rona Mackay]
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-17242.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, is: For 14, Against 100, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-17242, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on UK Government welfare reforms, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

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

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-17242, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on UK Government welfare reforms, is: For 73, Against 40, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament calls on the UK Labour administration to immediately scrap its damaging social security reforms, as announced in the *Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper*; highlights the UK Government's own impact analysis, which shows that 250,000 people, including 50,000 children, will be pushed into poverty under these plans, and notes the Resolution Foundation's report that lower-income households are set to become £500 a year poorer, following the UK Government's Spring Statement 2025.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on three Parliamentary Bureau motions, unless any member objects.

As no member has objected, the final question is, that motions S6M-17269 and S6M-17270, on committee meeting times, and motion S6M-17271, on the designation of a lead committee, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Education, Children and Young People Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament between approximately 1.30 pm and 5.00 pm on Tuesday 13 May and Tuesday 20 May 2025.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Social Justice and Social Security Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament between 2.00 pm and 5.00 pm on Tuesday 29 April 2025.

That the Parliament agrees that the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Commissioner for Older People (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Global Intergenerational Week 2025

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-16869, in the name of Jackie Dunbar, on global intergenerational week 2025. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak buttons now, and I call Jackie Dunbar to open the debate.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that Global Intergenerational Week runs from 24 to 30 April 2025; understands that the campaign originally started at a local level, grew to a national event and is now a global celebration in its sixth year; recognises that the aim of it is to inspire individuals, groups, organisations, local and national government, as well as non-government organisations, to fully embrace Intergenerational Week, which, it believes, will help connect people of all ages, particularly the younger and older generations; commends the work of Generations Working Together, which works in partnership with organisations from across the UK to promote intergenerational working across the country; recognises that this year's theme is intergenerational learning and aims to highlight the findings of the World Health Organization's Global Report on Ageism, which outlines the negative impact of ageism on society and recommends education as a key strategy to address it; understands that, for the first time, Generations Working Together welcomes a Global Intergenerational Week sponsor in global life sciences, the company, Bayer AG; recognises what it sees as the importance of intergenerational working in helping to create a fairer society, and welcomes all intergenerational work that has taken place, not only across Aberdeen Donside, but Scotland as a whole.

17:11

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer—my apologies for confusing you by sitting in a different seat tonight.

I thank all my colleagues across the chamber who signed my motion on global intergenerational week 2025, and I thank in advance those members who will take part in the debate. I also welcome Alison and Kshitija from the Generations Working Together team, who are in the public gallery.

The theme of this year's global intergenerational week is intergenerational learning. This is not the first debate that I have led on intergenerational working, which has led to someone asking me what personal experience I have had that makes me care so much about the subject—what is my story? To be honest, I do not have any particular personal experience that has led me to this issue, just a general belief that it is important for different generations to engage with and learn from one another.

As for stories, however, there have been so many. Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, before Facebook and Twitter—and, indeed, before Bebo and MySpace; who remembers them?—most communication was spoken rather than written. Some of it was practical, such as skills and language—that is how Doric has made its way down the generations—while another part of it was myths and legends, as well as some good old-fashioned gossip.

That is how so much of our history is passed down to us. Those of us from more humble beginnings know that history books were not written about farmhands and factory workers. Their stories and legacies were passed down and kept alive by word of mouth. That is what makes our uncle or great-uncle—or even our great-great-uncle, depending on how old we are—a person rather than an inscription on the local war memorial for someone whom we have never met. It is how so many of our folk songs, recipes and traditional skills, and the stories that are unique to our families and communities, have made their way down to us today.

I mentioned social media, and I come back to that. Social media—indeed, the internet in general—has changed how we share information, for better and for worse. It has led to there being an online Doric dictionary, which is for the better; it has supported people to share their lives with the world in a way that they never could before; and it has put some of our culture in front of larger audiences in a way that we could never possibly have imagined. However, in amongst the world's-worth of videos, blogs and web pages that we have at our fingertips, we have moved to a situation in which the majority of the content that people see online has been created in the past 24 hours, and that does not bode well for the stories that have been passed down the generations.

