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Wednesday 10 September 2025

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 10 September 2025

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

Presiding Officer's Ruling

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. Before we begin this afternoon's business, I note that I undertook to respond to the point of order that Mr Whitfield made at the end of the members' business debate last night. I have had time to reflect on his point of order, and I will advise Mr Whitfield and other members accordingly. A bill must, on its introduction, be accompanied by a financial memorandum that sets out best estimates of the costs, savings and changes to revenues to which the bill's provisions would give rise. The rules on a financial memorandum do not require it to include comment on the merits or otherwise of the bill's provisions—that information is included in the bill's policy memorandum.

As Mr Whitfield will be aware, although the matters are interlinked, standing orders make separate provision on financial resolutions. When it is determined that a bill requires a financial resolution, no proceedings may be taken on the bill at any stage after stage 1 unless the Parliament has, by resolution, agreed to a financial resolution. I hope that that clarification is helpful.

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

14:01

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The first item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is rural affairs, land reform and islands.

I advise members that, across the afternoon, we are incredibly tight for time, so I make the usual plea for brevity in questions and responses. I will do my best to get in as many supplementary questions as I can. It is unlikely that I will get them all in, but I will do my best.

Scottish Ocean Cluster

1. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with Seafood Scotland regarding the development of the Scottish ocean cluster. (S6O-04898)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I was fortunate to join Seafood Scotland for the launch of its ocean cluster project at the Seafood Expo Global conference in May. The project represents a welcome new approach to maximising the value and sustainability of our seafood industry by focusing on the critical opportunity of utilising industry by-products that have traditionally been underutilised or simply discarded. I am hopeful that the project will drive further innovation and sustainability in our seafood while, at the same time, maximising the value that we get from those products.

Audrey Nicoll: The Scottish ocean cluster has the potential to drive innovation and entrepreneurship in the blue economy by creating value from underutilised sidestreams. A successful Iceland ocean cluster—a model that Scotland seeks to emulate—has generated high-value jobs in engineering, artificial intelligence, product design and biotechnology, thereby contributing to vibrant and sustainable local economies. Furthermore, that ocean cluster has driven substantial growth in Iceland's biotechnology sector and has resulted in the establishment of its first unicorn company, which creates high-value medical products from fish sidestreams—namely, cod skin. The Scottish ocean cluster would have the added benefit—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question.

Audrey Nicoll: —of access to our established biotechnology and innovation facilities. Does the

cabinet secretary agree that that development has significant merit, and will she agree to meet me?

Mairi Gougeon: Audrey Nicoll has raised some really important points. It has been exciting to see what has been developed in Iceland. We can only hope to build on that ambition and make the most of the opportunities that exist in Scotland to capitalise on innovation and new funding streams.

I am more than happy to commit to a meeting with Audrey Nicoll. It would be beneficial to include Seafood Scotland in the meeting, so that we can discuss the project in more detail.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): The cabinet secretary very helpfully accepted my invitation to join cockle fisher stakeholders at a meeting in Newton Stewart in July. At that meeting, she committed to come back with a progress report on the approach to opening a sustainable cockle fishery on the Solway. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on progress?

Mairi Gougeon: I thank Finlay Carson for the meeting that I held with him and his constituent on such a fishery. We had a really helpful discussion. I am still waiting for more information from officials, but I will keep him updated. When I receive that information, I will look to discuss the issue further with him.

Glen Prosen

2. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what the justification was at the time for the purchase of Glen Prosen by Forestry and Land Scotland in November 2022, with a reported cost to the public of £17.6 million. (S6O-04899)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The strategic objective of acquiring the additional land at Glen Prosen was to create a contiguous area of 10,000 hectares in public ownership across the Angus glens and in the Cairngorms national park. It provides an opportunity for the development of an exemplar of integrated land management that can demonstrate how habitat restoration, forestry, agriculture and other land uses can be combined in a way that furthers the Scottish Government's aims for people's wellbeing, nature recovery at scale, climate resilience and thriving rural communities.

Liam Kerr: For three years, the only formal reason that was given for the purchase was "strategic importance", although what that means has never been formally set out. The public did not ask for it, the people in the glen did not want it and, three years on, they still await the promised management plan that would explain its strategic importance. Given that, under the Scottish

National Party's new land reform legislation, failure to produce such a plan would result in a massive fine to the taxpayer, when will the plan be laid, what will the amount of the fine be if it is not, and from which budget will it come?

Mairi Gougeon: There has been significant consultation and engagement in the development of the land management plan, and I believe that the plan will be submitted to Scottish Forestry, the regulator, in the coming months. It has been finalised, but it has taken a long time to develop, purely because of the extensive engagement and consultation that has taken place. I hope that the Scottish Parliament will pass the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, which is progressing through the parliamentary processes. At that point, I will expect our public agencies to follow the plan and, if anything, lead by example when it comes to the different initiatives that we will introduce.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): We have just heard from the cabinet secretary that Forestry and Land Scotland purchased Glen Prosen for the purposes of nature recovery, climate resilience and public health and wellbeing activities, which are clearly in the public interest. When I consulted on my proposed land ownership and public interest bill, I found widespread support for a public interest test on transfers of large landholdings. Will the cabinet secretary support the inclusion of a public interest test in the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill ahead of stage 3?

Mairi Gougeon: As the member will be aware, and as we have discussed at length during stage 2 consideration of the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, we have looked at introducing wording that would reference a public interest test in a way that is ultimately workable and that would achieve the aims that we have set out in the bill.

I look forward to continuing to engage with Mercedes Villalba and members across the chamber as we look to strengthen the bill and work on amendments ahead of stage 3.

Sustainable Farming and Food Production

3. Ruth Maguire (Cunningham South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what work it is doing to support sustainable farming and food production that is based on improving biodiversity. (S6O-04900)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): As per the vision for agriculture, Scotland will have a support framework that delivers high-quality food production, climate mitigation and adaptation and nature restoration. The agri-environment climate scheme continues to support targeted environmental actions, with £339 million having been committed since 2015. The

£14 million future farming investment scheme will facilitate farmer-led actions to restore nature, address climate change and improve business efficiency.

We have new requirements to prevent damage to peatlands and wetlands, and the whole farm plan biodiversity audit encourages the adoption of nature-friendly approaches. The transition to the four-tier framework will further incentivise farmers and crofters to improve biodiversity.

Ruth Maguire: As of last week, support payments of more than £322 million had reached the accounts of farmers and crofters. Uniquely in the United Kingdom, Scotland has maintained direct payments, showing that the Scottish National Party values the work of farmers and crofters and knows the importance of stability and the ability to plan. How much of that funding has been received by Ayrshire agricultural businesses compared with equivalent businesses in England, thanks to the SNP's policies?

Jim Fairlie: The Government whole-heartedly supports our farmers and crofters. We recognise how crucial forward planning is for agricultural businesses, which is why we have committed to having no cliff edge in support as we transition to the new four-tier framework.

As of 8 September, basic payments scheme and greening 2025 advance payments worth £21,799,762 have been issued to businesses in Ayrshire local authority areas. That is one part of a wider package of support, including the aforementioned agri-environment scheme, that we are delivering to farmers and crofters. I point out that Andrew Connon of NFU Scotland was delighted to see farmers receiving those payments.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Scotland has legislated for sustainable regenerative agriculture, but stakeholders—farmers and other people who are employed in the sector—are concerned that little has been done to provide the education and training opportunities that are needed for that urgent shift. Without a properly funded long-term education and skills pipeline, there is a real risk that the transition in agriculture will stall before it has had a chance to get started. What consideration has the minister given to allocating a greater proportion of funding to the education and skills tier of the farm support budget, to ensure that the agricultural workforce has the skills and training that it needs?

Jim Fairlie: I am sure that Ariane Burgess knows that a range of things happen in agriculture that help knowledge exchange between farmers and among the community. In specific terms, tier 4 of the framework is about continuous personal development, and it will continue to help farmers

to get to a place where they can deliver the vision of the agriculture programme.

Flood Resilience Strategy (Islands)

4. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government, as part of the cross-Government co-ordination on islands, what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding action to ensure that island communities are protected through an effective flood resilience strategy, in light of Audit Scotland's reported findings on weaknesses in preparedness. (S6O-04901)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Climate change adaptation and improving resilience to flooding, including for our island communities, are priorities for the Scottish Government across ministerial portfolios. The recently completed Millport coastal flood protection scheme exemplifies that commitment. We have invested £39 million to safeguard island homes, businesses and critical infrastructure, which demonstrates how national leadership and local delivery can build real resilience for island communities. We are carefully considering Audit Scotland's report, while noting that many of its recommendations align with work that is already under way as part of our national flood resilience strategy, which itself was subject to an island community impact assessment and requires cross-Government working.

Martin Whitfield: The Auditor General's report highlights that Scotland does not have a clear national plan to improve communities' resilience to flooding. It says that the funding model is

"not fit for purpose",

with costs rising from

“£350 million to over £1 billion.”

In a previous answer, the minister spoke of providing whole-hearted support for farmers and crofters—and I assume that he also meant support for our communities—so why is it that, after 17 years in government, the Scottish National Party has failed to produce a fully costed, time-bound flood resilience plan? When will such a plan finally be put in place?

Jim Fairlie: I dispute Martin Whitfield's characterisation. I point out that the report stated that there has been

"a positive step forward in providing the strategic leadership that is needed".

The Scottish Government has funded improvements to flood resilience across communities in Scotland since 2016. It has allocated more than £570 million to local authorities to support flood protection schemes and wider flood resilience.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a number of supplementary questions—I will try to get in as many as I can.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): My constituency is prone to significant flooding, and at the weekend alerts were again issued for Stornoway and Baleshare. The minister might be aware that the Baleshare causeway was built in the 1960s. Given that, since the original construction, upgrades have been limited, and given that the community in Baleshare is now frequently cut off from the rest of North Uist due to flooding, what avenues might be available to support that vital work?

Jim Fairlie: As ministers, we take the impact of coastal flooding and erosion on local communities, such as the community in Baleshare, very seriously. As such, we have published guidance to support local authorities to develop coastal change adaptation plans. Over this parliamentary session, almost £12 million will be invested to support such adaptation.

Scotland's national islands plan sets out the actions and investments that the Scottish Government intends to put in place to meaningfully improve outcomes for island communities, including building resilience to climate change. A new national islands plan will be developed for publication this year, and we will continue to listen to and be guided by islanders to ensure that it continues to deliver on our shared vision for thriving, sustainable and successful island communities.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The Government cannot do that on its own. It needs partnership with farmers and landowners, both on islands and across the country, but that simply is not happening. We should be using best practice and natural water management measures. However, there has been no proper discussion and no roll-out of best practice. When will that happen?

Jim Fairlie: I hear Willie Rennie's points. We have had these conversations before. I am alive to the fact that we need those landscape-scale interventions if we are to ensure that we develop proper flood strategies. I am absolutely committed to looking at that.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): A number of flood prevention schemes have been constructed on the isle of Cumbrae in recent years, the most recent being on Millport waterfront—a £48 million investment that is 80 per cent funded by the Scottish Government. What impact does the minister envisage that that investment will have on the long-term security of Millport against the adverse impacts of climate change?

Jim Fairlie: The Millport coastal flood protection scheme exemplifies our commitment to improving resilience to flooding in our island communities. It was completed last year and provides a one-in-200-year standard of protection for the 2km of Millport's coastline. It has improved flood protection for more than 650 homes and businesses by reducing the risk of flooding and tidal overtopping and by improving community resilience to the impacts of climate change and the increased frequency of storms. The scheme not only safeguards homes, businesses and critical infrastructure in Millport; it demonstrates how national leadership, local delivery and partnership working, which relate to Willie Rennie's point, can help us to build real resilience for island communities.

National Good Food Nation Plan

5. Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to support small-scale food producers in rural communities, in light of its commitments under the national good food nation plan. (S6O-04902)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government remains committed to supporting small-scale producers and empowering them to help deliver our vision for agriculture. This year, the small producers pilot fund is providing up to £1 million in resource funding, which includes support for the practical training fund, to help small producers to access training and build stronger, sustainable businesses. The practical training fund supports our good food nation ambitions by providing access to training on sustainable food production for small producers, who will play a role in advancing the outcomes that are set out in the proposed national good food nation plan.

Elena Whitham: The cabinet secretary will know that two fantastic local producers in my constituency, at Mossgiel farm and Corrie Mains farm, have lost their school contracts with East Ayrshire Council. Those businesses have long supported sustainable food, local jobs and the good food nation vision, and have helped East Ayrshire to achieve gold status under the Soil Association's good food for life scheme. The decision is a real setback, and it raises serious questions about the procurement rules that councils must follow. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is time to review the frameworks to ensure that they do not end up working against the very goals that we are trying to achieve collectively?

Mairi Gougeon: I completely understand the concern that Elena Whitham raises. I point out that such decisions are for East Ayrshire Council to

take, because public bodies are responsible for their own procurement decisions. However, the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 already includes a range of drivers to increase the quality and consider the provenance of the food and drink that are procured. The Economy and Fair Work Committee undertook a review of the 2014 act and made a number of recommendations, which the Minister for Public Finance followed up on. I believe that the committee is due to receive an update on the recommendations that were made.

We of course wish to support our local producers. Scotland Excel does a lot of work to ensure that producers are in the best position possible to bid for public contracts, so that we do not end up in the situation that has been described. I am always keen to see what more we can do in relation to that, which is why public procurement is highlighted in the good food nation plan.

Meat-free Days (Public Institutions)

6. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the potential impact on farmers and food producers of the introduction of meat-free days in public institutions, such as schools and hospitals. (S6O-04903)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): It will come as no surprise to Murdo Fraser to hear me say that Scottish red meat is world renowned and is recognised as a good source of vital nutrients, including iron, zinc and vitamin B12. We continue to work with the sector to ensure that it thrives as part of a climate-smart food system. Decisions on which meals to serve are matters for each managing authority—whether it be public or private—because we recognise that they are best placed to take into account local dietary needs and demands. For example, in schools, provided that statutory food and drink standards are met, decisions on which products to include on menus are matters for the local authority.

Murdo Fraser: I congratulate the minister on his track record in producing healthy red meat on Scottish farms, but he will be familiar with the concern that Scottish farmers and food producers have expressed about the growth of meat-free days—for example, on school menus—and about the substitution of meat with heavily processed meat substitutes, instead of healthy, home-produced Scottish meat products.

In the area that the minister and I both represent, a group called ProVeg International is actively involved in designing school menus to reduce the availability of meat. Does the minister agree that we should support choice when it

comes to menus in schools and elsewhere and that, just as there should always be vegetarian and vegan options for those who want to choose them, there should also be the option of healthy, home-produced meat for those who wish to choose it?

Jim Fairlie: I am grateful to Murdo Fraser for bringing up that question, because the issue is close to my heart. I am aware of the concerns and campaigns among some stakeholders, and of the potential impact on farmers and food producers of the introduction of meat-free days in public institutions. Indeed, I will meet the local campaigner on that very issue on 19 September, in my capacity as a constituency MSP.

The Scottish Government continues to keep a focus on food policy, based on scientific evidence, and in partnership with bodies such as Food Standards Scotland. I absolutely get the point that Murdo Fraser is making, which is that we should have a balanced diet for our children and young people.

Edinburgh Biomes Project

7. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government at what stage the current funding application is for the Edinburgh biomes project at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. (S6O-04904)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Scottish Government has already committed £58 million to the Edinburgh biomes programme over the past five years, to the end of 2025-26. We will continue to play an important role in supporting the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh as it moves forward with delivery of the programme, within overall budget constraints across the public sector. The process to determine capital funding provision for future years is under way, and regular discussions with the botanic garden continues, to ensure that it is fully engaged with that process.

Miles Briggs: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the risk to that globally important living collection of plants if the heating system were to fail, which reinforces the importance of delivering the project. The uncertainty of funding each financial year makes planning the project even more challenging. What assurance can the cabinet secretary give the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh that it will receive the necessary funding to complete the project? Will she agree to visit the site with me and other Edinburgh MSPs to see the global importance of the project?

Mairi Gougeon: I am more than happy to commit to that meeting. I absolutely agree with Miles Briggs on the overall importance of the project.

I emphasise, and offer assurance, that our officials are in regular discussion about the matter with the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. We have already provided quite a lot of flexibility in relation to spend and attempts to reprofile that, in recognition of challenges that could not have been foreseen when the project was first initiated.

We all want to see the project be a success. A refreshed business case is being worked on, which will feed into the budget processes. I am more than happy to continue the discussion and undertake that visit.

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): How exactly does the Scottish Government plan to protect vital carbon mitigation research at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in the interim period while the biomes project secures funding?

Mairi Gougeon: I would like to say how much we value the work that the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh undertakes through its research and in relation to its collections. I hope that I have emphasised that so far. That is why we work so closely with it, and particularly through the difficult budget situation that we are all facing at the moment. We all want to work to support the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, which is certainly what I am committed to doing.

Derelict Land and Vacant Buildings (Urban Areas)

8. Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, in relation to its policies on land reform and land use, what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding any action that can be taken to address concerns about derelict land and vacant buildings in urban areas, including Glasgow. (S6O-04905)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I have had discussions with ministerial colleagues relating to land reform and particularly to the links between the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill and other Government policies. The Government is very aware of the harm that vacant and derelict sites can cause to communities, and we are providing resources to address those issues. Glasgow City Council is receiving £1.9 million this year from the vacant and derelict land fund. In addition, we are seeking to reform and modernise compulsory purchase. We are also reviewing the community right to buy.

Annie Wells: What steps will the Scottish Government take to ensure that the land that has been left derelict since the demolition of the Red Road flats more than a decade ago is finally brought back into productive use, given that the local community has been left feeling ignored and

let down during this time, and in light of its responsibilities for land reform and community empowerment?

Mairi Gougeon: If the member writes to me about the particular issue that she just highlighted, I will be more than happy to come back with more specific detail. A number of different reforms are under way that I think will help to address some of that situation. I have already mentioned the vacant and derelict land fund. We are also undertaking a review of community right to buy, which I think will assist. We have the Scottish land fund and the review of compulsory purchase orders. As a Government, we have also committed to undertaking a consultation on compulsory sales orders. Those measures in the round, as well as what we are doing more broadly in relation to land reform, will help us to better address the problems and blights that exist in our communities.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The urban blight and unfulfilled potential of derelict buildings such as the Interfloor factory building in Dumfries have been an issue for many years, and I have campaigned about it, along with residents and businesses. What more could the United Kingdom Government do to change the tax system that it controls to promote refurbishment and regeneration and to avoid people defaulting to demolition purely because of tax regulations?