We have also seen a shift in how folk engage with one another. Our communities used to be mostly based on where we lived; we knew our neighbours and their neighbours, and their neighbours' neighbours. Nowadays, people can find friends on the other side of the planet who share the same interests, or they can find folk with common interests and then form a new kind of community with them. However, with those much wider nets, more folk—and especially older folk—can slip through, and we are seeing increased isolation as a result.

I want to use today's debate to talk about why there is still a case for intergenerational learning and for different generations to learn from one another. It not only teaches new information and skills, but provides opportunities to challenge

stereotypes and misconceptions, with ageism against both young and old being a particular problem.

On the theme of intergenerational learning, Generations Working Together has provided us with a wonderful briefing. As the MSP for Aberdeen Donside, I think that the best bit is where it talks about Aberdeen, particularly the intergenerational choir that is run by ACE Voices in Aberdeen. That project has been credited with reconnecting communities, providing learning and leadership opportunities, helping to reduce isolation and loneliness and reducing ageism. It is a fantastic initiative, and it is just one of numerous such initiatives across Scotland. For example, there is the intergenerational shared site that consists of a nursery inside a care home in Methilhaven in Fife, and there is the junior Up Helly Aa in Shetland. There are older adults mentoring young folk in the Citadel Youth Centre in Leith, and there is the great work of the F'aside women and girls group in East Lothian.

I expect to see more of that in the future—and I say "expect", because of the work that Generations Working Together has done in, for example, developing lesson plans and resources for primary schools to prepare children for intergenerational learning. I am sure that it will give members a copy of that material to anyone who wants it—I got one from the organisation earlier. It has also worked with Education Scotland and produced two new practice guidance handbooks on intergenerational work.

I will remind members what Generations Working Together is now asking for so that it can build on what it has already done. It is urging everyone to recognise the importance of three things. The first is intergenerational training to enable staff and volunteers to start from a place of good practice. The second is funding for intergenerational projects. If anyone is thinking of funding intergenerational projects, I promise them that it will be money well spent. I know at first hand, as a member of the ABZ propeller fund—which is funded by Aberdeen airport and gives out money to charities and groups in north-east Scotland—the fantastic difference that that can make. In my area, the fund has allocated money to the Bridge of Don men's shed for a polytunnel that it uses with Forehill primary school, with the not-so-young teaching the young how to grow things. That is just one fantastic example of intergenerational work.

Thirdly, the organisation is asking for at least two members of staff or volunteers in each project or school to be trained and supported over the long term to build their knowledge and confidence in the field of intergenerational practice.

I will finish by urging everyone to do something, too. Go and have a conversation with someone different, from a different generation. Learn or teach something, such as a new phrase, or, for those in Aberdeen, teach the younger generation the Doric. You will be glad that you did.

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

17:18

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to take up the opportunity to participate in the debate, and I thank Jackie Dunbar for bringing it to the chamber. Indeed, I contributed to a similar debate when I was my party's shadow minister for older people.

Generational working together is, and continues to be, a major issue. It is encouraging to hear that, from humble beginnings, the global intergenerational week event has now grown to an international level in just a few years, and now addresses the international issues that make such a difference to the generations. The campaign is a good chance for us to celebrate local opportunities to bring different age groups together to form friendships, to work together, to learn and to make progress.

As members know, I am a co-convener of the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group on Malawi, and I was delighted to learn recently that the Malawi Network of Older Persons Organisations has taken on the role of Malawi's country lead for global intergenerational week. As a consortium of civil society organisations working on ageing issues in Malawi, MANEPO is completely dedicated to promoting and protecting the rights of older people across that country.

The motion highlights this year's theme of intergenerational learning and highlights the findings of the World Health Organization's "Global Report on Ageism". The report outlines the negative impact of ageism on society, states that education is a key strategy for addressing it and focuses on the vital progress that has been made. Although it is very much the case that the Government must focus on how we deal with ageism and on how older people are managed, it is vital that we think about how those issues work on an international and intergenerational stage.

It is also important that we look at what the Scottish Government has done in the past. We know that there have been concerns about how the issues of isolation and loneliness are being tackled. There has been some progress in that regard, but we still have a long way to go in order to make the necessary changes. If nothing else, it gives us the context for where we are with regard to our ageing population.

Age Scotland's report, "The Big Survey 2023", which contains the results of a survey of people over 50 in Scotland, highlights many areas that need to be addressed and highlighted. Furthermore, a study by the Scottish Fiscal Commission that the BBC highlighted recently has found that issues with people's health become much more apparent as they get on in years, and discusses how that can be looked at. It says that we face "significant challenges" as a country when it comes to managing how individuals from different generations are supported

As for financing what needs to be done, we are well aware that, over the next 20 years, the spending required could have major impacts on what can and will be achieved. The commission's study talks about several indicators that relate to the decline in the health of the Scottish population, and we have already talked about how, in the past, health inequalities, isolation and loneliness have been big issues. Since 2012, Scotland's progress has very much stagnated, and there has been a general decline in healthy life expectancy. There has been a rise in mental health issues, too, as we are, sadly, all aware.

However, it is important that we also consider the positives that can be achieved. Significant health inequalities indicate not only where we are with regard to intergenerational issues but ways of supporting older people to feel part of the process. In saying all this, I echo the words of the Scottish Fiscal Commission's chairman, Professor Graeme Roy, who has said that

"Scotland faces a real challenge in terms of its overall fiscal sustainability"

when it comes to its ageing—and its unhealthy—population.

I am anxious to hear what the minister will say in her summing-up speech, when she will talk about where we are. However, there is a real opportunity for us to work together, to train together and to engage in projects together, all of which will make a difference when it comes to intergenerational issues.

17:23

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate ma guid freend—and, if I can yaise a Doric word, ma guid quine—Jackie Dunbar on securing this debate on global intergenerational week, which runs from 24 April to 31 April this year.

This is the second time that Ms Dunbar has led a debate on the issue, and she has aptly covered many important aspects of intergenerational working and the wider global movement, which is now in its sixth year.

The meaning of "intergenerational" has changed hugely over our lifetimes—indeed, we might say that it has changed across successive generations. The days of three or four generations of a single family living on the same street or in the same district and engaging with and learning from one another are almost entirely at an end. Mobility—social and physical—has gradually eroded that way of life, and we need to re-engage to assist generations to work together.

The point of generations working together is to leverage the diverse experiences and perspectives of each generation, fostering a richer learning and growth environment for everyone involved.

I remember participating as a relatively new MSP in a previous members' business debate on intergenerational issues, which was led by Christine Grahame MSP, who is sitting across the aisle from me. It inspired me, and Christine Grahame inspired me. Indeed, it was obvious that she had captured my interest, as one of the first actions that I pursued following the debate was to find out what intergenerational engagement work was taking place in Dumfries and Galloway, which is part of my South Scotland region.

There is, indeed, intergenerational work taking place in Dumfries and Galloway. For example, Kerry Little from Mallory Nurseries in Dumfries takes pre-school children to the older persons day centre at Cumberland Street for intergenerational engagement. Intergenerational working might sound quite lofty—it is a bit of a mouthful—but what takes place at the day centre was quite simple to achieve. The wee ones were guided to play and interact with the older adults, and there was much mirth and joy.

The home page of the Generations Working Together website states:

"Together, let's celebrate the power of connection. Relationships between older and younger people are not just 'nice' but essential."