Mairi Gougeon: Discussions are on-going with the UK Government on those issues. One of the best solutions to the discrepancy in the tax treatment of refurbishment and retrofitting would be for the UK Government to equalise the relevant VAT rates. That would definitely bring benefits for the regeneration of communities, while also contributing to our net zero ambitions by reducing the emissions that are caused by demolition and new construction. I am happy to follow up on that with my Government colleagues and to respond to Emma Harper in more detail.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the rural affairs, land reform and islands portfolio. I apologise to the members I was not able to call. To allow front-bench members to change places, there will be a brief pause before we move to the next portfolio.

Health and Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next portfolio is health and social care. I remind those members who were not in the chamber earlier that we are tight for time across the afternoon. I will try to get in as many supplementaries as I can, but questions and responses will need to be as brief as possible.

“Healthy Life Expectancy, 2021-2023”

1. Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the recently published report by National Records of Scotland, “Healthy Life Expectancy, 2021-2023”. (S6O-04906)

The Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health (Jenni Minto): The Government remains committed to supporting everyone to live longer, healthier and more fulfilling lives. We recognise that the latest report indicates that there has been a slight decline in Scottish healthy life expectancy, which is the number of years for which people can expect to live in good health.

Experts attribute the stalling of improvements and the widening of health inequalities in Scotland to successive economic shocks, which include austerity, Brexit, Covid-19 and the on-going cost of living crisis. To tackle those inequalities, the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities have jointly published a 10-year population health framework that aims to improve life expectancy—which is an objective measure—while closing the gap between the life expectancy of the most deprived 20 per cent of communities and the national average.

Katy Clark: Healthy life expectancy estimates for both men and women in Scotland have hit their lowest point since records began in 2014. There are also clear regional variations, with North Ayrshire having the joint lowest healthy life expectancy, at 52.5 years for women and 52.6 years for men. What work is the Scottish Government doing to improve healthy life expectancy nationally, and what work is it doing with North Ayrshire Council and NHS Ayrshire and Arran specifically in relation to North Ayrshire?

Jenni Minto: I recognise that the issue of the inequalities that exist across Scotland is one that the Government needs to look at alongside local authorities and health boards. That is why we have introduced the population health framework. As part of that, three Marmot pilots will look specifically at how areas can take a whole-community approach to supporting their communities.

I was pleased to be able to visit a project—not in the member’s constituency, but in South Lanarkshire—that is looking at whole family support in areas of inequality to support a move to a better population health position.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): In April, the Scottish Fiscal Commission published its “Fiscal Sustainability Report”, which raised concerns about the pressures that ill health will place on future Scottish budgets. It said that, if population health improved relative to the rest of the United Kingdom, fiscal pressure could be

eased, but it would rise if population health worsened. Given that healthy life expectancy has been falling since 2014 to 2016, is the minister concerned that we might be on a path to the worst health scenario projection?

Jenni Minto: I recognise the amount of work that Brian Whittle does in the area of preventative health activity. The Scottish Government has looked at tobacco and vaping and is working with the United Kingdom Government on a bill that will try to reduce people’s reliance on tobacco and vaping. In October, we will bring in regulations in relation to healthy food options, and specifically on high fat, salt and sugar. There is also the legislation on minimum unit pricing for alcohol. We are working closely with the UK Government to ensure that the gambling levy funding is allocated specifically to support people with gambling issues, which can also impact on their health.

This Government is ensuring that we take a health in all policies approach to improving people’s health because, if we do not have healthy people, we do not have healthy businesses or a healthy Scotland. That is what I am working towards.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask for more brevity in responses.

Question 2 was not lodged.

ADHD Assessments (Children)

3. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I am already on my feet, Deputy Presiding Officer.

To ask the Scottish Government what information it holds on the number of children currently waiting for an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessment and the median length of wait. (S6O-04908)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): The Scottish Government does not hold data relating to the number of children waiting for an ADHD assessment or to the length of waits. Health boards hold their own data on that.

As I have previously acknowledged, work is needed to improve the quality of data that is available on neurodevelopmental support and services. We are working with health boards and local authorities to better understand what is available and how it can be used to support improvements for children and families.

Daniel Johnson: I remind members of my diagnosis.

The minister’s answer speaks for itself. The reality is that there is a crisis in neurodiversity assessment and that the Government does not

hold that data. How does it propose to fix the problem when it does not know the scale of the problem or even the length of waits? Children are going to wait until they are adults to be assessed. When will the Government introduce a comprehensive system of waiting time data and pathways for assessment?

Tom Arthur: The member will be aware that considerable work has already been undertaken on the development of pathways, both for children and young people and for adults.

On the point about data, as I stated in my original answer—and as I referred to in the statement that I gave to Parliament towards the end of June—we understand the issue and the interest in Parliament on the length of waiting lists and the median waits. That information is held by health boards.

I repeat the point that I made in my original answer and in response to questions in Parliament in June: we are working with health boards and engaging with local authorities to understand the picture more clearly. I am conscious of the member's interest. As part of the pre-agreed summit between parties, we will have the opportunity for dialogue, and I am sure that we will be able to explore the area further.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A couple of members wish to ask supplementary questions. I will try to get them both in, but they will need to be brief.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast (SNP): I welcome recent figures that show that the Scottish Government has met child and adolescent mental health services waiting time targets for the third successive quarter. However, we must maintain the momentum, particularly in the face of unprecedented demand for mental health and neurodevelopmental services. Will the minister say more about how health boards are being supported to improve their performance and provide our young people with the support that they so desperately need?

Tom Arthur: I put on the record my sincere thanks to the staff in our national health service CAMHS teams for their hard work. They play a vital role in making that achievement possible. However, we cannot be complacent. I agree with the member that we need to sustain that work and, importantly, ensure that standards are consistent across the country. That can be done only with direct support from the Scottish Government. Through our support framework, we continue to work with boards to meet those targets and ensure that they have robust improvement plans in place. We are also investing directly in a system to ensure that children and young people receive the support that they need, when they need it.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): The minister's response to Daniel Johnson sums up this Scottish National Party Government. How can he, as a minister, possibly be part of the solution when he does not even ask for the data? How can the minister possibly be able to put forward ideas, policies or anything at all if there is no data? Will the minister now ask the 14 health boards for the data? If necessary, will he put in his own freedom of information requests to find out what the data is? This is simply unacceptable.

Tom Arthur: That is interesting, because Mr Kerr asked me a question on the matter when I gave a statement to the Parliament at the end of June. The point that he made about the importance of data to understanding the landscape and developing policy is important. I recognised that point then. I had recognised it in the statement that I gave to the Parliament, and I recognised it in both my original and supplementary answers to Daniel Johnson.

Of course there is a need for data and for understanding of it, but health boards hold that data. As I have stated and have indicated previously to the Parliament, my officials have been engaging directly with health boards to understand the range of data that is available and, importantly, how that data can be used and applied for the benefit of children and young people.

NHS Dumfries and Galloway

4. Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide further details regarding the announcement that NHS Dumfries and Galloway has moved to stage 3 of the NHS Scotland support and intervention framework. (S6O-04909)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The NHS Scotland support and intervention framework is one of the key elements of monitoring performance and managing risk across the national health service in Scotland. All NHS boards are continuously reviewed against that framework, based on their financial performance.

The decision was taken to escalate NHS Dumfries and Galloway to stage 3 of the framework for finance. That will include increased oversight and co-ordinated engagement, ensuring that the board is provided with the appropriate support and that it returns to financial sustainability. Regular updates will be provided to ministers on the financial position of NHS Dumfries and Galloway following the escalation.

Craig Hoy: The escalation of the health board to stage 3 is a genuine concern for people across the NHS Dumfries and Galloway area, many of

whom already struggle to access healthcare. The picture across Scotland is one in which health boards are under extreme pressure to make significant cost savings, rather than focusing on the day-to-day job of delivering the highest standards of healthcare.

Through its funding formula, the Scottish National Party Government has, in effect, left rural health boards high and dry and fending for themselves. It is systematically failing rural Scotland due to the skewed funding formula. Will the minister now commit to revising the NHS Scotland resource allocation committee funding formula to make sure that rural funding meets rural health needs and that health boards such as NHS Dumfries and Galloway are not left in an impossible situation?

Neil Gray: I will point out to Craig Hoy a couple of facts about NRAC and the funding position. NRAC explicitly takes account of rurality and the challenge of delivering services in rural and island communities. That directly contradicts Mr Hoy's understanding of NRAC.

When it comes to the financing of health boards across Scotland, we delivered at the budget a £21.7 billion funding settlement for health and social care services in Scotland. That was a record funding settlement, which the Tories opposed. Not only did they oppose it, but their tax and spending plans would have involved £1 billion coming out of the funding of public services and the decimation of the health service. Those were the plans that Mr Hoy put forward.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I recognise that the SNP Government is committed to fully funding our NHS to ensure that patients receive the best possible care. Given the challenges that have been described, will the cabinet secretary outline how NHS Dumfries and Galloway in particular will continue to benefit from record funding—notably that in the 2025-26 Scottish budget?

Neil Gray: In the 2025-26 budget, NHS boards received increased investment in their baseline funding, bringing total investment to more than £16.2 billion, with NHS Dumfries and Galloway receiving more than £425 million. That represents an increase in investment of £60.7 million compared with 2024-25, including additional funding to provide for prior-year pay deals as well as a range of funding to support vital front-line services. NHS Dumfries and Galloway's resource budget has increased by 22.3 per cent in real terms between 2010-11 and 2025-26, and in cash terms by £218 million between 2006-07 and 2025-26.

Private Health Clinic Visits

5. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that paid-for visits at private health clinics in the first quarter of the year were at the highest level recorded in a single quarter. (S6O-04910)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): My priority is to expand national health service capacity to cut waiting times. That is why we have invested a record £21.7 billion in the budget—which, I note, Labour MSPs refused to support. This year, we are targeting more than £110 million of that to cut waits. That targeted funding is expected to deliver more than 213,000 additional appointments and procedures this year. Clearly, our plan is working, given that a record number of hip and knee operations were performed last year. In July, the highest number of NHS operations were performed since February 2020.

Paul Sweeney: The NHS was established by Labour to provide universal healthcare that is free at the point of use. The new Labour Government has provided the Scottish Government with record investment, but it has not been utilised effectively—that is self-evident. The choice that many of my constituents face is to spend their life savings on private healthcare or languish on waiting lists. That is a result of the failure of the Government after 18 years.

People in their 20s are waiting for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessments and elderly people are waiting for cataract removals. More and more people are being forced to seek private care out of desperation and pain. That is simply unacceptable, and it is reminiscent of a time before the national health service when private care was the only option. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the rise in paid-for visits to private clinics is a result of an NHS that is failing to meet people's needs?

Neil Gray: I reiterate the point that I made in my initial response to Mr Sweeney, which is that my priority is to expand NHS capacity, and that is what is happening. July saw the largest number of operations performed in the national health service since back in February 2020, and a record number of hip and knee operations were performed in the NHS last year.

The number of paid-for private procedures in NHS Scotland is much lower than in other parts of the health service, including in areas where Labour is in charge, such as England. The level of paid-for private provision was 54 per cent higher in NHS England than in Scotland.

Our service delivery would be made much easier if we were able to recruit internationally. On that, I ask Mr Sweeney to lobby the United

Kingdom Government to stop the decimation of social care and health visas, which were down by 77 per cent last year. That would enable us to recruit into the positions that can help us to get through those waits.

Residential Social Care Beds (West of Scotland)

6. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to increase the availability of residential social care beds in the west of Scotland, in light of reported closures and service reductions in the region. (S6O-04911)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): We do not want to see the closure of good-quality care homes, and we understand the concern that the issue causes residents and families.

Regrettably, care homes can close for various reasons. It is outwith the remit of the Scottish Government to intervene. Although we have overall responsibility for social care policy in Scotland, the statutory responsibility for delivering, commissioning and providing appropriate social care support at a local level lies with local authorities, national health service boards and integrated health and social care partnerships.

Funding for health and social care is at a record level. Our 2025-26 budget will invest £21.7 billion into the sector, including almost £2.2 billion of investment for social care and integration. That delivers on our commitment to increase social care spending by 25 per cent during this parliamentary session—two years ahead of schedule.

Jamie Greene: I thank the minister for that answer, as unsurprising as it is. If social care spending is at record levels, why are care homes in Greenock and Paisley closing down? Why are services on Arran reducing capacity? Why are the majority of care homes that are closing citing financial viability as the primary reason for their closure?

We have lost more than 250 care homes, or more than 2,000 beds, during the past decade. As the minister knows, Donald Macaskill has said that the whole of Scotland's social care sector is in crisis. I have constituents who are languishing in hospital when they should be in a care home. What will the Scottish Government do about that?

Tom Arthur: The member's final point relates to delayed discharges. The cabinet secretary and I engage closely with integration joint boards, health boards and wider partners to work to drive improvement. Although we have a challenge nationally, we see examples of excellent practice across the country. Part of the challenge is to

ensure that parts of the country where performance is not where it should be can learn from other parts of the country.

The member will appreciate that many of the challenges that are faced by our social care sector—and particularly by residential care homes—are the result of macroeconomic factors that are outwith the immediate control of the Scottish Government. We have been through a period of significant inflation, and policy decisions have had a significant impact, not least the UK Government's decision on national insurance.

We are committed to working constructively with our partners at the local level to ensure that we provide support for our social care sector, and we will continue to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that the initial question was about residential social care in the west of Scotland.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I am sure that the minister shares my concern that a number of residential beds are at risk of being lost following the UK Labour Government's reckless decision to raise employer national insurance contributions, which is estimated to add a further cost of more than £84 million to Scotland's social care sector. Will the minister join me in calling on the UK Labour Government to immediately reimburse those costs in full to stop that unnecessary harm to vital lifeline services across the country?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, please link your answer back to the substantive question.

Tom Arthur: Yes, Presiding Officer.

The issue impacts the west of Scotland and many other parts of the country. The Scottish Government is deeply concerned about the impact that the UK Government's increase in employer national insurance contributions will have on the social care sector in Scotland. The Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities continue to press the UK Government to fund the impacts of those changes on Scottish public services in full. I include the vital services that are provided on behalf of local authorities by providers in the private and third sectors, such as the non-profit social care sector. Scottish Government officials have estimated that the social care sector faces additional costs of more than £84 million as a result of that decision.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Recognising the need to improve the terms and conditions of the existing social care workforce, the Scottish Government was on the verge of allocating £38 million in funding to enhance sick pay, maternity pay and paternity pay provisions, which would in turn have helped to reduce the loss of care home

spaces in the west of Scotland. That was 18 months ago. The money disappeared at the 11th hour. Has that work been abandoned, or will we see the return of the £38 million pot to address the terms and conditions of the social care workforce?

Tom Arthur: I have already outlined the investment that the Scottish Government is providing to social care to help to ensure that we drive up standards, including payment of at least the real living wage. We are taking forward work on sectoral bargaining. I have engaged constructively with the UK Government on its Employment Rights Bill process. We are committed to working constructively with our partners to drive forward standards in social care across Scotland. If Jackie Baillie is interested in the matter, I am sure that she will bring forward reasoned proposals as part of the budget-setting process, rather than sit on her hands, as she did earlier this year.

Weight Loss Treatments (Access in Rural Areas)

7. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the United Kingdom Government's recently announced funding to test new ways to tackle obesity and the reported limited access to weight management treatments across Scotland, what steps it is taking to ensure that people in rural areas, such as Dumfries and Galloway, can access new weight loss treatments, including through innovative models such as pharmacist-led pilot schemes in general practitioner practices. (S6O-04912)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): We know that we need a whole-system approach to tackling obesity, with new treatments as part of a package of interventions that include prevention through making our food environment healthier. The Scottish Government and NHS Scotland issued a national consensus statement in September 2024 that recommended the introduction of obesity medications in a phased manner across national health service boards, so that people who are in greatest clinical need benefit first.

I welcome the UK-wide obesity pathway innovation programme funding competition, with up to £10 million ring fenced for devolved nations. Officials are working with all health boards, including NHS Dumfries and Galloway, and innovation leads to support development of bids that expand access to a range of weight management treatments across Scotland, which could include community pharmacy.

We are also working collaboratively on the development and subsequent implementation of a quality prescribing guide for primary prevention of

cardiovascular disease, including a section on treating obesity.

Finlay Carson: Obesity remains one of the most pressing public health challenges that we face, and access to effective treatments is vital if we are to improve outcomes and reduce long-term pressures on our NHS. However, I continue to hear from constituents in Dumfries and Galloway that access to the new medication is extremely limited. In a recent response, NHS Dumfries and Galloway stated that it had not even undertaken a cost benefit analysis of the use of the new drugs, so how can we ensure that such treatments are patient centred?

Jenni Minto: I thank Finlay Carson for his follow-up question, and I recognise how much I appreciated visiting a community-led pharmacy in Newton Stewart, in his constituency, in the summer.

I recognise that we have to ensure that all boards have pathways to ensure that people who need obesity-reducing drugs can have them. We have been speaking directly with NHS Dumfries and Galloway, alongside other health boards that are considering how to implement such pathways, but we have so far been unable to reach an internal agreement on how to progress that through services, finance and primary care. However, I am happy to follow that up with Finlay Carson.

ADHD Medication (Adults)

8. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how it is supporting adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder to access medication. (S6O-04913)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): First, I clarify that not all adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder require medication and that a range of non-pharmacological supports should be made available following diagnosis. When medication is required, it can be prescribed by specialist services following a formal diagnosis of ADHD.

My officials have liaised with national health service boards across Scotland to understand what provision they have in place to deliver adult neurodevelopmental assessments, and we are exploring how to address current issues that are contributing to long waiting times for assessment. In addition, we fund the national autism implementation team, which is supporting NHS boards to develop, enhance and redesign existing local adult neurodevelopmental services.