The website is full of information about events, workshops and activities, as well as online training. In addition, there is a global intergenerational week promotional video. It is worth watching, as it outlines the benefits, including mentoring, and notes the positive effect of confidence building and the reduction of isolation and loneliness among participants.

I note that this year's theme is intergenerational learning, and that the aim is to highlight the findings of the World Health Organization's "Global Report on Ageism". As Jackie Dunbar's motion states, the report

"outlines the negative impact of ageism on society and recommends education as a key strategy"

to address that.

I have my intergenerational guide with me. I will make sure that I read it later and pay attention to what it says.

Last September, I presented the welcome address at an intergenerational workshop at the Dumfries & Galloway Carers Centre. There were many attendees from third sector organisations.

I am pleased to inform members about some of the excellent work that is going on in D&G. Just this morning, I read that children at the Johnston Nursery in Kirkcudbright participated in an intergenerational event. The nursery is collaborating with Meeting Centres Scotland to create an intergenerational and dementia-friendly meeting space in the nursery. I note that the children took the lead on a brilliantly relevant bridge-building challenge. The challenge, which was to build a bridge strong enough for a toy car to cross, was reported as

"an enjoyable and inclusive activity that fostered teamwork."

In addition, the Galloway Action Team charity in Stranraer is delivering intergenerational work, responding to local people's needs and building the skills of the volunteers, supporting them to continue to integrate with locals.

Today's debate is a good way of raising awareness of what generations working together means, conveying the positives six years on from the first global intergenerational week and valuing the importance of intergenerational working.

17:28

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I, too, thank Ms Dunbar for securing the debate. It is commendable that this is the second year in a row that she has done so, as this is a critical issue for our society. Often, the discourse in our country can focus on intergenerational inequality and unfairness, but focusing more on the opportunities that intergenerational working can bring is important, because amazing things are going on in this country. Ms Dunbar alluded to a lot of that in her speech, and it provoked a lot of thinking on my part about what goes on in my area.

I remember going to an event in Springburn academy—this was before I became a member of the Scottish Parliament—that was to do with an oral history project that intermediate-level pupils were involved in. As part of the project, the pupils spoke to older members of the community about their memories of Springburn. The history that the pupils recorded opened their eyes to the immense richness of the identity of those older members of the community and the pride that they had in their community. That was something that they had not previously discovered, and it was really special to witness.

At the event, when the pupils were presenting the findings of their project, having interviewed older members of the community, they referenced a proverb, which was along the lines of "When an old person dies, a library burns to the ground." I thought that that was a really poetic way of capturing the point of how much we might miss as a society, particularly when we view with derision or with a lack of respect our older people and the immense amount of experience and wisdom that they can bring. It was remarkable to see the awareness of young people at the school reflecting on that.

It is a turn of phrase that has stuck with me. We often forget the immense amount of experience, particularly in working-class communities, that is not recorded or appreciated. The way in which the campaign has focused on promoting a grass-roots network is important. I commend its work and hope that it continues to grow from year to year. It has certainly grown from being a relatively local project to being a global phenomenon, and that is to be celebrated.

I also think of my recent attendance at a model railway exhibition in Glasgow, where I enjoyed the model railway exhibits, which were impressive. I also enjoyed seeing all the community model railway clubs, with young people and old people working together to build amazing historical and contemporary scenes from across Scotland, and the shared enthusiasm and joy of people coming together and celebrating that. That is another example of the richness in our country that can be overlooked or dismissed.

Things such as men's sheds or community gardens are not prescribed by central Government or some central office; they happen organically in our communities. Those things are very special and we ought to celebrate them. So often, they are seen as being nice to have and easy to trim away from a Government budget line from year to year, but they are valuable and rich.

Such things are also essential to public health. We often talk about problems with mental health and wellbeing, or about isolation and loneliness, and how difficult it might be for a general practitioner to find a remedy for those things. It is not always about prescribing something; the remedy can be built into our communities. Mental ill-health and other problems might be a symptom of disconnect within our communities, which is more subtle and harder to diagnose.

That is where the ideal of social prescribing comes in. It is about building that richness into our communities. An introduction to a sports club or to a group such as the scouts, the Boys Brigade, the

cadets or a model railway club is the essence of starting to build wellness, prosperity and happiness, which is an under-regarded and underappreciated factor in public policy in our society. If we can establish the tangible value of such organisations and the work that they do, and price it into Government policy, we will be well on the way to building a better network and system for intergenerational working across our country.

I again thank Jackie Dunbar for lodging the motion.

17:32

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

Global intergenerational week is aimed at inspiring individuals, groups, organisations and Governments to connect people of all ages, especially the younger and older generations, in order to share good practice and take opportunities to come together, enjoy each other's company, and make friendships that cross the age divide. That can happen through physical activities, chatting, gardening and baking—although I should say that I am quite hopeless at baking.

Some of that already happens quite naturally through grandparenting and interaction with elderly relatives and neighbours. It can be about cuddling in to granny or grandad, telling a story from a book or simply sharing memories of the past, embellished—in my case, at least—for dramatic or romantic effect, or even both. Those are special moments and they give parents a break. Walking hand in hand with a young one chattering away, and granny getting out and about instead of being sofa bound, are the stuff of abiding memories.

A benefit of being Granny Scotland—my soubriquet—is going to films that I really want to see but for which I need an alibi. That alibi is the granddaughter who is at my side while we watch "Frozen" on the big screen, with compulsory burgers; who, while I simply lounge on the sand at Portobello beach, paddles about and keeps checking to see if I am watching her with approval; or who shares a humungous banana split with me. I remember having my face painted as a cat's on new year's day and then returning home, forgetting that I was still sporting the cat face and wondering why the world was smiling at me as I passed by.

In some cultures—for example, in China—the elderly are respected and even revered, just for being elderly. Indeed, with my own late granny, we did as we were told. It was her hoose, so there were no mugs in her kitchen; there was a cheena cup and saucer, doilies, antimacassars and a three-tiered cake and sandwich stand. There was nothing less from a former lady's maid—the daughter of a shepherd, who left school at 14. It was another world, but it is as clear in my memory as yesterday.

This sort of intergenerational activity can involve young ones coming in to care settings to share simple play and perhaps perform a song or two. Indeed, I have seen that at work in schools. It can involve lessons in social history, too. What was it like, say, growing up after the war with the remnants of rationing, or in the swinging 60s when mini-skirts were, dangerously, all the fashion and the young rebelled against the older generation? By the way, I come free of charge.

It can involve a young person showing someone older, such as me, how to use TikTok or even the mysteries of the internet. It can also be about using emojis in the right place at the right time for the right reason. After all, we all remember David Cameron getting caught, misusing "LOL".

All of that activity should also remind the younger generation that we, the older people, have a value and should be valued—that we have had, and still have, a life. It is important that we understand and tolerate one another. Age discrimination against the older generation is alive and well—as an octogenarian, I can testify to that—but so is age discrimination against the young. The untrammelled energy of youth can be annoying but so, too, can the slower pace of the elderly, irritating those who are young, for whom life is in a hurry.

Tolerance and understanding are, therefore, a good prescription. That is why one-to-one encounters, starting with those personal encounters between the younger and older generations, are important; they shatter misperceptions and, what is more, enhance respect and understanding of both the old and the young.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Grahame. You may be underpricing yourself.

I call Kaukab Stewart to respond to the debate. Minister, you have about seven minutes.

17:37

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): Thank you, Presiding Officer, and fellow members.

I am delighted to close the debate on global intergenerational week 2025, and I thank my colleague Jackie Dunbar for lodging the motion and my fellow MSPs for attending and taking part. It is important that we celebrate this global event organised by Generations Working Together,

which is the nationally recognised centre of excellence supporting the development of intergenerational work across Scotland.