Marie McNair: I have been contacted by a constituent who received a psychiatric assessment and an ADHD diagnosis when residing in England

and who was advised that his general practitioner was willing to prescribe Ritalin. However, he has been refused such a prescription in Scotland, apparently because of the need for a psychiatric assessment here. My constituent is therefore without the medication that he desperately needs, despite having a diagnosis and a GP who is willing to prescribe Ritalin. Will the minister intervene in this case and help to secure the support that my constituent needs?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As briefly as possible, minister.

Tom Arthur: I acknowledge that the increase in adults undertaking neurodevelopmental assessment across Scotland is creating challenges for services. The risks of underprescribing need to be carefully balanced against the potential risks of inappropriate prescribing.

As I hope that the member appreciates, decisions on prescribing should be led by the appropriate clinicians. We are aware that different health boards have adopted varying approaches to private diagnosis or diagnosis from outside Scotland. We are aware that NHS Lothian, for example, has issued guidance to support clinicians. My officials will draw on the experience of health boards and explore a sustainable solution that effectively addresses the balance of risks.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise again to members whom I was not able to call for supplementaries. That concludes portfolio question time.

Scotland's Finances

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-18779, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on improving Scotland's finances. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call Murdo Fraser to speak to and move the motion.

14:52

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is my great pleasure to open the debate on improving Scotland's finances—an ambition that I am sure we all share across the chamber.

To help to inform the debate, I note that, over the past few weeks, we have had two significant publications highlighting the state of public finances in Scotland. Just last month, we had from the Scottish Government the annual "Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland" report, which sets out what is, in effect, an income and expenditure analysis not just for the Scottish Government but for the totality of public spending in Scotland. The messages from that report are stark. The net fiscal deficit for Scotland now stands at £26.5 billion, which represents the gap between the amount of money that is raised here in taxes and the total that is actually spent. That figure represents 11.7 per cent of gross domestic product—twice the United Kingdom level.

In practical terms, that means that if Scotland were to become an independent country, the Government of the day would have to find around £13 billion, either in tax rises or in public spending, just to mitigate the current level of UK fiscal deficit—

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): Will the member give way?

Murdo Fraser: I am happy to give way to Mr McKee, who will explain to us where that £13 billion would come from.

Ivan McKee: Murdo Fraser is barely a minute into his opening remarks and he has completely misrepresented what GERS is. He should know that it is very clearly Scotland's fiscal position under the current constitutional arrangements. The whole point of independence is that it would give us the capability to raise more money and spend it more effectively than we currently do.

Murdo Fraser: Mr McKee has let the cat out of the bag: he has just said that we would have the opportunity to raise more money. I will give way to him again if he can give me one example of how the extra £13 billion would be raised.

Ivan McKee: The whole point is that we would not have to raise that amount of extra money, because we would not be paying for significant parts of the Whitehall machinery and other costs that are incurred down south that Scotland receives no benefit from but that are allocated to our expenditure. Through growing the economy by focusing on our strongest sectors, we can emulate countries such as Ireland, which has many tens of billions of surplus euros, or Norway, with its trillion-dollar wealth fund. We would be in the position to do that if we were an independent country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give you the time back, Mr Fraser.

Murdo Fraser: That was a U-turn from Mr McKee within 10 seconds. He stood up and said that we would raise the money, but he has changed his mind completely in the course of just a few seconds. Let me move on, because Mr McKee has already taken up half my time with his intervention.

As is revealed in the GERS figures, the union dividend now accounts for £2,600 for every man, woman and child in Scotland. With that level of extra cash to spend on the national health service, education, justice and infrastructure, surely Scottish residents have the right to expect public services that are so much higher in quality than those in the rest of the UK. Patently, that is not their experience, and, in many cases, outcomes in Scotland are poorer than they are in England, where much less money is being spent.

The second publication that should concern us is the latest report from the Scottish Fiscal Commission, which is the independent watchdog that exists to scrutinise Scottish public finances. The SFC has identified an economic performance gap that it estimates will cost the public sector £1.058 billion in the current fiscal year. In practice, that means that we are losing £1 billion in revenue that would otherwise accrue if Scotland's economy performed at least at the level of the UK average. The consequences of Scotland's relative economic underperformance are severe. According to the SFC, the Scottish Government faces a projected £851 million negative reconciliation in the financial year 2027-28, exceeding current borrowing limits, due to the slower increase in earnings in Scotland compared with that in the rest of the UK. At present, no one in the Scottish Government has any idea how that can be funded. Even more seriously, extending to the financial year 2029-30, according to the SFC, Scotland faces a projected £4.8 billion fiscal gap that is made up of resource spending of £2.6 billion and capital spend of £2.1 billion.

The simple fact is that spending is growing faster than revenue, fuelled by increases in the public sector pay bill and the growth in welfare

spending. Despite pledges from the Scottish National Party to reduce the size of the public sector workforce, the devolved civil service has grown by almost 60 per cent since 2018-19. Increased pay deals will simply add to the burgeoning public sector cost unless the workforce reductions that were promised are delivered. Perhaps the biggest concern is around social protection spending, which has grown by 55 per cent in real terms since 2020-21, crowding out other budgets. As the SFC makes clear, that is simply not affordable.

Whichever party is in government by 2029-30, that black hole has to be filled. So far, the SNP is in complete denial about the scale of the problem, perhaps hoping that, by then, it will be somebody else's responsibility to fix it or that Westminster will, once again, come to the rescue—although, given the state of the economy and the UK's finances under Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves, it is likely to be very disappointed.

So, what do we believe needs to happen? First, we are past the point at which we need to end short-termism in Government spending. We need a full multiyear spending review to identify priorities, make savings and inform needs. Secondly, we need a strategy to cap welfare spending growth, which is currently consuming too large a share of resource spending. Simply put, we have too many people of working age who are in receipt of benefits when they should be part of the workforce. That requires investment in apprenticeships and reskilling, as well as schemes to assist those who are currently far from the workplace to be engaged in meaningful employment.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member will be concluding shortly.

Murdo Fraser: I apologise to Mr Macpherson.

Thirdly, we need proper public service reform to see where savings can be made. Mr McKee promises that he can find £1 billion-worth of backroom savings in Government departments, although we have yet to see a detailed plan for that, and private correspondence that was released following freedom of information requests suggests that his ideas have been met with something other than enthusiasm by his cabinet secretary. However, doing that would be, at least, a start, and we encourage Mr McKee to do that good work on our behalf.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we need a proper focus on productivity and economic growth to broaden Scotland's tax base. Only by allowing private sector businesses to thrive,

thereby expanding the economy, will we see more better-paid jobs created and greater tax revenues generated to fund the public services that we all need.

In conclusion, it is clear that the SNP is clueless about how to address the enormous financial black hole that it has created. Only the Scottish Conservatives have the ideas to tackle the issue. That is the point that is made in our motion today, which I am pleased to move.

I move,

That the Parliament notes with deep concern the Scottish Fiscal Commission's forecast of a £4.7 billion funding gap in 2029-30; recognises that without the Union dividend of £2,578 per person there would be a substantial deficit, with Scotland's 2024-25 net fiscal balancing standing at -£26.5 billion (-11.7% of GDP); regrets that the Scottish Government continues to dismiss these realities and prioritise constitutional campaigning over sound financial management; calls for urgent measures to restore credibility to Scotland's finances, including a full multi-year spending review to identify priorities, savings, and reform needs, a strategy to cap welfare spending growth, which is currently consuming a significant amount of resource growth, and create jobs by moving more people into work through reskilling and apprenticeships, a focus on productivity and economic growth to broaden Scotland's tax base by allowing businesses to thrive, and a robust public service reform and stronger Audit Scotland oversight to deliver better value; believes that the Parliament must focus on NHS waiting times, education standards, and community safety rather than fiscal denialism, and resolves that Scotland's future depends on fiscal discipline, growth, and accountable government within the United Kingdom.

15:01

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I thank Murdo Fraser for bringing attention to the fact that the Scottish Government has been constrained for many years by the austerity measures of the UK Government, which were taken forward by the Conservative Party.

Murdo Fraser: The GERS figures that I referred to earlier show that public sector spending in Scotland is now equivalent to 52 per cent of gross domestic product. If that is austerity, at what level does Mr McKee think it should be?

Ivan McKee: What has happened over those years is clear, and nobody would deny that we have been under those austerity measures. As I said before, the whole point of independence is to put us in a position where the constitutional arrangements allow us to grow the economy and focus on what is important to deliver increased tax revenues across Scotland. I thank Murdo Fraser for giving us the opportunity to highlight the positive actions that this Government is taking in what is a very challenging fiscal environment.

The Scottish Government has balanced the budget in each and every financial year, against

the backdrop of economic turmoil and hardship for many.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): You have to.

Ivan McKee: I hear Conservative members shouting that we have to do that. Of course we do. The point is that we do it—we deliver that every year—which requires us to manage the budgets that we have in front of us effectively and efficiently. That does not happen by itself. Enormous pressures have been placed on public and household finances by prolonged Westminster austerity; the economic damage of Brexit, which costs us £2.3 billion in public sector revenues every year; the Covid pandemic; the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis, which has been made worse by both UK Governments during the past few years; and inflation shocks. However, this Government has deployed every lever at our disposal to ensure that we stay true to our values and deliver for the people of Scotland while delivering a balanced budget. That is fiscal discipline in action.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): The minister says that he can balance the budget between now and the end of the decade by saving £1 billion in public expenditure through cutting waste and reducing the public sector workforce. His colleagues said that they had considerable concerns about his £1 billion figure. Can he say what those concerns were?

Ivan McKee: The reality is that we are going to deliver that. If the member wants to know where the number comes from, it comes from the numbers that we published last year. Openly, across the whole public sector, spend on corporate costs will reduce by 20 per cent over the next five years, at 4 per cent per year. That will involve a range of measures, including in procurement, where we have already saved more than £200 million; in estates, where we have already saved many tens of millions of pounds; and in workforce reduction. That is where the £1 billion is coming from, and the member should have no doubt that we are going to deliver that.

The current UK Government appears to be continuing the trend of austerity, and its spending decisions will significantly hamper Scotland's fiscal position for the coming year. The UK spending review was a missed opportunity to take the necessary measures to stimulate economic growth and put public services on a sustainable path.

Our funding for day-to-day spending is set to grow by only 0.8 per cent in real terms over the next three years. Had our funding for day-to-day priorities grown in line with the UK Government's overall spending, we would have £1.1 billion more to spend on priorities over the next three years.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): What would the minister say to Paul Johnson of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, who said that under no circumstances could what the UK Government is doing be described as austerity across the UK? Will the minister acknowledge that there is an additional £2,600 per person in Scotland? It is not austerity, and the independent experts say that it is not.

Ivan McKee: I have just clearly said that, if our spending in Scotland had been growing at the same rate as UK Government spending was growing, in total, we would have £1.1 billion more to spend on our priorities over the next three years.

I want to talk about the actions that we are taking. We have a very thorough public service reform strategy, which was published in June and which we are taking forward across a whole range of activities to deliver that £1 billion. The fiscal sustainability delivery plan sets out a clear and credible path to managing Scotland's public finances over the next five years by increasing value from our spending and driving efficiency and productivity across public services; delivering sustainable and inclusive economic growth; expanding Scotland's tax base and creating more good jobs; and taking a strategic approach to taxation to ensure that the tax system is fair and competitive and that it delivers sustainable revenues.

We have committed to a Scottish spending review—which Murdo Fraser called for—and that is happening, as he well knows, alongside the 2026-27 Scottish budget. That will provide the spending plans for three years for resource and four years for capital, with spending focused on delivering the greatest impact across our four priorities of eradicating child poverty, tackling climate change, growing the economy and ensuring high-quality and sustainable public services. Those are our priorities and the priorities of the people of Scotland.

Ultimately, it is only with the full powers of independence and full control of fiscal levers that we can deploy a truly sustainable system to support efficient and effective public services that deliver for the people of Scotland. Until that time, we will continue to do everything within our powers to meet the challenges that our public finances face, and we have set out a clear path to achieving that.

I move amendment S6M-18779.3, to leave out from “notes” to end and insert:

“that Scotland's public services have been hampered by the UK Conservative administration's austerity budgets; recognises the deep harm that the UK Conservative administration has done to the economies of the UK and Scotland with Brexit, and that this has reduced Scotland's

public spending by £2.3 billion annually; further recognises that this loss of public finances impacts on Scotland's vital public services, including Scotland's NHS, support for a just transition, and skills training; notes that a public sector reform programme is underway with the aim of saving public money while protecting the delivery of frontline services; believes that the UK Labour administration should either explore the application of wealth taxation or devolve the necessary powers to Scotland so that the Scottish Parliament can do so; welcomes that the Scottish Government has already announced plans for a three-year spending review to be published alongside the upcoming Budget, and believes that it is only with the powers of independence and full control of the fiscal levers that a truly sustainable and fair system can be developed to support efficiency and public service delivery.”

15:06

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Over the past 14 months, the UK Labour Government has decisively ended austerity and has already invested an additional £5.2 billion in Scotland. The UK spending review in June saw a further £9.1 billion of investment in Scotland over a three-year period.

That funding can be transformational for public services, which have been decimated by, yes, 14 years of Tory austerity, but also 18 years of SNP incompetence. The current fiscal arrangement—the Barnett formula and the pooling and sharing of resources across these islands—means that spending per person is significantly higher in Scotland than in England. The Scottish Government's own GERS figures for 2024-25 show that spending per head in Scotland is more than £2,600 higher than the UK average.

For years, the SNP claimed that Tory austerity was the reason why public services in Scotland were so bad. It no longer has that excuse, yet more people in Tayside than in the whole of England are spending more than two years on NHS waiting lists. Scottish 15-year-olds are a full year behind their English counterparts in maths, and more than 10,000 Scottish children are living in temporary accommodation. Capital projects such as the A9 and the replacement of Barlinnie are running years—even decades—late, and costs are spiralling wildly out of control.

The largest block grant in the history of devolution has not even touched the sides of SNP incompetence and waste. No reasonable, responsible Government would put the Barnett formula at risk—that is absolutely clear—yet scrapping the Barnett formula is official SNP policy. Shona Robison told the Scottish Affairs Committee on 16 January 2025 that full fiscal autonomy was the Scottish Government's preferred position. This very morning, the cabinet secretary told a tax conference here in Edinburgh that the SNP is “negotiating on that”.

Those words should send a shiver down the spine of every Scot. The SNP's war on the Barnett formula would wipe £14 billion from Scotland's annual budget. That is a quarter of our total budget, as set out in the GERS figures from the Scottish Government. Professor Mairi Spowage from the Fraser of Allander Institute said at that conference that, if we did that, Scotland would get a lot less funding. I would love to hear from Government ministers today how they think the negotiations to get rid of the Barnett formula for Scotland are going and what that level of cuts would mean for Scotland's public services.

The approach has been panned by people who, unlike ministers, are looking at the facts. Respected institutions such as the IFS point out that drastic spending cuts and vast tax rises would be needed to balance the books were the SNP to have its way.

The SNP must recognise and learn that, as a responsible Government that works with the UK Government in a new kind of relationship, it has to take responsibility for Scotland, as a legitimate interlocutor with the UK Government. There must be an honest set of negotiations, but that has not been the case so far, with the Scottish Government having made £135 billion of spending demands since the UK Labour Government took over.

The SNP would know all that if it had bothered to do its homework first. The finance secretary admitted that no detailed work has been undertaken on full fiscal autonomy, and the Scottish Fiscal Commission told the Finance and Public Administration Committee that it has had "no instructions" on it from the Government, despite full fiscal autonomy being Government policy.

The truth is that that is a very serious misstep from a knackered SNP Government that has failed to deliver on the issues that really matter: Scotland's NHS, schools and housing. Scotland has long suffered at the hands of the economically illiterate and fiscally inept SNP. A Scottish Labour Government will work in partnership—proper partnership—with the UK Government to translate the record investment into delivery on the ground. We will get the basics right, defend the Barnett formula, get Scotland's NHS back on its feet and set the new direction that this country so badly needs.

I move amendment S6M-18779.2, to leave out from "notes" to end and insert:

"recognises that, as a result of the Barnett formula, spending per head of population is higher in Scotland and that full fiscal autonomy would end this arrangement."

15:11

Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green): Every year, when the GERS figures are published, unionist parties treat them as though they are some kind of gotcha. They claim that the numbers prove that Scotland cannot afford independence, but that is not what the GERS figures show. Depending on how accurately you rate them, they reflect Scotland's finances inside the UK—inside the union. By definition, they cannot say anything about what Scotland's finances would be like outside the UK.

Unfortunately for Mr Fraser and his colleagues, who are unable to come up with many persuasive things to say on the subject of the union, they cling to the GERS figures as an alternative to proper debate about the future of the union. They want independence supporters to just go quiet and disappear, but half of Scotland believes in independence, and we are not going away. Why? Because the union is not working for us. It allows the rich to get richer, unchecked. It sees cuts to services that are relied on by millions of people as the only way to balance the budget.

Murdo Fraser: Will Lorna Slater take an intervention?

Lorna Slater: I will make some progress.

The UK is one of the most unequal countries in Europe. Wealth is concentrated in very few hands, while families across Scotland struggle. There is no shortage of money, but it is hoarded by a few, while millions struggle.

The UK child poverty figures are morally repugnant. As of April 2024, 4.5 million children in the UK—31 per cent—lived in relative poverty. That was a record high. A hundred thousand more children fell into poverty compared with the previous year. Most of those children—72 per cent—live in working households.

Food insecurity is widespread. In 2024, one in six UK households experienced hunger. More than 14 million people, including 3.8 million children, were food insecure. Child poverty is not just a number; it represents millions of people suffering inside the union.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will Ms Slater take an intervention?

Lorna Slater: I will carry on.

Nearly 1.7 million children are affected by the two-child benefit cap. That policy has pushed about 350,000 children into poverty and 700,000 into deeper poverty. The gap between rich and poor is not theoretical. A cross-party commission estimated that scrapping the two-child cap, paired with benefit increases, could lift 4.2 million people

out of poverty, including 2.2 million people in deep poverty.

In environmental terms, the system is also failing us. Environmental taxes made up just 1.9 per cent of GDP in 2024. That was down from 2 per cent. You heard that correctly—during a climate crisis, the UK Government is collecting less in taxes through environmental measures. As a total share of taxation and social contributions, the figure dropped from 8.4 per cent in 1997 to 4.5 per cent in 2024. That decline persists even as the climate emergency intensifies and recognised economists are calling for change.

Overhauling tax powers to ensure that those who have profited from wrecking our climate pay for its clean-up is very reasonable and fair. How is it a just transition if ordinary workers are being asked to pay for the consequences of the actions of massive oil and gas corporations?

This week, University of Oxford experts argued in the *Financial Times* that a land and property wealth tax is vital in order to “improve housing affordability” and ensure that rising land values benefit society, not just landowners. However, Westminster does not act. Instead, it refuses to tax wealth properly, underfunds the NHS and lets polluters off the hook.

Environmental taxation income is falling when it must instead rise in order to pay for the just transition. Scotland can choose differently. With independence, we can choose to close the wealth gap to redistribute wealth.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to bring your remarks to a close now, Ms Slater.

Lorna Slater: We can invest in public services. We can make Scotland a fairer and greener country when it is an independent country.

15:15

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): Today’s debate has turned into the usual constitutional battle, as these things do, but the Parliament needs to have an honest and grown-up conversation about the reality of Scotland’s finances, and I would like to think that we can do so. I say that not as someone taking a constitutional or political point of view but as a member of the Public Audit Committee, which is a great committee because we get sight of and scrutinise all the numbers, many of which have been quoted by speakers in the debate. We look at the numbers objectively and fairly, as does Audit Scotland.

We are talking not only about figures on a balance sheet but about people. When we look at the state of Scotland’s finances, we are talking about whether we have enough schoolteachers,

whether people with mental health problems or additional support needs are being helped back into the workplace and whether there is enough money to build new ferries for our island communities or enough to fund outdoor education. Apparently, there is never enough money to do it all, but the numbers are serious, and the Conservatives are right to bring them to the Parliament’s attention today.

By 2030, there will be a £4.7 billion funding gap. That is the Scottish Fiscal Commission’s own number; it is not a made-up political number for a *Daily Mail* headline but a real, independently forecast number. The Government needs to have a harsh look at the reality, because it is in denial about the figures.

In the motion, another interesting point that I agree with is about scrutiny. I have a lot of respect for Audit Scotland’s role, but its powers are somewhat clipped at the moment, and I want to see them expanded. For example, there should be mandatory deadlines for ministerial responses to Audit Scotland’s section 22 reports. There should be stronger enforcement powers, in particular when issues of poor performance or financial mismanagement have been identified. I also want the Parliament’s committees to have enhanced scrutiny powers to ensure that any recommendations that they make actually lead to reform, because too many reports just sit on ministers’ shelves.

Too many projects have gone massively over budget. The new ferries were supposed to cost less than £100 million; the bill is now sitting at more than £400 million. What could the Government have done with that extra £300 million? What extra public services could it have supported with it? HMP Glasgow is 10 times over budget—the figure sits at nearly £1 billion of spending. We can argue about the reasons why that has happened, but think of the money that has been wasted on those inflationary costs. The A9 is already more than £100 million over budget. I suspect that that figure will rise massively, if it ever gets completed. We cannot blame all those costs on inflation, because had the projects been delivered on time—when inflation was incredibly low and money was cheap to borrow—it would not have mattered.

We need to improve Scotland’s productivity, which grew by only 1 per cent each year from 2008 to 2023. That is important because lack of economic activity affects how much money the Government has to spend. Taking more than £3 billion in additional tax revenues due to tax differentials north of the border has resulted in only just over £600 million of cash being available for the Government to spend. That is 20 per

cent—20p in every extra pound that is paid by Scots. We have to look at that properly.

We also need to look at spend. The welfare budget is sitting at more than £6 billion and is due to rise to £9 billion. At the minute, it is 15 per cent of the entire budget, and it will rise. The health and social care budget is sitting at around 40 per cent of the entire budget. If we put those two areas together, 70 per cent of Scotland's budget will be spent on two portfolios. Where does that leave education, transport, preventative healthcare and all the other measures? It is about time that we got people back into the workforce by supporting those who need it most.

The reality is that there is a £4.7 billion gap, productivity is lagging, and we are spending more than we are getting in income. That has to be addressed. We cannot talk, argue or borrow our way out of the problem. We will have to sit down as grown-ups in the room and agree a way out of it.

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

15:20

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): My passion is the outcomes for Scottish children; that is, providing a positive future and ensuring an education that encourages knowledge and allows children to be children. What is essential to achieving such outcomes for our children? I would go as far as stating that, to achieve anything through a state-funded process, the robust health of our economy is essential, as it literally funds everything that we do.

The country is forecast to have a £4.7 billion funding gap by 2029-30, as highlighted by the Scottish Fiscal Commission. As our motion states, “the Scottish Government continues to dismiss”

that as a reality. However, it is a reality, even if the Government refuses to recognise it. Making changes for the better comes from recognition and acceptance that there is a problem and actively taking steps to eradicate the issue. We have therefore requested measures in our motion. I will speak to the second of those measures, which is “a strategy to cap welfare spending growth, which is currently consuming a significant amount of resource growth, and create jobs by moving more people into work through reskilling and apprenticeships”.

In Scotland, we carry too high a number of people who are economically inactive, and not enough is being done to fix that. I return, as I have many times, to parental employment. A paper was produced by the Social Justice and Social Security Committee containing answers to some of the

issues that I have mentioned. What issues are preventing people from gaining continuing and meaningful employment? Too many people of working age are being let down by the basics of insufficient transport, lack of flexible childcare and restrictions in reskilling. In many cases, those three issues converge, making it completely impossible for people to come off welfare and support themselves.

When it comes to transport, bus services are restricted and restrictive. I have previously spoken about the fully subscribed Fife College course that had to be cancelled due to a timetable change by the local bus company. It does not take a genius to work out that, if people cannot get to work or college, they cannot participate.

I turn to childcare. I know that the Deputy First Minister shares my frustration on that issue. Childcare in Scotland is meant to ensure that the funding follows the child, but that is simply not true. We have disparity in the offer across 32 councils. There are councils barring children from outwith their local authority area, which restricts where and when parents work. The Scottish Government is forcing parents to choose between family and work, and that is unacceptable.

On reskilling, college places have been drastically underfunded by the SNP Government. People might get a college place, but they will be hindered by a lack of ability to get to college and by the inflexibility around their childcare offering.

It is essential that we grow our economy. In that way, we will increase the tax base and reduce the tax burden on the ever-squeezed middle earners, who are more than frustrated. Over the summer, I talked to many people who are, quite simply, hacked off with this Government. They pay more in taxes, have swallowed massive council tax rises and are facing exactly the same next year. They have been promised cheaper, greener fuel bills, but prices continue to rise. Frankly, there is simply too much month at the end of the money for far too many Scots. As politicians, we ignore them at our peril.

15:23

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Once again, we are having a debate in which the Opposition says that Scotland is too wee, too poor and too stupid to be independent. In this shameful, unfair union, Scotland is too wee in population terms, Scotland is too poor and Scotland would be incredibly stupid to stay in the union any longer. When Scotland was dragged into this union, our population was just over one fifth of that of England. Now, three centuries later, the population of Scotland is less than a tenth of that of England.

That is the true union dividend—or rather, loss, which is what it really is.

The Tories are indeed correct: Scotland is too wee, and all thanks to their beloved union. Their campaign against the people of Scotland is still on-going. Scotland is in desperate need of new families and more children. What is the Westminster answer? Austerity, which makes people think twice about having more kids. There is also the two-child cap. Imagine banning women from having children. Imagine punishing people for trying to grow their family. The Tories are truly the anti-family party, and Labour is no better.

It does not stop there. From Brexit, sending our young European workers fleeing, to the current pantomime of both Westminster parties dressing up in a vile parody of Farage—or, as one of his former teachers said, “fascist” Farage. It is almost as if Westminster wants the Scottish population simply to wither away, leaving nothing but a barren wasteland called North Britain.

The union loss does not stop there. The Tories have the temerity to mention the deficit. The day Scotland entered the union we did not have a single penny of debt to our name but, the morning after, we were saddled with a share of Britain’s—or should that be England’s—£15 million debt pile. And, boy oh boy, did the British debt pile keep growing after that. Three centuries later, and the British national debt mountain now stands at £2.9 trillion. That is £41,572.17 of debt for every single man, woman and child. That is the true union loss: a mountain of debt racked up by Westminster in Scotland’s name. Yet again the Tories are correct: Scotland is too poor—at least, we are poor in the union, with that £41,572.17 of debt for every single person.

It is only getting worse. Starmer and Reeves, the Thatcher tribute act, have driven British debt repayments higher than even Liz Truss could manage. The union debt loss—not dividend—is truly the gift that keeps on giving. Yes: thanks to the union loss—not dividend—Scotland is currently too poor and too wee, and, yes, we would be stupid to stay in the union any longer. Now is the time for us to leave the sinking ship. Now is the time for independence because, with the powers of independence, we can grow our population, grow our economy and unshackle ourselves from the union debt loss—not dividend.

15:28

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The title of the debate is “Improving Scotland’s Finances”. To do that, we need to produce an economic strategy, based on growth; to develop an industrial strategy; to address productivity; to rise to the challenge of the green industrial revolution; to be at the

forefront of the technological changes that are required to address the climate challenge; and to recognise the changing demographics, with an ageing population and low birth rates.

We need to increase funding, but to do so in a way that does not increase taxes for working people, who are already worse off than they were in 2010, and who have suffered with austerity, wage stagnation after the financial crash, increased costs and higher interest rates. As has already been mentioned in the debate, the Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts that Scotland faces a funding gap of roughly £4.7 billion a year by 2029-30. That is equivalent to 4 per cent of day-to-day spending and 23 per cent of the capital budget. Recent GERS figures highlight that Scotland’s public spending deficit now stands at more than £26 billion, or around 12 per cent of GDP.

Scotland’s finances are undoubtedly in a challenging state, but addressing the state of our public finances comes down to political choices. We can choose to protect public services, save jobs and invest in our communities, or we can repeat the failed experiment of austerity. The Scottish Government’s political choice, as set out in its medium-term financial strategy, appears to be one of further cuts to public services.

Public sector workers and public services should not pay the price for the Scottish Government’s mishandling of public finances, yet its plans for public sector reform will result in precisely that. There is still a lack of detail from ministers on what services will be subject to cuts and which jobs will be lost, but the Scottish Trades Union Congress has warned that up to 10,000 jobs could be lost.

Scotland has already lost more than 1,000 firefighters, 1,000 police officers and around 65,000 local government workers since 2006. Those are the very people who keep vital front-line and local services running. A loss of an additional 10,000 workers will undoubtedly have an impact on those, and on the delivery of wider public services, at a time when they are more needed than ever.

I would therefore be grateful if the minister could provide any detail about which services will be subject to cuts and job losses, and how they will deal with that deficit.

Ivan McKee: Will Katy Clark take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is about to conclude.

Katy Clark: I apologise, but I do not have time.

In its fiscal sustainability development plan, the Scottish Government outlined steps that it would

seek to take on tax. One of those was for ministers to undertake engagement regarding the taxation of wealth and to publish a literature review on the subject. I would appreciate it if the minister could outline how that would work and, indeed, how work on land taxation more generally is progressing.

Ahead of the Scottish Government's budget, I hope that ministers will engage seriously with unions, and those of us in the Parliament, on the issues that are being raised in today's debate.

15:32

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will begin by repeating three of the key facts that have underpinned contributions to the debate so far.

Fact 1: by 2029-30, resource spending will be £2.6 billion above the available funds, and capital spending will be £2.1 billion above the available funds. Fact 2: social security payments in 2029-30 will rise to £8.8 billion from the current £6.8 billion in the current budget, which is a nearly 30 per cent increase in just four years. Fact 3: the economic performance gap is just over £1 billion.

It is little wonder, then, that the Scottish Fiscal Commission and other forecasters are warning of serious long-term fiscal unsustainability. The trouble is that, with current demographic trends and a high incidence of economic inactivity, plus the fact that the Scottish economy has been seriously lagging behind the UK economy for more than a decade, Scotland has not been creating the growth that it desperately needs to pay for an increasingly dependent population.

Ivan McKee: Will Liz Smith take an intervention?

Liz Smith: I will not just now, minister. I will come back to you in a minute.

Further, the Scottish Government has not been focused on getting people back into work, broadening the tax base or prioritising economic growth.

The Government tells us that it is addressing the issue with public sector reform, a reduction in the public sector workforce and preventative measures to reduce long-term demand for welfare payments. As yet, we do not have the details.

Inside all of that, there was a really interesting admission from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government at the Finance and Public Administration Committee last week, when she acknowledged that she was facing some tough decisions and that some areas of spending must be reined in. For example, in relation to free school meals, she said:

"We will not be able to roll out the universal offer as far as we had perhaps initially wanted to ... we have to prioritise those children who are most in need."—[Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee, 2 September 2025; c 34.]

Finally, we have an admission from this Government that things have been spiralling out of control. Finally, it has been forced to admit that it cannot adopt the principle of universalism across the board, not just because universalism does not prioritise those who are most in need but because it is wholly unaffordable.

I hope that that is at last a sign that the Scottish Government has finally woken up to the folly of the years that it has spent in the pursuit of universalism, whether in relation to benefits, prescriptions, university tuition or whatever, because its current policies are serving only to make that big black hole much bigger.

I hope that that will also mean that we will finally address the widespread belief that it is the duty of the state to fix everything. That approach has clearly failed when it comes to the public finances, most especially in Scotland, where the rise in the number of benefit claimants is deeply worrying. It has also failed because it has allowed a dangerous claim culture to develop. Far too many people believe that they are unfit to work when they are not. That is not good for the Scottish economy, and it is not good for society, either.

Senior figures in the business community all say that Scotland is not performing nearly as well as it should be because there has been insufficient emphasis on growth and on creating better jobs. All along, they have watched the SNP Government prioritise the wrong things, which has detracted attention from policies that are proven to create growth. They want the Government—I know that the Deputy First Minister agrees with this—

Ivan McKee: Will Liz Smith give way?

Liz Smith: I will come back to the minister in a minute.

They want there to be much better collaboration between the private and public sectors, and they want the Government to be serious about broadening the tax base, rather than taking an approach that is having detrimental impacts on our middle and higher earners.

I will take a quick intervention from the minister.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: It will have to be incredibly quick.

Ivan McKee: I will rattle through some facts. Fact 4: we balance the budget every year. Fact 5: we have laid out such plans in the fiscal sustainability delivery plan. Fact 6—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We do not have time for this.

Liz Smith: Fact 6 is that the business community does not believe the minister.

15:36

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I want to thank the Tories for bringing the debate to the chamber, because it highlights exactly why the union does not work for Scotland and why only independence can deliver a brighter future for the nation and everyone who lives here.

Nothing at all will convince me of the case for the union. Economically, the UK is a basket case, from the financial crash and the lack of action against those who caused the problem in the first place to the fact—this is another fact—that Brexit is a disaster. Modelling by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research suggests that, in 2023, the UK economy was already 2.5 per cent smaller than it would have been if the UK has remained a member of the European Union, and it expects that figure to rise to 5.7 per cent by 2035. In Scotland, that equated to a cut in public revenues of around £2.3 billion in 2023.

Here is another fact. The short-lived Liz Truss-Kwasi Kwarteng mini-budget tanked the economy by taking out of it more than £40 billion. I am sure that we all remember the cheerleaders among the Scottish Tories urging the Scottish Government to follow Liz Truss's lead. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat, Mr McMillan. I will not have a cross-chamber conversation going on while a member has the floor. Please show some courtesy and respect, members.

Stuart McMillan: I will repeat that point, just in case members could not hear it. We cannot forget about the cheerleaders among the Scottish Tories who urged the Scottish Government to follow Liz Truss's budget. I am glad that the SNP Scottish Government rejected those Tory demands.

Sadly, the financial carnage that the Tories created—this is yet another fact—left a mess of huge proportions, and the UK Government that took over from them was always going to have a lot on its plate. I even agreed with Anas Sarwar—which is not something that I often do—when he said last June:

“I will not disagree when it comes to the carnage the Conservatives have imposed on this country, and the state of their public finances.”

The position that the Labour Government was left in was pretty similar to the one that Labour left the Tories in 2010. I am sure that we all remember the note that Liam Byrne left for them, in which he said:

“I am afraid there is no money.”

I turn to Labour's amendment. It is true that Labour inherited a mess, but we all know that it has a sufficient majority in the Commons to fix it. However, the 18 months of misery and chaos that we have had under Keir Starmer's Government has done nothing at all to instil any confidence in Labour's handling of the economy—or anything else, for that matter.

Labour recognised that the country had had 14 years of austerity, which was clearly going to have an impact on public spending and delivery. Westminster austerity, whether Tory or Labour, does not stop at the border. It was made in Westminster for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. When in opposition, Labour's Wes Streeting said something that we can all agree on:

“all roads lead back to Westminster”.

He uttered those comments while trying to defend Labour's running of the NHS in Wales. That was because of austerity. The uncomfortable truth for Labour is that the same austerity hammered the people living in Scotland as well.

Last year, Labour promised to cut fuel bills by £300. They have increased by nearly £200. Labour hammered employers with the national insurance contributions hike in its previous budget. Labour announced the cutting of the winter fuel payment, only to eventually roll back on it after outrage from the public. Labour went on an austerity journey with its welfare cuts that hurt those who need the help the most.

Michael Marra: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is concluding.

Stuart McMillan: Quite frankly, no matter which party's Prime Minister resides in Downing Street, Scotland will always be hamstrung due to the limitations of devolution. That is why independence is essential for our future.

The financial forecasts that have been spoken about today are all under the current constitutional arrangements. Labour and the Conservatives have proved that they are not up to the job. That is why Scotland needs independence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I advise members that there is no time in hand and that therefore they should stick to their allotted speaking times.

15:40

Lorna Slater: I am glad that the Scottish Government amendment, which we intend to

support, supports the taxation of wealth and mentions “a just transition”.

I point out to Scottish Government colleagues that we have the power in Scotland to tax the single largest type of wealth: land and property. The main way in which we do that—council tax—is also by far the most broken and unfair element of our tax system. The SNP has been promising to reform council tax for nearly 20 years, and it is time that it got on with it.

The council tax is based on property values from before the new Scottish Green leaders were even born. As a result, it is now completely broken. We would not tolerate most people paying the wrong rate of income tax, but that is exactly what has been allowed to happen for 34 years with council tax.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Lorna Slater: Very briefly.