The seven themes explored in this year's campaign are key to my work as Minister for Equalities and align with the mission and values of the Scottish Government. Indeed, the themes include challenging ageism and social isolation and loneliness, both of which come under my portfolio.

The Scottish Government recognises the value in bringing generations together to encourage greater understanding and respect between them and to build more cohesive and fairer communities in Scotland. As a result, we are working with a wide range of partners across the age equality spectrum, including Generations Working Together, which sits on both our older people's strategic action forum and our social isolation and loneliness advisory group.

I have seen in practice the benefits to both older and younger generations of coming together to share skills and to learn from one another. In February, I had the pleasure of visiting the men's shed in Inverclyde—a volunteer-run grass-roots organisation that provides community spaces where people can get involved and grow. In its workshop, I saw multiple generations and cultures working together and building friendships.

Turning to colleagues' contributions, I was struck by Jackie Dunbar's general belief that generations can learn from one another and her celebration of the tradition of oral history that passes on to other generations our folklore, storytelling and language—indeed, all languages, including the Doric, for which Jackie Dunbar has a great passion.

I thank Alexander Stewart for recognising the progress that we have made. I accept that we face challenges, but I give him an absolute commitment that we will continue to make further progress.

Inspired by Christine Grahame, as so many of us are, Emma Harper highlighted the value of education as a way of addressing ageism. When I was a teacher, which was not that long ago, I took great pleasure—especially when I was teaching primary 7s—in making sure that, as part of our work on the topic of people and place, we reached out to local older people. We organised tea parties for them in the school, and children were able to develop their social and interpersonal skills by learning how to take turns to ask questions and listen. Everyone benefited from that.

Paul Sweeney acknowledged the opportunities that intergenerational work presents and emphasised—very poignantly, I must say—the vast knowledge that is held by our older people and for which we are grateful to them.

Christine Grahame highlighted the role of grandparents. I am sure that all members are grateful to her for sharing the joyful tales of the activities that she has taken part in, including face painting. I am sure that she looked perfect.

I return to the fact that the Scottish Government is clear about our support for intergenerational working, with older people in particular, given the impact that it has on loneliness. That is evident from the support that we provide through the social isolation and loneliness fund, which supports 53 organisations in tackling social isolation and loneliness. We will be investing £3.8 million in that work over a three-year period.

As Alexander Stewart pointed out, social isolation and loneliness are public health issues that can affect anyone at any stage of life. Therefore, many of the projects that are funded take a strong intergenerational approach by supporting older and younger people to connect through social lunches, befriending, community meals or other activities.

We are, of course, proud to have supported men's sheds since their inception in Scotland more than a decade ago, and we have provided more than three quarters of a million pounds to enable that movement to grow and flourish. Men's sheds are a positive role model for fostering connections between generations of men to increase wellbeing, reduce stigma and make a difference to their local communities.

We are also delighted to fund Befriending Networks, which provides vital support and advice to befriending organisations across the UK and is a partner of our social isolation and loneliness advisory group. We do recognise that many of those organisations rely on the passion of volunteers.

We know that intergenerational volunteering brings many benefits, not only by reducing loneliness and isolation but by helping people make new friends, have fun and help others. Building a deeper understanding of one another through volunteering can help all generations feel valued as well as create a greater sense of belonging and help everyone improve their mental health and build their confidence. That is why the Scottish Government has published the volunteering action plan, which seeks to increase participation and reduce barriers to volunteering for all.

I again thank Ms Dunbar for securing the debate and Generations Working Together for its tireless work in raising the profile of intergenerational work across the globe. I appreciate that we have faced many challenges that have impacted on intergenerational connections, such as Covid-19 and the on-going cost of living crisis, but I know

that, with the on-going support of Generations Working Together as a key partner, we can strive to make a positive difference to all generations.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:44.

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