Rachael Hamilton: Ms Slater, will you support the next SNP budget if the SNP does not reform council tax?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Lorna Slater: I will not be in a position to say what our view on the next budget will be until we have seen it, but reform of council tax is very high on our agenda and will always be part of our conversation.

The current council tax system was a quick and dirty replacement for Thatcher’s hated poll tax. Everyone has agreed for years that it must be replaced completely. Despite that, the Scottish Government has lacked the courage to make that change. The wealthiest people in the most valuable houses are getting off with an absolute steal. They pay less than they should, while far more ordinary households pay much more. It may sound dry, but the council tax is crucial for funding schools, social care, bin collections and other local services. It should never have been allowed to become so completely broken. Those with the broadest shoulders and the biggest houses should be paying more than those less privileged to fund the local services that we all rely on.

The reform of local taxation is an opportunity to progress the Scottish Government’s already proposed policy of a carbon land tax. That would raise revenues by incentivising landowners of Scotland’s largest estates to reduce carbon emissions by restoring their degraded peatland and creating more woodland—both key tools to tackle the climate and nature crisis.

The Scottish Government is absolutely right about what more is possible in an independent Scotland. I ask that it sets the example by showing us what is possible, within the powers that we already have, to make Scotland greener and fairer.

15:43

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): In the contribution that we have just heard from Lorna Slater, there is an important point that speaks to the Government’s amendment. If the Government were at all serious about a wealth tax, it would have done exactly what Lorna Slater set out: it would have reformed council tax and non-domestic rates, because they are taxes on wealth. However, for 18 years, the Government has shown absolutely no interest or seriousness about doing either of those things. That exposes the Scottish Government for what it is.

This afternoon’s debate has been—somewhat predictably—frustrating, but, in a sense, quite helpful, because—

Ben Macpherson: Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: I want to make some progress.

In a sense, what we have discovered is that the two parties that are across the chamber from mine are probably more similar than they care to remember. Both want us to have exceedingly short memories. The Conservatives want us to forget that, in 2022, their party caused the single most drastic one-day economic event in this country’s history since 1993—the previous time that they did it—resulting in the shortest career for a British Prime Minister in political history.

Likewise, when Ivan McKee gets to his feet and professes that the Scottish Government has balanced its budget every year that it has been in office, the SNP wants us to forget that, for the past three years, its Government has had to introduce emergency budget measures every September. I understand that, right now, meetings to look for savings are happening because the Government is concerned about the finances in this financial year.

More important, the debate was meant to be about the economy. Although the parties are similar, their mistakes are slightly different. The Conservatives want us to believe that we will cut our way to growth. That misunderstands the role of the state and public services in their interaction with the economy. The SNP wants us to believe that we can tax our way to growth, which is, to be frank, short-sighted.

Most important, both positions misunderstand how the Government should seek to use its money to support the economy in partnership. I was at a round table at the start of this week, at which we discovered that health tech businesses, rather than flourishing in Scotland with our £25 billion-plus expenditure in health, are having to leave this country in order to grow. That is the reality. Scottish Government expenditure, which is significant and growing, does not help to grow the economy; it forces companies out.

Michael Marra was absolutely right: there has been no acknowledgement of the £5.2 billion that has come forward from the UK Government since Labour was elected, nor of the £9 billion over the spending review. The SNP asks us to completely ignore the £2,500 per person that the Barnett formula provides us with. This is important. It is not about independence. The party opposite believes in full fiscal autonomy. That is now the SNP's official position. Shona Robison and Angus Robertson have said it. The SNP needs to explain to us where the £14 billion—because that is the size of the fiscal transfer—would come from, either in growth or in additional taxation. We did not hear an answer.

Two parties in the chamber want us to forget their errors, their mistakes and the very real costs that they have passed on to every Scot in the country. That is why we need a change in direction—a Government that understands public expenditure, which will use it wisely and which understands that, to grow the economy, we do not cut public services but invest in them.

15:47

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): I am ever the optimist, so I will start with a few areas that I hope the Parliament can unite to commend.

In the past few weeks, a fascinating report from NatWest has confirmed that Scotland had one of the highest rates of start-ups in the UK in the first few months of this year. That is a testament to our investment in the infrastructure that supports start-ups and to the brilliant entrepreneurs.

A few weeks before that, our labour market statistics were some of the best in the UK.

Back in June, KPMG's chief economist said:

"Scotland's economy is well placed to strengthen in the months ahead, and if conditions improve as we expect, could give it a modest edge over the UK as a whole in 2026."

A few weeks after that, Scottish businesses, supported by Scottish Enterprise, delivered their highest-ever level of planned international

exports—an unprecedented £2.46 billion during the year to March, which was up by 20 per cent on the figure for the financial year 2023-24. In fact, the current price value of goods exports increased by 15 per cent from the pre-pandemic period while the rest of the UK experienced an increase of about 6 per cent.

As I have said in probably every economy speech since I came into my role, I live in hope that, aside from the politics, the parties in the chamber can join together to commend our brilliant businesses, ingenious entrepreneurs and very talented workers. It is tough out there, and people have covered some of the reasons why, but—my word—Scotland's businesses are doing a brilliant job, whether they are in tech, manufacturing, life sciences or the food and drink sector. There is such a contrast between the doom and gloom that often characterises the Parliament's discussions about the economy and the optimism and hope of our businesses and our industries. As Kevin Stewart said, we are certainly not "too wee" or "too stupid". Our businesses and our workers prove that.

Daniel Johnson: I very much appreciate those comments, but will Kate Forbes not reflect that we did not hear any of that in any of the preceding speeches from those on the SNP benches? They were all doom and gloom too, were they not?

Kate Forbes: I have not singled anyone out. The funny thing is that I think Daniel Johnson has tried to drive a wedge in an area where I hoped that all of the Parliament—those from all parties—could join together to commend.

There is no doubt that the cost of living remains extremely tough for people. I think that it was Katy Clark who talked about that—I ask members to forgive me if it was somebody else. Flatlining wages across the UK, which have not grown in line with inflation since 2008, have been really tough for people. The impact of Covid, combined with stubbornly high inflation and the catastrophe of the Truss budget, has been felt in real terms by households across the country, and it has also had an impact on public finances.

Although today's debate is obviously just a bit of fun for some—the Tories—I am with Jamie Greene, because we need to take our public finances seriously. As we approach the next budget, the parties' approaches to that budget will be on display. The Parliament has always been very quick to call for more spending and very slow to identify how to find it. I am old enough to remember when the Conservatives' form of opposition to welfare support, when it was first being devolved, was to tell us to be more generous. Now they have very much changed their tune.

I want to touch on economic inactivity.

Murdo Fraser: I reassure the Deputy First Minister that we are entirely serious about looking at the Fiscal Commission's warnings about public finances. However, in 2023, the Scottish Government promised that it would reduce the size of the public sector workforce in Scotland. How is that going?

Kate Forbes: That cues me up nicely to talk about workforce. I thought that Roz McCall gave an absolutely brilliant speech—I hope that that does not ruin her credibility. She talked about the serious issue of economic inactivity, which we can all get behind. During the past few months in particular, I have convened a lot of work between employers, public and private employers and the third sector to look at how we resolve this. The Government has been quite good at helping people into work, but the question remains of how we keep people in work and break down the data, because this is not a homogenous group, especially after Covid, when a lot of people left the job market and have not returned for various reasons. I am keen to work on that issue on a cross-party basis.

As we look ahead to the Labour budget in November, which is being introduced at the last possible point because Labour has hedged itself in and has a crisis of confidence, the prospect for Scotland is either to wait and see what we will be given for another year, or for us to say that we have had enough of this. We have all the comparative advantages of other small, independent, advanced economies. We can be just as wealthy as them, but only as an independent country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Stephen Kerr to close on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives.

15:53

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I reinforce what Murdo Fraser said to the Deputy First Minister: the reason why the Scottish Conservatives brought the motion to Parliament for debate today is that this is a very serious situation. A former colleague who is now appearing in a different place said that we should have an adult conversation, and we should. However, in all honesty, could the Deputy First Minister or Ivan McKee possibly think that the speeches that we heard from their back benchers this afternoon were serious? They were hardly serious at all. It was like they were doing a stand-up routine—they were practically unhinged in the way that they conducted themselves and the arguments that they put before the chamber.

One of the most remarkable speeches that we heard today—there were a number from those on this side of the chamber—was from Liz Smith. I particularly liked her fact 6, which was that the business community knows exactly how it feels about how the Scottish Government is managing our public finances. Liz Smith talked about facts. A well-known Burns phrase that is often repeated from various places in the chamber is:

“Facts are chiels that winna ding.”

That is the whole problem for the SNP in this debate—the facts are the facts. For example, SNP members criticise the GERS report, but it is the Scottish Government that produced the report. It is their Government that says what it says. Those are the facts and they cannot be argued with.

We were only a few seconds into the debate before minister McKee was on his feet contesting something that Murdo Fraser had said. It might be a good exercise for minister McKee—and for all the Scottish ministers—to look in the bathroom mirror every morning, when they get up, and repeat to themselves 10 times,

“Facts are chiels that winna ding”,

because no matter how often they stand up and deny the facts, the facts will remain. They can move themselves to any position that they like and any fantasy that they wish to entertain, but the facts are the facts.

While I am on the theme of facts, let me address directly a comment that was made by Kevin Stewart. He said that the majority of the people of Scotland who do not want to break up the United Kingdom are too stupid. We should have that clipped and put on social media 24 hours a day. I tell him that the people of Scotland are not too stupid, and they know a good deal when they see it. Being part of the United Kingdom is a very good deal for Scotland, and I am very proud of that fact.

By the way, we are not banning women from having children—I have never heard such nonsense. That speech needs to be fed through some artificial intelligence somewhere to find out whether there is any logic or reason in it. I can tell Kevin Stewart for a fact that, frankly, his idea that we should be ashamed is far from the truth.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Stephen Kerr: For entertainment purposes and no other reason, I will.

Kevin Stewart: Mr Kerr is proud of the union, but is he proud of the £41,572.17 of debt for every man, woman and child that has been put in play by his beloved Westminster and the union?

Stephen Kerr: The reason why we have those levels of debt might be the nonsense that has been spoken by Kevin Stewart and other members

on his side of the chamber when it comes to more and more spending, more and more borrowing and more and more tax. That is the only answer that the parties on the left have to the problems that we face as a country—both Scotland and the UK—as we can see from the travesty of financial and economic mismanagement by Rachel Reeves and Keir Starmer.

There are many other things that I would like to say, but I want to pay compliments, as is right and proper, to my colleague Roz McCall. She spoke as a compassionate Conservative, and she spoke about the facts. There we go—we are back to facts again. I have reintroduced SNP members to facts. Roz McCall reminded us that the facts of economic life are conservative. That is the baseline of what we say in our motion. Members cannot run away from those realities. They might try to paint them a different colour—mainly yellow on this side and red on that side—but the reality is the reality. She spoke about knocking down the barriers that get in the way of people getting back to work, and I compliment her on her speech. It was practical conservatism spoken large in this chamber, as was Liz Smith's speech, which I have already referenced. She talked about a dangerous claim culture. If we are going to have a grown-up conversation about the state of the public finances, we need to address the issues that Liz Smith rightly and properly raised in this debate.

I see that I am, sadly, running out of time. I have so much material courtesy of everyone who spoke in the debate, but particularly SNP members.

In all seriousness, Audit Scotland has repeatedly warned that runaway welfare costs, rising public sector pay and healthcare pressures are crowding out investment in education, policing and infrastructure. Those warnings are not political attacks; they are sober analysis from our independent auditors, and yet, instead of action from the Scottish Government, we get complacency.

I will conclude. The Scottish Conservatives' motion calls for honesty and action, not spin and distraction. Message 1 is that we must control welfare growth and move people from dependency to dignity through work, skills and opportunity. Message 2 is that we must invest in productivity to grow the tax base and drive economic growth. Message 3 is that we should reform the public sector and public services—rather than tinkering at the edges—to cut waste and deliver value.

We must end vanity projects. We have had a few—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, you will now need to conclude.

Stephen Kerr: —in the first two weeks that we have been back in Parliament, including the nonsense paper on independence—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, you now need to conclude.

Stephen Kerr: Thank you—I conclude.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr. That concludes the debate on improving Scotland's finances. We need to protect the time for the second Scottish Conservatives debate, which is about to start.

Asylum Seeker Accommodation

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-18780, in the name of Craig Hoy, on the impact of accommodating asylum seekers on Scottish local government. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible.

I advise members that we are, as expected, quite tight for time. I call Craig Hoy to speak to and move the motion—up to seven minutes, please, Mr Hoy.

16:01

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): This is a debate that some members in the Parliament do not want us to have. It is one that is politically heated, and in which those on the liberal left want to mischaracterise the views of others. It is a potentially uncomfortable debate for those in government and those who have recently been in government. It is a debate in which our language needs to be carefully chosen; I recognise and respect that fact.

However, it is a debate that we can no longer afford not to have, because today there are more than 6,000 asylum seekers in Scotland. Glasgow is housing more asylum seekers than any other council in the United Kingdom—a staggering 3,844 as of the end of June; that is 40 per cent more than Birmingham. To be blunt but honest with the communities that we represent and serve, that cannot continue.

The economic costs are considerable. It costs £250 million a year to house asylum seekers in Scotland—£41,000 to house and support each and every one. Ignoring the problem will not make it go away. The protests that Mr Swinney condemned are not what any of us would like to see on Scotland's streets, but they are the product of politicians' failure to address legitimate community concerns.

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: Not at the moment.

At the heart of the problem are criminal gangs who bring illegal immigrants into the country in small boats. In the year to June, nearly 90,000 asylum applications were made in the UK, and 50 per cent of those arrived via irregular routes—the vast majority by boat, but others by lorry or shipping container.

The First Minister and Scottish National Party can no longer bury their heads in the sand,

because the negative effects of illegal immigration—and of the asylum hotels, which are the visible tip of that iceberg—are very real.

During the summer, I knocked on thousands of doors across Dumfriesshire and, time and again, the issue of illegal immigration came up. It came up among the young and the old, and among those living in small villages and in large towns. It came up among those who are directly impacted by asylum hotels, and among those who have simply watched the small boats arriving on their televisions with an increasing sense of alarm.

The costs are not just financial—there are economic costs, social costs and opportunity costs. Yes, we all want Scotland to be a welcome, open nation. I have had the privilege of living and working overseas, and I know how important migration is for modern, dynamic economies in order that they can attract global talent and, in so doing, create a country with rich and diverse cultures and experiences.

However, uncontrolled migration—or worse still, rampant illegal immigration—simply cannot be the sustained solution to any workforce challenge, and the SNP is playing a strange game of identity politics if it believes that to be true.

As we see from Scottish local authorities, the financial burden of housing immigrants cannot be understated. In fact, SNP-run Glasgow City Council has admitted as much itself—Susan Aitken says that the debt-laden local authority faces a staggering £66 million overspend on homelessness. Today, city chiefs fear a fresh influx of newly homeless refugees as the Home Office reduces the length of time for which people can stay in Government accommodation.

Kaukab Stewart: Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: I will take an intervention at this point.

Kaukab Stewart: I welcome the measured tone that you started the debate with—language does matter.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair.

Kaukab Stewart: Does the member recognise that, in fact, the previous Conservative Government deliberately put a hold on processing claims to allow people to seek asylum and that, now that Labour has come into Westminster, it is processing those claims? Does he recognise that there are vast numbers of claims that have not been properly funded in order to enable people to move on in dignity?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give Craig Hoy some of the time back.

Craig Hoy: I recognise that. I also said at the outset that it would be an uncomfortable debate for parties that had recently been in government. I am not apportioning blame to one party or another, but the SNP—[*Interruption.*] The First Minister is chuntering away, but the SNP has to recognise—

The First Minister (John Swinney): Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: I give way to Mr Swinney.

The First Minister: Although Mr Hoy is tacitly acknowledging the failure of the Conservative Government to properly manage the asylum regime over many years in office, he is bringing the debate to the Parliament to politically exploit the issue in a most disgusting fashion. It embodies where the Conservative Party has found itself these days.

Craig Hoy: We can always rely on John Swinney to lower the tone. We are coming to the Parliament to reflect the legitimate views of reasonable people in a representative democracy. I think that it is scurrilous, Mr Swinney, for you to throw around that kind of language when we are having a reasoned debate in the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: Mr Swinney is shaking his head, pretending that none of this is to do with him, but it is quite clear that, as Scotland has more liberal homelessness rules than England, Scottish councils fear that thousands of potential asylum seekers will come to Scotland where they will have a right to be housed that does not exist in England. That is a real risk, which the minister is well aware of.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: No, I will not. I do not have time.

By councils' own admission, the SNP's approach is crippling. It is forcing them to prioritise the needs of those from elsewhere when Scots struggle to get a roof over their heads. At the outset, I said that the debate would be uncomfortable for those in government and those who were recently in government. That means us recognising that the policy of housing asylum seekers—many of whom are, in reality, illegal immigrants—in hotels was the wrong decision.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: I do not have time.

That decision was taken by the previous Conservative Government in the eye of the Covid

storm. Now, we have to admit that it was the wrong policy, even if it was well intentioned.

We also have to recognise that things are now much worse as a result of Labour's failure to tackle the mounting immigration crisis. Rather than stopping the boats, Keir Starmer and Labour have allowed their numbers to swell. They systematically took apart the deterrent schemes that were put in place by the previous Conservative Administration. In the year to June, Labour presided over a 17 per cent increase in asylum applications compared with the previous year. Beyond those numbers, the picture is even more alarming because of the SNP's open door rhetoric, which is adding to the pressures.

Scots are seeing their services undermined and their life chances blighted. In 2023-24, there were 40,685 applications for homelessness and 33,619 households were assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness in Scotland. Across the country, people will be concerned, understandably, when they see priority being given to those who are coming from overseas. Housing asylum seekers in hotels is not the solution to the problem. Tackling the causes of illegal immigration and processing those who are seeking to come to the UK at source is, in effect, the only way to fix it. As I said last week, the use of asylum hotels has changed our communities and, in their view, not for the better.

Five years after the emergency use of hotels during the pandemic, the numbers have soared. In August 2020, 188 asylum seekers were housed in hotels and bed and breakfasts in Scotland. Today, that figure stands at more than 1,500. The previous Conservative Administration committed to end the use of hotels but, sadly, the Labour Government has comprehensively failed to do so.

Stuart McMillan: Will the member take an intervention?

Craig Hoy: No, I do not have time.

It is unfair and wrong that we are still spending millions of pounds every day providing hotels to asylum seekers and illegal immigrants.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Craig Hoy: The communities that I speak to want action from their Governments. They understand that Britain should be a place to live, work, flourish, and put down roots, but it should not be a hotel for those who have entered the country illegally.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude, Mr Hoy.

Craig Hoy: It is not a debate that any of us relish, but it is one that our constituents,

regardless of the party that we represent, want us to have.

I move,

That the Parliament acknowledges that the current number of asylum seekers accommodated in Scotland's local authority areas is becoming financially "unsustainable" for them, as confirmed by the Scottish National Party leader of Glasgow City Council; believes that asylum seekers should never have originally been accommodated in taxpayer-funded hotels; calls for the closure of all asylum hotels across Scotland as soon as possible, and rejects the Scottish Government's position outlined in its response to the UK Government's immigration white paper, which would see a further increase in the number of asylum seekers coming to Scotland.

16:10

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Our words matter in this debate. They matter to the communities that we serve and those who seek our protection. Therefore, my message is clear: we must ensure that Scotland continues to be a welcoming nation to those fleeing persecution, conflict or danger.

The UK has a moral and international legal obligation to uphold the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the supporting 1967 protocol. Indeed, the UK was a founding signatory to the convention, which defines the term refugee and outlines the legal protection, rights and assistance that a refugee is entitled to receive. According to international law, everyone who satisfies that definition in the convention is a refugee.

Scotland has a long history of being a welcoming nation where refugees have been able to rebuild their lives. Successive generations of refugee communities have contributed to Scotland's economy and society. We should not now turn our backs on those who need our protection in response to those who seek to cause division and fuel tensions.

Asylum is a reserved issue. The UK Government is responsible for asylum decision making and the provision of asylum accommodation. The Scottish Government has repeatedly raised concerns about the impact of UK asylum policy on Scottish local authorities, devolved public services and people living in our communities.

As Kaukab Stewart pointed out, it was the previous Conservative UK Government that introduced asylum hotels and caused a processing backlog in the UK asylum system. Over the past year, attempts by the current UK Government to speed up decision making and clear that backlog have resulted in a larger-than-expected number of newly recognised refugees seeking support from local authorities. The wording is important: we

speak of newly recognised refugees who have gone through the process, not illegal immigrants or migrants. That is where the danger is in the policies that we are seeing.

I am disappointed that the UK Government has not been able to work with the Scottish Government and councils on the pressures in the current system. The situation has been further exacerbated by the recent reduction in the time that people seeking asylum are given to move on from asylum accommodation after receiving a positive decision on their asylum claim—again, that means that they are not an illegal asylum seeker. Newly recognised refugees are entitled to housing support and other benefits, but we have long argued that 28 days is not sufficient time to enable them to make those arrangements. Indeed, that is a position that is also held by the British Red Cross.

Of course, the UK Government's policy of restricting people seeking asylum from working can also make finding a job extremely difficult once a decision has been made.

The Scottish Government recognises that Glasgow City Council in particular has come under significant pressure as a result of UK Government decision making, and I have repeatedly called on Home Office ministers to meet me alongside Glasgow City Council. Indeed, in April, the Scottish Refugee Council invited me to attend a round-table meeting, along with the council and the UK Government. We were disappointed that UK Government ministers did not join us at that meeting, at which we collectively discussed what could be done to tackle the pressures, within our own responsibilities.

In the face of Russian aggression, we stood with the people of Ukraine, helping more than 28,000 people to flee war. That approach was supported across the chamber. I wonder what the difference is that makes some people think that we should not support people who flee war, persecution and abuse when they come from other countries.

Craig Hoy: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am quite happy to take an intervention from Craig Hoy on that point.

Craig Hoy: In the previous debate, many of the cabinet secretary's colleagues talked about what an independent Scotland would look like. If an independent Scotland had a similar problem of illegal immigration, how would she tackle it?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Of course, every country needs an asylum policy, but we would not allow a backlog of claims to build up, and we would not have a system that did not allow migration into our country at times when we

wanted people to come into our country. We would be responsible, morally and economically.

I ask the chamber to join me in rejecting divisive, dehumanising rhetoric in favour of delivering our moral and legal duties of protection and building a strong and resilient community.

I leave the chamber with the words of Sabir Zazai from the Scottish Refugee Council, who is himself a refugee. Talking about refugees, he says:

"To live in fear is not a choice. It is a condition forced upon them. And when we allow fear to shape our response, we do not become safer. We become smaller."

I move amendment S6M-18780.3, to leave out from "acknowledges" to end and insert:

"reaffirms individuals' rights to asylum under international law, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol; upholds the European Convention on Human Rights, and highlights Scotland's place in the world as a welcoming nation to those fleeing persecution, conflict or danger."

16:15

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Today, the Conservatives have taken the opportunity to put before the Parliament a motion that opens us up to the type of dangerous and divisive rhetoric that bad-faith actors weaponise for political gain. Of course, they are absolutely entitled to raise the issue in the manner that they have, but it is clear that doing so is, at best, an act of political amnesia or, more likely, blatant hypocrisy on two fronts.

First, we cannot forget which party is entirely responsible for the huge increase in the use of hotels for asylum seekers. Fourteen years of having a Conservative Government in Westminster pushed our asylum system to the point of collapse. Tory party decisions meant that thousands of people were stuck in limbo while the appeals system sank under the strain. It is the party that decided that 400 hotels across the UK were to be used to house people, and it is the party that had no serious plan to address the growing backlog that it caused.

Secondly, was it not the Conservative Party that, just last week, was complaining about parliamentary time being dedicated to the situation of children who are suffering in Gaza? Today, its business is about asylum and immigration policy, which is a reserved matter. Like I said, it is a case of either political amnesia or hypocrisy—the public will decide.

However, although the Conservatives have created the immigration crisis, it is the SNP Government that has entirely failed to address the wider housing crisis and the funding crisis in local government in Scotland. The SNP Government's utter failure to build enough homes and to properly

fund public services has caused the current crises, and an SNP-run Glasgow City Council has facilitated that.

Kaukab Stewart: We know that local authorities are not accommodating people who seek asylum; it is the Home Office that is entirely responsible. Will Mark Griffin join us in calling on the Westminster Government to properly fund local councils, instead of paying private companies that are making profit out of peril?

Mark Griffin: The minister makes it clear that the UK Government funds asylum seekers to the point at which they are given leave to remain. Responsibility for housing them then becomes a Scottish Government and local government funding issue. That is where the problem lies. We have an SNP council in Glasgow that blames the record financial settlement from the UK Government for its funding problems, while completely ignoring the years of successive council tax freezes and successive cuts to its budget made by its parliamentary colleagues.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will Mr Griffin give way?

Mark Griffin: Sorry—with four minutes, I cannot give more time away.

While bins go unemptied, potholes appear and Glaswegians are living on the streets, the SNP council quietly gives massive pay-outs to department officials.

The SNP Government talks about providing a welcome, but it does not back up that welcome with the financial decisions and long-term support that are needed to turn it from just words into action. It is only Labour that has taken steps to fix the problem. Since the Labour Government was elected in the UK, the number of asylum decisions has doubled and the backlog has fallen by 24 per cent in just 12 months. A new independent body has been announced to speed up asylum appeals and ease pressure on the courts. Such delivery and leadership were completely absent from any Conservative Government during the past 14 years, and absent from any contribution that I have heard from members on the Conservative benches.

Here in Scotland, after 18 years of SNP failure, a Labour Government would prioritise restoring our roads, hospitals, schools and communities. Further, it would ensure that it served all Scots—new and old—well, rather than using them as a rhetorical device, only to forget them when their political capital runs out.

We must do better. Scottish Labour will work with everyone who is committed to delivering for our communities, and we will never allow division

or dangerous political point scoring to detract from the real work that is needed in that area.

I move amendment S6M-18780.2, to leave out from “acknowledges” to end and insert:

“regrets that the previous UK Conservative administration left the asylum system in a state of collapse; recognises the progress made by the UK Labour administration to clear the backlog of asylum claims, and believes that the failure to tackle the challenges facing Scotland’s local authorities, public services and housing system, for which the Scottish Government has devolved responsibility and has received record levels of funding from the UK Labour administration, is the root cause of the housing emergency.”

16:19

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): We are here today to debate asylum and migration, but let us be clear that this debate has been framed by dog whistles, distortions and dangerous rhetoric from the Conservatives and others. I will not stand by while human beings are dehumanised, scapegoated and treated as though they are less than others. No one person can be considered illegal.

What is illegal—what is shameful—is the stripping away of rights, the deliberate spreading of misinformation and the whipping up of hatred by politicians and parts of the media. They are fuelling the fire of racism and fascism in our communities. This situation has been created by design—not by those seeking safety but by those who would rather manufacture enemies than face up to the real problems.

The threat to our country arrives not in small boats but in private yachts and jets. The Conservatives come here with their hate-filled rhetoric, but it was they who closed the routes for people to come to this country safely. They are the proud party of empire, but empire has consequences. We cannot invade more than 170 countries and subjugate millions to colonial rule, but then feign outrage when people seek safety, family and community in Britain.

Our history matters. The illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 destabilised an entire region. Without our greed for oil, many people would never have been forced to flee in the first place. We bombed Libya and left it as a failed state. British foreign policy continues to create the very displacement that the Conservatives now cynically exploit for political gain.

The cynicism runs deep. The decision to house asylum seekers in hotels was not about care or compassion; it was about lining the pockets of Tory donors during the Covid pandemic while simultaneously stoking public resentment. The plan backfired—the Conservatives lost in a landslide—but, instead of learning, they have

doubled down on exploiting the most marginalised people to divide our society even further.

We see the consequences. In Falkirk, a brick was hurled through the window of a hotel that housed asylum seekers. That was not mindless vandalism; it was intimidation and racism that had been fuelled by the lies and hatred that are peddled in politics and the press. I have seen some of that toxicity at first hand, at anti-migrant protests in Aberdeen and Westhill. Anti-migrant protests are not about safety. They are about hate, and hate kills. Scotland must choose another path.

International law places on us a legal obligation to provide sanctuary. Beyond that, there is a deeper moral duty: the duty to treat people with dignity, compassion and humanity. That means giving them the right to work, the right to contribute and the right to live in communities. They should not be warehoused in ghettos or trapped in hostile conditions. Asylum seekers are not a burden; they are our neighbours, our future colleagues and our friends.

Let us be honest about the real issues. Small boats are not the problem. Refugees are not the problem. The problem is a grotesquely unequal economic system that privileges the wealthy elite, while ordinary people—whether they were born here or have newly arrived—struggle to make ends meet. The answers do not lie in violent racism or in scapegoating those who seek safety. They lie in solidarity, in dismantling inequality and in building a society where everyone belongs and where everyone can flourish.

I say to the Conservatives that they should stop scapegoating the marginalised, stop using asylum seekers as a distraction from their failures and stop peddling the dangerous lie that migration is a threat.

Scotland has a proud tradition of offering a welcome. Let us honour that tradition—not just in words, but in action—by treating asylum seekers with the dignity and respect that every human being deserves, by ensuring that they can live safely, securely and proudly as part of our communities, and by rejecting hate and choosing hope and love.

16:23

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): The better side of my nature would like to think that, when the Tory shadow cabinet discussed how it would use its precious party business time, some voices around the table wanted to talk about national health service waiting times, education standards, the ferry scandal or Scotland’s mental health crisis. However, I can say with a high degree of certainty that somebody—I suspect that it was not an MSP—said, “Let’s talk about asylum

seekers. All 6,000 of them in Scotland." I think that, deep down, we all know why. We all saw the same poll last Friday, which is perhaps why half of the Tory seats here in the chamber are empty right now.

The motion refers to the number of asylum seekers becoming "financially unsustainable" for our local councils. That is a valid debate, because it is true that our local councils are in a perilous financial situation and have been for years, but what does that have to do with the housing of asylum seekers? The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities tells us why councils are in a perilous position. Over many years, council tax freezes have led to revenue shortfalls. Councils must now do more with less. This year alone, councils are plugging a black hole of more than £600 million. Long-delayed reforms to our outdated council tax system, which were promised nearly two decades ago, are yet to materialise.

When I sat on the Conservative benches, we did not blame asylum seekers for councils' financial position; we blamed the Scottish Government. I wonder what has changed.

The Parliament should not be deaf to people's concerns about immigration, but neither should it be afraid to debate them. It is true that people cannot get a general practitioner appointment or see their dentist. Yes, they struggle to get decent housing that is suitable for them and their children. Yes, they see people who have absolutely nothing to do and nowhere to go, wandering around their town centres. It is easy for political parties to blame such situations on those who can do nothing about it. The reason for people being unable to get GP appointments is that there are not enough GPs. The reason for their being unable to get dentist appointments is that there are not enough dentists. The reason for their being unable to get houses is that there are not enough affordable homes in Scotland.

All the while, qualified doctors, dentists, entrepreneurs and engineers are sitting in a Holiday Inn somewhere, living on £10 a week and waiting in a Home Office backlog—sometimes for years—that leaves skilled asylum seekers unable to work or claim universal credit, with nothing to do and no money to spend. That is the reality for asylum seekers in Scotland. Therefore, here is an idea: instead of forcing them to live off the state, as it is often described, why do we not let them stand on their own two feet? Why do we not let them take individual responsibility? Why do we not let them contribute to Scotland's economy? Why do we not let asylum seekers work? That is not a woke question; it makes economic sense. I vividly recall sitting on the Conservative front bench, next to the well-respected Donald Cameron, during a debate in which we agreed that such a proposal

merited genuine discussion with the then UK Tory Government.

Research tells us that if we allowed asylum seekers to work after six months in the country, it would generate £16 million of economic growth in Scotland alone. If we allowed it from day 1, the figure would double. If we allowed it across the UK, the gains would be huge—more tax revenues, more money flowing back into the economy and more people filling our skills gap. It would just make sense.

People's concerns about immigration are real, but the way to deal with the problem of thousands of people stuck in asylum hotels is not to shut the hotels but to clear the backlog and process their claims quickly. The previous UK Government failed spectacularly to do so. If the new one does not succeed, more people wearing turquoise rosettes will be sitting in the chamber next May than those wearing blue ones. We all know who the real winners would be in that scenario.

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

16:28

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): This afternoon, we have heard that local authorities are struggling to house the surging number of asylum seekers in Scotland. Communities, especially in my Central Scotland region, are feeling the consequences of that and tensions are rising. The debate is important because we have a duty to confront our constituents' concerns, however difficult that is. We cannot simply dismiss them.

In October 2023, the rape of a 15-year-old girl in Falkirk by an asylum seeker who had entered the UK illegally left the community shaken. As part of the perpetrator's defence, his lawyer cited cultural differences and language barriers as reasons why he did not understand his action but did not say that they were an excuse for the crime that was committed. Irrespective of the people I represent, the plain fact is that a young girl was attacked by someone who illegally entered the UK.

Protests have taken place outside migrant hotels in my region. The use of hotels has become a flashpoint and has fuelled anger and disgust, but we cannot brand everyone who raises concerns as racists. We, as politicians, must listen.

Kaukab Stewart: The crime that Meghan Gallacher describes is absolutely disgusting and appalling, and I totally condemn it. She went on to say that people who are raising concerns should not be tarnished or categorised. Does she also accept that we should not tar asylum seekers and refugees who are fleeing war and persecution with

the same brush and that we need to be very careful to use our positions of leadership to calm the tensions? Will she give me an example of how the Conservatives are doing that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Meghan Gallacher, I will give you the time back.

Meghan Gallacher: We are trying to have a grown-up debate in the Scottish Parliament. The public are not extremists—they are asking fair questions. We are trying to bring the debate to the chamber in order to talk about the wider issues surrounding asylum seeker hotels and the issues that could alleviate some of the tensions, such as housing, which I will come on to discuss.

One of the banners at the protest read “Migrants adored, pensioners ignored”. That sentiment is completely blunt, but it captures what I believe many people in Scotland are feeling. The pressures of both legal and illegal immigration expose the failures in housing, healthcare and public services. Too many hard-working people who live and work in Scotland are feeling ignored by Governments—I use that word in the plural—that have completely failed to get a grip on the issue.

We need to look at the demographics of the people who are arriving in Scotland. Across the UK, 62 per cent of asylum claims are from adult males, whereas just 21 per cent are from adult females. For small boat arrivals, the imbalance is even greater: around 75 per cent are adult men, while only 10 per cent are children. They are not families fleeing together—they are overwhelmingly single men of working age. People see those demographics and wonder why women and children are not being prioritised as part of the asylum system. Meanwhile, in Scotland, more than 1,500 asylum seekers are being housed in hotels—that is almost a quarter of the number that are in the system. Across the UK, the number of those in hotels still stands at more than 32,000, despite repeated promises to reduce it.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is concluding.

Meghan Gallacher: I will not give way, as I am in my last couple of seconds.

Housing is central to the debate. Scotland’s housing emergency was not created overnight; it is the product of decades of failure to build enough homes. We see that through the homelessness applications and through the thousands of Scots who are trapped on social housing waiting lists. Yet, asylum seekers are being placed in hotels while local families wait.

The solution is straightforward. If we get a grip on the housing emergency and build more homes, we will be able to look at immigration in a new light. However, I fear that, until then, we will still have tensions in Scotland, because we are not addressing the big issues that matter in this country.

16:32

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): One of the most noticeable things during my time in the Scottish Parliament—it will have been 15 years when I retire next year; no cheering, please—has been the positioning of British politics. Historically, it moved gently from centre-right to centre-left, with a few Thatcher-like blips in the middle. However, in that time window there has been continual movement further and further to the right. The reasons for that include the constant squealing by media outlets in an attempt to get clicks for advertising—bad news always sells better than good—and the craven surrender by once-mainstream political parties to the racism and xenophobic scaremongering that are being touted by populist grifters on the make.

In 2015, I had the opportunity to visit Serbia with a local charity, Glasgow the Caring City, to see how efficiently the support that it had sent to help refugees fleeing war-torn countries was being used. During that trip, I met a group of Afghan families who had been travelling for months to get to Serbia on the next stage of their journey to a life that they hoped would be better and safer. The father was holding a small bag, which I took to be holding important items—papers and so on—but it was a newborn child. They had trekked for thousands of miles while the mother was pregnant, with her having to give birth and suckle that child while living in makeshift tents or simply by the side of the road on their journey. I met many other good people there, who were forced to leave because of different situations in their country—and many of them were young men, because they were the ones who were under threat from their existing Governments. Most of them would have been a huge positive to any country. However, of all the people I spoke to, not a single one was making their way to the UK. As one voluntary worker said to me, “Why would they? They know that the UK hates foreigners and is very unwelcoming to them.” Is that something to be proud of?

Migrants and refugees are not a curse on a country; generally, they are a blessing. They often bring with them much-needed experience, different cultures and a vibrancy that is often missing in this grey land of ours. However, to our shame, we are now seeing any new person as a threat—a threat to our jobs, our houses, our

doctors and our safety. That is utter insanity. Clearly, there have been some high-profile cases of violence and sexual offences, which are appalling, and they have to be dealt with by the full force of the law. Does that mean that everyone from that country is a threat? Of course not. There are many instances of Brits or Scots going abroad and committing heinous offences. Should every Scot or Brit be banned from those countries? Of course not.

The debate has been brought about for one reason only: the party that secured it is terrified of losing support and MSPs to a racist grifter in charge of another party. The Tories are not alone. While they meekly trail behind Farage, hoping to entice their support back by even more xenophobic actions such as today's motion, Labour has decided to try to outdo them. Apparently, concentration—sorry, barracks are being considered to house asylum seekers.

One of the problems raised in the motion is, however, a real one: the cost to Glasgow of housing asylum seekers. The solution is not to make life more unbearable for those seeking shelter; the solution is simple: to support the cities that take in asylum seekers with appropriate funding and, as Jamie Greene mentioned, to allow asylum seekers—who often bring much-needed skills and qualifications—to work. That would take some of the strain off the taxpayer, and it would help to close the employment gap that we keep hearing about.

Of course, none of that works for those in charge, because they do not want solutions; they want scapegoats. If it is not asylum seekers, it is single mums with more than two kids, or it is the guy down the road who makes a few bob on the side doing homers while also helping his neighbours in the community. Meanwhile, the ever-increasing number of billionaires get to decide who the losers are while funnelling money offshore, never to be seen again in these islands.

If members are looking for someone to blame, they should blame the tax dodgers, the mass polluters and the utilities companies, which charge us more than is charged anywhere else in the world for power while grabbing huge profits for themselves. They should stop blaming people who are fleeing thousands of miles from a horrible existence to make a better life for themselves and their families.

The way the world is going, one day it may well be you or yours. Please vote against this horrible motion.

16:37

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): During the recess, there was a protest

outside the asylum hotel in Westhill, just outside Aberdeen. There were three groups: the protest, the counter-protest and a group at the other side of the road, where I was, who were just watching what was going on.

Regardless of what people think of the protesters, we have to acknowledge that a lot of people are angry at what they see going on over immigration. Let us set this straight up front: legal migration is good, our country is great and it is the way it is today because of legal, controlled migration. We owe so much to those who have come to this country and who call the United Kingdom their home. We are in a position where we can control our own borders, and we can attract the skills and professions that we need—be they doctors, dentists or nurses, all of whom we have a shortage of. The problem that fellow Scots are angry about is illegal migration.

The First Minister likes to remind us at every opportunity that we are a country that follows the rule of law.

Kaukab Stewart: In the spirit of the fact that language matters, would Douglas Lumsden accept that there is no such thing as illegal migration, due to the 1951 convention, to which this country is signed up, and that he would be better advised to use the language that is appropriate, which is “regular and irregular routes”?

Douglas Lumsden: If people are coming here illegally, it is illegal migration. I think that is the term that everyone accepts. When it comes to illegal immigration, the Government is quite happy to look the other way and welcome with open arms these individuals who have dangerously entered the country illegally.

The SNP seems genuinely confused about what is legal and what is illegal. Let me try to spell it out for its members. A person applying for a visa, being granted that visa, bringing their skills to the UK and contributing to our economy is perfectly legal—and welcome. Crossing the Channel in a small boat is illegal. Not only that—it is dangerous and life threatening, and it enables criminals. We should not be welcoming people into this country who cross the Channel illegally. If SNP members cannot understand that, it proves that they are out of touch with communities right across Scotland, who are angry.

Stephen Kerr: That is the whole point. At general question time last week, I asked a question about homelessness in Glasgow, pointing out the issues surrounding the numbers of refugees or asylum seekers—call them what you will. The minister who replied said that I should be ashamed of myself for asking the question. Does that not show how out of touch SNP members are

with the ordinary people of Scotland? They do not share their concerns.

Douglas Lumsden: Stephen Kerr is right. Whether we like to talk about it or not, these are the real concerns of people outside. We are here as a Parliament, and we have to represent the views of all those people.

There is no real deterrent in this country. The Rwanda scheme was perhaps not perfect and not liked by everyone, but it would have been a start. Instead, we have Labour and the SNP sending out all the wrong signals. We should not be encouraging illegal immigrants to cross the Channel in dinghies, allegedly fleeing persecution, conflict or danger in war-torn France. We simply cannot cope.

The Government needs to understand the strain that communities are under due to high levels of illegal migration. Scots struggle to get appointments at dentists and GPs, and NHS waiting lists have spiralled out of control. We have a housing emergency and people cannot get into social housing. The list of pressures goes on. Jamie Greene is right that those pressures existed before. However, if members think that illegal immigration is not playing a part in all of this, they are deluded. Hard-working families who have paid into the state for their whole lives are being forgotten about. That is the view of people out there.

People see that our public services are under strain. Local councils that already face a funding crisis due to years of SNP austerity are left to pick up the tab for the SNP's open-door policy. The SNP Government needs to listen to our communities and to our hard-working Scots, who are angry because they are paying more and getting less.

16:41

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): When internet use became more prevalent and social media emerged, many of us thought that that would help to bring us closer together, as human beings, both here and around the world. Unfortunately, on many occasions—we are seeing a lot of this in our communities now—such technology is used by bad-faith actors to drive wedges between communities and create fear.

Fear of immigration has always caused much more damage than any sort of immigration ever could. People focus on the bad examples—the minority of stories—where there has been a case that has negatively affected a community, rather than on amplifying the huge and massively positive contribution that thousands of individuals have made when they have gone to other

countries, throughout the pages of history and in recent times.

Let us also remember that a lot of the people who are coming to our shores, and to other parts of Europe, are moving away from places that we bear responsibility for damaging: Iraq, Afghanistan and many others. Let us put ourselves in the shoes of those who come here, and think about how it must feel to leave somewhere, travel across continents and then arrive and be subject to a system that is often extremely difficult to cope with, mentally and psychologically.

I recognise and respect the fact that immigration is an important issue for my constituents and people elsewhere in Scotland. I have thought about it deeply, particularly as the MSP for Leith—a port, and an area that has welcomed people for decades, whether it is the Irish in the 19th century, Italians, Indians and Pakistanis in the 20th, or, more recently, people from Poland, Ukraine, America, China and elsewhere, all of whom have added to our community and adopted a sense of being proudly Scottish.

Let us be clear that the vast majority of people who come here are very positive contributors—that is a fact. Economically, they are net contributors and, socially, they bring something to our communities, creating multicultural and intercultural diversity, with minorities adding to and embracing a strong and inclusive collective Scottish culture. That is what our new Scots do in the vast majority of cases.

I am passionate about the benefits of immigration, as members can probably hear. However, I also agree that, although people are welcome, we need to have a controlled system. It is not controversial to say that—every country has that. We, as a party, have always been clear about membership of the European Union and a points-based system. That was the position in 2014, and it is a serious position. If boats were landing here in Scotland, we would of course need a system to manage that.

However, there is a broader question that goes beyond the level of inward migration and what that would mean for Scotland. We need to give thoughtful, sensitive and rational consideration to the reality of the situation, without it being taboo, which is that we need to bring more people to Scotland. It is a fact that, because of our demographics and our low birth rates, we need to bring more working-age people here. They enrich our communities.

At the moment, the issue is completely reserved, but there are solutions to be found. While we continue to consider how Scotland could build a different migration system, let us embrace the long tradition of giving a warm and heartfelt

Scottish welcome and shaking people's hands as they arrive in our communities.

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

16:45

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): [*Inaudible.*]—of the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Mr Sweeney. We are having difficulty with your visuals. Perhaps you could begin again.

Paul Sweeney: I apologise for my connection issues. I hope that you can hear me now.

I have been listening intently to the debate, and I agree with those members who have said that the Conservative motion is not only ignorant in nature but deeply divisive and unnecessarily damaging. Even its title fails to address the fundamental crux of the problem. People who are seeking asylum are not the primary issue when it comes to the housing pressure that exists in Scotland today. The issue is the rate at which people in the asylum system are being granted refugee status—because of the backlog that built up under the Conservative Government—and then settled on the basis of existing housing capacity, which is under pressure.

As my colleague Mr Griffin highlighted, the Conservatives' hypocrisy is appalling. They should be eating humble pie for the vandalism that they have caused to the asylum system over the past few years. I say as someone who represents 95 per cent of the people who are seeking asylum in Scotland that that rings true. The penury under which people in the asylum system have been forced to live is shameful. People have had to survive on as little as £9 a week. For many people, that is simply unsustainable. Those are the most destitute people in our community. We should be doing as much as possible to get the backlog down, and I support the Labour Government's efforts to do so as quickly as possible.

All levels of government must support people's transition from the asylum system so that they can settle as refugees with the right to work, use their talents and contribute to communities. That is a good problem for Scotland to have because, as a country, we need more people. By the middle of the century, the number of working-age people is set to increase only by the equivalent of the population of Stirling while the number of retired people is set to increase by the equivalent of the combined population of Aberdeen and Paisley. It is not difficult to do the maths. Unless we grow the working-age population of this country and increase the number of people who are able to

contribute to the workforce, we are in for a serious fall in living standards or a significant increase in taxation to deal with that issue. For the sake of our own wellbeing, we need to grow the country's overall working-age population and to settle people.

Glasgow is a city that is well able to do that. It was built for 1.1 million people, but at the moment it has only around 600,000 people living in it. That is why more than 95 per cent—around 4,100—of the asylum seekers in Scotland are resident in the city. That is not a large number when we consider that there are more than 2,000 long-term empty homes in the city at the present time.

There has been a failure of policy in translating housing capacity to meet the demand of a growing population, for which the Scottish Government needs to step up and take responsibility. It is no good simply saying that the UK Government must somehow finance refugee accommodation. The responsibility transfers once refugee status has been granted.

I am open-minded about the idea of revisiting the Mears contract, which the minister suggested. I believe that there is a break clause that is due to come into effect next year. I would be happy to work with colleagues to explore an approach to the UK Government with a view to changing the nature of that contract. Perhaps there could be a municipal contract or the provision could be delivered through another means, such as local housing associations in the city. That would enable the pound to be recycled more readily into housing stock supply in the city.

We could look constructively at such ideas, but the Scottish Government must recognise that, ultimately, this is an issue of housing supply: the supply is not meeting demand. We need a growing population, particularly in Glasgow, and we need to address that issue urgently at all levels. Given that 44 per cent of homelessness applications are due to come from people who are refugees, it is clear that the situation needs to be managed efficiently and addressed.

There is added pressure from people coming into Glasgow from other parts of the UK; maybe we need to look at temporary application of local connection rules in order to staunch that flow of people.

Ultimately, the answer comes down to growing the housing stock: it needs to grow at a much faster pace than it is presently. Otherwise, there will continue to be social unrest, which is not good for our politics in general. We need to meet the needs of the people through housing supply.

16:50

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I recognise the context for this debate. The UK still receives a small number of refugees compared with many other countries. Seventy-two per cent of refugees live in countries that neighbour their country of origin. The UK hosts only about 1 per cent of the world's refugees, and the truth is that they make a huge contribution to this country, economically and socially.

As for the numbers, asylum applications peaked in 2002 at around 84,000 a year. In 2024, the number was around 84,000 in the year. So far, the figures for 2025 show a slight increase, but there are still significantly fewer than many other European countries receive, and the current peak is similar to previous high points. That is nothing to be surprised at, given the growth in conflict and economic or climate stress around the world.

Most claims are legitimate. The claimants are found to deserve and need the right to stay here and, as others have mentioned, the backlog is entirely the result of deliberate choices by successive Governments.

As for housing, what broke the UK's housing system is the long-term decline in socially rented housing and its replacement by a rapacious, exploitative private rented sector. Asylum seekers are not to blame for the lack of investment in affordable housing. They are not to blame for landlords hiking rents or for the pressure on our public services. Those things are the result of choices made by successive UK Governments.

The UK Government's explicit hostile environment policy began in around 2012, and anti-immigrant and racist sentiment peaked with Brexit. Even at that stage, what we are seeing now might have seemed unthinkable: openly racist, ethno-nationalist ideology is being mainstreamed. Members of Parliament are openly discussing mass deportation and questioning whether black and brown people can ever be considered British or English; the UK's shadow justice secretary is quite content to be photographed in the company of a founder member of Combat 18, a neo-Nazi terror group; and a man who proudly showed the world a Nazi salute is now not only using the social media platform that he bought to tolerate explicit far-right racist and conspiracy content, but actively paying people to generate that content.

Despite years, even decades, of evidence from countries right around the world, the political parties that claim the centre ground in UK politics are doing nothing to challenge the profoundly dishonest, racist grifters of the far right. Instead, they are signalling to the electorate that the priorities of people such as Farage and Robinson are the right ones.

Aping the far right is obviously wrong in principle; also, it will never work. Those people already have wall-to-wall media coverage for their hateful agenda, and the current UK Government risks giving them the political power to demolish our human rights and to treat immigrants and asylum seekers as subhuman, all while slashing public services even more severely and handing what is left of the economy to the super-rich. We need to be clear eyed about the dire threat that has resulted from UK Government after UK Government dancing to the far right's tune and allowing both traditional and social media to become propaganda machines for extremism.

There is still reason for optimism. Even after decades of anti-asylum propaganda, in every community we can find people giving their time, energy and resources to support asylum seekers and to show that the instinct to reach out and help those who need it is a basic part of human nature. It is strong. We need Governments and politicians who share that instinct, who will express it and who will explicitly challenge and oppose the racism of the far right.

16:54

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I have long thought that the issue of immigration requires a sensible, mature and informed discussion. Some good contributions and points have been made during the debate. However, overall, sadly but not surprisingly, we have not had the considered and honest discourse that is required for such a serious issue.

As Mark Griffin and Paul Sweeney have said, the Conservative motion reeks of hypocrisy. We know why the Conservatives have held the debate. It is because they are panicking about Reform. Who knows? The way that things are going Craig Hoy might be leading Reform in Scotland the next time that we debate the issue.

The fact is that immigration skyrocketed under the Conservatives. They did not have a plan then, and neither does Nigel Farage have one now—he was a key Brexiteer who is as responsible as anyone for the situation that the country faces. On the other hand, the UK Labour Government has doubled the number of asylum decisions and reduced the number of asylum seekers who are waiting for a decision by 24 per cent in just 12 months. That is practical and responsible action.

What will not work and is not practical and responsible is the policy of open borders, as suggested by some members of the SNP and the Greens; equally, nor is closing the borders practical or responsible, as suggested by some members of Reform and the Conservatives. I think that the vast majority of people in Scotland—

indeed, in the UK—would agree with Labour's position that we must have a managed immigration system alongside sustainable public services and finances.

Scotland will always be a place where vulnerable people are welcome. It is part of who we are—it always has been. If we lose that, we lose something fundamental about being Scottish—our welcome to everyone, wherever they come from.

However, let us not become misty-eyed about ourselves. Let us be realistic. The reality is that a large number of us are struggling to make ends meet, cannot afford a home or public transport, do not feel comfortable with our finances and do not carry ourselves with the confidence that we would wish for. When those doubts are among us, people are less charitable, and we wonder why people from beyond our shores seem to be able to get the things that we cannot afford.

I will be clear. My son, Sam, had difficult birth, and in the theatre room in Paisley, a United Nations of doctors and nurses from around the world brought him into the world. New Scots have made an invaluable contribution to our NHS and our society as a whole. The resentment that people currently feel about asylum seekers is not because those people are racist but because people such as the Tories and the SNP have failed to make Scotland as prosperous as it could be, due to the beggar-thy-neighbour politics that they peddle.

I welcome people who are in need of refuge. I reject those who pretend to be welcoming but who do not build a welcoming nation that looks after its citizens. I reject the parody patriotism of John Swinney and the SNP and welcome the challenge to make the Scottish welcome real again. We can do that only by recognising our constituents' real concerns about the level of migration and its impact on their security, our public services and our housing supply.

People are angry about the lack of homes and the state of their homes, as they should be, but that anger should be directed at the SNP Government, which created the housing emergency; it cut the affordable housing budget and cut money to councils while spending £1 billion on a new Barlinnie prison, which should have cost a tenth of the price. [*Interruption.*] People in Scotland need a new direction. That is why a Scottish Labour Government would reform our planning laws and support councils to boost house building and end the housing emergency, on which the Government has failed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I discourage members from making interventions from a sedentary position.

16:58

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart):

This afternoon, we have heard of the failings of UK Home Office policies. However, that must not undermine our continuing moral and legal commitment to refugees and people who seek asylum. I am deeply concerned about some of the rhetoric that is being used across the UK, which should, of course, have no place in our society. No one should have to fear that they will be targeted just for being who they are. It is critical that every citizen feels safe and welcome in our communities.

As the cabinet secretary made clear in her opening remarks, we all have a responsibility to be mindful of the language that we use. Scotland's Parliament can choose to reject the deliberate use of divisive and inaccurate language, which does nothing to address community concerns or the impact of austerity. It has been disappointing to hear the echoing of divisive language in the chamber. However politely it is said, it is still inflammatory.

As the MSP for Glasgow Kelvin, I have the great honour to represent one of the most diverse constituencies in Scotland. I understand—of course I do—that people feel left behind after a decade of austerity and mismanagement, and Westminster is literally working against them. However, I have also had the pleasure of visiting many local grass-roots community groups that are bringing people together to share conversations, food and culture in order to get to know each other and learn that we have more in common than what divides us. New Scots have the same hopes and dreams, and their stories and laughter are weaving the very fabric of our rich, diverse and welcoming nation.

Patrick Harvie: Does the minister also recall the way in which a community in another part of Glasgow, Kenmure Street, rose up in opposition to the violence of the Home Office heavies and protected their asylum-seeking neighbours? Does she share my pride in that kind of concern about the immigration issues in our society?

Kaukab Stewart: I absolutely accept that the majority of people in Scotland will rise up and protect everyone in our communities. However, in direct contrast, some of the pressures that are arising from the UK's asylum system are a consequence of overly restrictive policies, such as the policy on the right to work. Such policies prevent people from contributing to our economy or supporting themselves, and they erode their skills by minimising opportunities for integration. I welcome the fact that that was also raised by Jamie Greene and James Dornan.

Sadly, and to our increasing frustration, asylum and immigration decisions are reserved to the UK Government. I welcome Paul Sweeney's support in working with us to pursue the right to work, safe regular routes and the expansion of visas. I am deeply concerned that asylum hotels are now being turned into targets of the far right. For the safety of all, we need the move-on period to be extended back to 56 days.

Craig Hoy: Will the member take an intervention?

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Paul Sweeney: Will the member take an intervention?

Kaukab Stewart: I am conscious of my time.

Furthermore, local authorities need to be properly funded for the work that they do when pressures are identified, as is the case in Glasgow City Council. We need the UK Government to recognise the impact on public services and to engage with us to develop those solutions.

I hope that the new Home Secretary and Home Office ministers will engage with the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities on how we can best deliver asylum and immigration systems that are based in compassion, respect and human rights for all.

17:02

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): The people of Scotland deserve honesty, and the truth is that the Scottish National Party has failed them. For years, the SNP has pushed an open-door immigration policy, so long as someone else is paying for it. It boasts of compassion, but it has washed its hands of responsibility. Where will asylum seekers live? Where will their children go to school? How will they see a general practitioner? Those are not abstract questions; they are real pressures on communities that are already stretched to breaking point.

However, the SNP blunders on while it ducks the consequences of its own mismanagement. That is not just incompetence; it is hypocrisy. The SNP can find money to send abroad, yet it cannot build homes here. It finds funds for foreign aid projects, but it cannot house Glasgow's homeless.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Sandesh Gulhane: Absolutely not.

The SNP points the finger at Westminster, while five senior officials at SNP-run Glasgow City Council walked away with more than £1 million

between them—signed off by themselves—with front-line services being slashed.

Furthermore, the Scottish Government has no plan to recover £36 million of benefits overpayments and fraud. That is not generosity; it is greed and misrule. The SNP has built a narrative, not a solution, and our communities are paying the price. Scotland and Scots are generous, but generosity must be matched with realism, and it is time that the SNP learned that lesson.

Douglas Lumsden reminded us that legal migration is good. Our country is great, and it is the way that it is today because of legal, controlled migration. We owe much to those who came to this country and called the United Kingdom home, just like my parents did. I am the son of immigrants who arrived, got a job, paid their taxes and integrated into British society. They never claimed a penny but worked hard every single day of their lives.

Ben Macpherson: I am a bit past the point in the speech, but I am keen to hear Mr Gulhane, who I appreciate is a significant contributor as a professional. Colleagues on his benches—particularly Mr Hoy—showed some humility about his party's mistakes and the damage that it has done to our country through the austerity agenda, which the Scottish Government has faced the consequences of. I wonder whether Mr Gulhane is going to refer to that.

Sandesh Gulhane: Ben Macpherson has forgotten that 18 years of SNP rule has led us to this point. The SNP is absolutely responsible for where we are today. I will say, with my colleagues, that the Conservative Government was wrong in the way we handled migration. We have many things to learn, and we will show contrition for that.

Craig Hoy told us that Susan Aitken, the SNP leader of Glasgow City Council, has admitted that there was a £66 million budget shortfall of the SNP's making. The SNP wants to virtue signal on someone else's dime.

Meghan Gallacher told us that 1,500 asylum seekers are being housed in hotels, which is almost a quarter of all those in the system. In fact, Glasgow is the asylum capital of the UK, with 65 per 10,000, and is attracting homeless refugees from other UK cities such as Belfast, Birmingham and London, but what does that mean in practice? What does that mean to the average person?

Through a lack of planning by this SNP Government, people cannot be seen by their GPs, and all public services are creaking and in danger of failing.

Kaukab Stewart: Mr Gulhane mentioned council leader Susan Aitken. Her direct quote was actually:

"It is not asylum seekers and refugees that are the cause of this problem. It is around policy and the lack of funding that flows to local government."

She went on to say that those are the direct consequences of decisions

"implemented elsewhere, specifically in Westminster."

Sandesh Gulhane: And who funds local authorities? It is Kaukab Stewart and her Government. Shirley-Anne Somerville had no idea how she would shape asylum or indeed pay for it. Mark Griffin condemns us for speaking about an issue that his constituents in Central Scotland are speaking about. It is an issue that directly affects my Glasgow constituents' access to public services, not international affairs. Jamie Greene is right: it is not the fault of the individual asylum seeker. It is the fault of this SNP Government trying to claim the moral high ground, but it does not know how to pay for its promises, and it is letting our public services crumble.

Scots are compassionate people, but compassion without capacity is chaos, and chaos is exactly what this SNP has delivered: a housing emergency, spiralling NHS waiting lists, overcrowded schools and financially broken councils. Scottish families are waiting longer, paying more and getting less under this SNP's undeniable legacy. Controlled, fair and balanced immigration must be the principle, as Ben Macpherson articulated.

Scots deserve homes, jobs and services before SNP vanity projects and virtue signalling. The SNP's open-door, pass-the-bill-to-Westminster policy has failed. Our motion puts Scots first and demands fairness and realism. Scotland cannot afford the SNP's excuses any longer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the impact of accommodating asylum seekers on Scottish local government. To allow front benches to change, there will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business.

Bus Services (No 2) Bill

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-18771, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on the legislative consent motion on the Bus Services (No 2) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation. I would be grateful if members who wish to speak in the debate were to press their request-to-speak buttons now.

17:09

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): This afternoon, we are debating a motion on the United Kingdom Government's Bus Services (No 2) Bill, and I appreciate the Parliamentary Bureau and the Parliament agreeing to schedule the debate.

Buses have a key part to play in cutting emissions from transport and contributing to meeting our world-leading climate change ambitions, which the Scottish Government is supporting by investing in bus priority infrastructure and encouraging a shift to zero-emission buses.

The UK Government's Bus Services (No 2) Bill was introduced to the House of Lords in December 2024. Its intention is to empower local leaders in England to choose the bus operating model that works for their local area. The Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 already provides options for local authorities in Scotland to introduce franchising, local authority-run services and formal partnerships.

The bill contains a range of measures, most of which will apply in England only. However, some measures in the bill will apply to, or have some effect on, Scotland. As the provisions relating to those measures are concerned with reserved matters, the bill did not engage the legislative consent process when it was introduced.

The bill includes, among other things, powers to prevent the registration of new non-zero-emission buses on English local bus services from a date no earlier than 2030. The Conservative UK Government had previously consulted on proposals for a UK-wide phased ban on the purchase of new diesel buses. The new UK Labour Government moved away from a UK-wide approach, with the provisions of the bill applying to England only at introduction.

Emissions from bus services are included in the Scottish Government's statutory commitment to achieve net zero by 2045, and the Scottish Government has been working with the industry to meet our ambitions for a fully decarbonised future for Scotland's bus fleet. We are making good

progress, with currently 14 per cent of all public service buses in Scotland being zero-emission buses, in comparison with a Great Britain average of 8.1 per cent. That has been achieved in partnership with the bus sector, and support has been provided through the Scottish zero-emission bus challenge—ScotZEB—fund and its predecessor, the Scottish ultra-low-emission bus scheme.

Now, legislation is required to build on that progress, maximise the benefits of the transition to a zero-emission bus fleet and provide market certainty for bus manufacturers. The UK Bus Services (No 2) Bill is currently in its final stage, the report stage having taken longer than anticipated to progress through the UK Parliament. We have therefore taken the opportunity to extend the zero-emission vehicle provisions to Scotland to support the Scottish Government's policy direction on phasing out petrol and diesel buses.

We had been planning our own legislation to similar effect, but with limited time remaining in the current parliamentary session, it would have meant legislating early in the next session, so the opportunity to amend the UK bill is helpful. The timing of the UK Government bill means that the motion before us has had to come directly to the chamber, as the UK Parliament will be voting on the bill imminently.

As members will be aware, this is the final term of the current parliamentary session, and there are many other pieces of legislation to be progressed. We have sought this amendment to the UK legislation because there is a need for clearer direction on future decarbonisation of the bus network, as well as demand for zero-emission buses. Indeed, the Scottish Government has previously called for the UK Government to ban the import and sale of new non-zero-emission buses, and the amendment provides a vehicle to enable that sooner than our own legislation would.

The motion before the Parliament covers the clauses that would be introduced by the amendment, which—as is set out in the legislative consent memorandum—fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of Scottish ministers.

The Scottish Government recommends consent to the new clause that would be introduced by amendment NC38, on the use of zero-emission vehicles for local services in Scotland. The clause will prohibit the use of new non-zero emission buses on local bus services in Scotland—that is, those that are registered under section 6 of the Transport Act 1985—as well as on franchised services, from a date that will be set in regulations by Scottish ministers. That date cannot be before 2030.

The clause will also provide Scottish ministers with the ability to make provisions about documents that may be relied on to determine what is included in the tailpipe emissions from a vehicle and specify descriptions of vehicles and local services to which the prohibition will not apply, allowing Scottish ministers to implement legislation in a way that reflects the Scottish context.

I welcome the collaborative engagement between the Scottish Government and the UK Government on the development of the amendment. I am also conscious that tabling the amendment late in the bill's Westminster passage has compressed the time that is available for the Scottish Parliament to consider the motion, and I am grateful for members' consideration of it this afternoon.

The regulations that are required to set the date on which the prohibition will take effect must be made using the affirmative resolution procedure, ensuring accountability to the Scottish Parliament. Therefore, members will be provided with future opportunities to fully engage in the details of the arrangements. Prior to the implementation of any legislation, detailed consultation will take place with affected stakeholders, including bus operators, bus manufacturers and local transport authorities.

Working in collaboration with local authorities and bus operators is crucial to achieving our emission goals and creating a legacy for the future, providing much-needed certainty to operators of bus services and the manufacturers of vehicles. The powers that will be introduced by the amendment to the Bus Services (No 2) Bill will reinforce the Scottish Government's climate change ambitions by setting out the timeline for restricting the use of non-zero emission buses on local bus services from a date that is no earlier than 2030. I ask the Parliament to support the motion in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees, in relation to the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 17 December 2024, and subsequently amended, that the five clauses affecting registration of zero-emission vehicles for local services in Scotland, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

17:15

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the Cabinet Secretary for Transport for her explanation of the legislative consent motion, as I now know a little more about it. It is a pity that there has not been time for the legislative consent memorandum to be considered at

committee so that we could understand more about it. The Parliament has standing orders for a reason: they are there so that we can have good governance and so that committees can review and report on legislative consent motions. Committees produce such reports so that members who are not on the committee can learn what changes are being proposed and give their consent to them. There has been no report on this legislative consent memorandum and it has not been reviewed by a committee. We have not examined what the legislation will mean or asked bus operators for their views. We do not know whether the legislation will have any unintended consequences. It might be a simple legislative consent motion with no, or limited, impact, but we have had very little description of it, so it is difficult to take a view.

I am not blaming the cabinet secretary or the devolved Government for the compressed timescale. From what I can tell, the UK Government has set the timelines. I hope that the Cabinet Secretary for Transport will write to the UK Government to remind it of the Parliament's standing orders, expressing her concern that the timescales that were given for consent were not realistic. The Parliament and its members have a clear role to play in creating laws, and we should not be sidetracked by any Government, regardless of its colour. That is why we will not support the motion.

17:17

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The legislative consent motion is a welcome sign of co-operation between the Scottish and UK Governments. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport clearly set out the rationale for the expedited procedure. Ultimately, it is crucial that we decarbonise our bus fleet and that we work collaboratively to do so. Therefore, it is important that we give certainty to the industry by agreeing to the same timetable and allowing further cross-Government co-operation.

In the context of the threat to the future of the only major bus manufacturer in Scotland, Alexander Dennis, it is important that we expedite fleet renewals, which is a key component in supporting a demand signal to industry. It is also important to note that the recent ScotZEB scheme has not been efficient in converting the demand signal into contracts for Scottish manufacturers. Of the 523 electric buses that have been funded through the Scottish Government's subsidy scheme so far, more than two thirds—340 buses—have been manufactured overseas, with 287 made in China by Yutong Bus. Only 162 buses have been manufactured in Scotland by Alexander Dennis and EVM UK.

From written questions that I have lodged, it is particularly concerning to learn that the Government does not collect data on where buses are manufactured, so its ability to calculate social value is limited. Social value weighting in public procurement in Scotland is not fit for purpose, and it needs to be bolstered to support critical manufacturers in Scotland, such as Alexander Dennis, instead of subsidising foreign competitors that have a clear industrial strategy to dominate the electric vehicle market and put Scottish industry out of business. It is clear that the Scottish Government needs to be cognisant of that and work further with the UK Government to extend to Scotland reforms that are being made to public procurement provisions in the rest of the UK, embedding social value at the heart of the public procurement process, so that Scottish manufacturers are supported to do so.

It is important to recognise the wider provisions in the Bus Services (No 2) Bill that will allow English bus franchising to further accelerate ahead of the pace in Scotland, which is already far behind. For example, the UK Government has already clarified and streamlined the guidance to make it easier, quicker and cheaper for local authorities to intervene on bus route development, and this new bus services bill will go further to reduce the barriers to franchising, including costs. Alongside that, the Government is building capacity within the Department for Transport to provide tangible on-the-ground support to those local transport authorities that wish to pursue franchising. That is exactly what we need in Scotland to accelerate the process with Strathclyde Partnership for Transport and other transport authorities. However, unfortunately, the Scottish Government has not been anywhere near vigorous or urgent enough in its actions.

I would like the cabinet secretary to respond to that and say how we can further support local transport authorities in Scotland to bring forward bus franchising at pace. I would be willing to support the cabinet secretary in the effort to build that collaborative approach to improve our bus services across Scotland, drive up modal shift and drive demand into Scottish manufacturing, which is a virtuous cycle. Let us seize this opportunity and make the most of it.

17:20

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I want to make a couple of brief comments in relation to the LCM. At the outset, it is deeply disappointing that the LCM has come to the chamber without any proper scrutiny at all. It appears that these expedited LCMs are becoming part of routine practice. Every time that this happens, it undermines the Parliament while

strengthening the executive power of the Scottish Government and the Westminster Government.

From what I understand, Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill wants to simplify the bus franchising process in England; his bill now includes a provision to end the procurement of fossil fuel buses no earlier than 2030; he wishes to extend this power to Scottish ministers; and the Scottish Government has worked with the UK Government on an amendment to achieve that.

That is all fine, and I agree with many of the comments about bus policy that were just made by Paul Sweeney. However, I cannot genuinely reflect in this debate on the views of Scottish bus operators and manufacturers about the provision, and I cannot say in this debate whether 2030 is too late or too soon. The reason why I cannot do that is that there has been zero scrutiny by a committee. I also cannot reflect on whether there were other opportunities through this UK bill to, for example, expedite the simplification of the bus franchising process in Scotland or any other related issues—again, because there has been no scrutiny.

The Scottish Greens will be voting for this LCM, but I have to say that patience is wearing very thin. I hope that the Conveners Group can discuss this recurring issue of expedited LCMs, and that the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee can continue to reflect on the continued unravelling of parliamentary protocol in this Parliament.

17:22

Fiona Hyslop: I thank members across the chamber for their contributions to the debate and, indeed, their forbearance.

On the issue of good governance, I have been in this Parliament since 1999 and I served as deputy convener of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, and anyone who knows me will know that I take our processes very seriously indeed.

I am engaging in the process around this expedited LCM only because I feel that it is important to do so at this time. We could have delayed the process and waited until the new parliamentary session, but that would have taken time, and there is a requirement now to provide confidence to bus manufacturers on our policy direction and to give them reassurance with regard to when the procurement of fossil fuel buses will end. The bill says that that will happen no earlier than 2030. Mark Ruskell makes a point about whether it should be before that, but I think that that provision allows us time to make the preparations. Importantly, regulations will come before Parliament through the affirmative

procedure, and that will allow the necessary scrutiny that everybody wants.

The Confederation of Passenger Transport has been generally supportive of similar proposals in England, stating in its Commons stage briefing on the bill that the industry supports the transition away from fossil fuel and continues to make progress in that regard. Of course, the progress that we are making in Scotland is in advance of that in the rest of the UK, with 14 per cent of our public service buses in Scotland being zero-emission vehicles, compared with a Great Britain average of 8.1 per cent. However, there is more to be done, and I have spoken with local authorities about their positions.

I would point out to Paul Sweeney a very important distinction: the Scottish Government is not a procurer of buses. We do not order buses. It is the operators who order buses, and we provide support to them. On that point, at the bus manufacturing panel that I attended, I spoke with the UK Government about the Procurement Act 2023, which reflects a lot of the principles that we implemented in 2016 and other measures that we have taken.

On the investment that we have put in, we have put £150 million of capital into zero-emission buses. That intervention is to provide certainty and confidence in future demand, and ensure that all areas of Scotland are included so that that transition can take place.

I say to Douglas Lumsden that this has been done in co-operation with the UK Government. We saw the opportunity. At one point, the UK bill process would have finished earlier, but our recesses are different from the UK Government's recesses, so it has taken a bit of co-ordination. I particularly thank Simon Lightwood, the UK minister, who has been very helpful in that co-operation. It is a good example of co-operation when we want to do something collectively with the UK Government. I would like to see more of that rather than less, which would be for the benefit of all.

Douglas Lumsden: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Fiona Hyslop: I really have to finish.

We are encouraged that the UK Government has taken action to legislate on this method. The amendment reinforces the Scottish Government's climate change ambitions by setting out that timeline and restricting the use of new non-zero-emission buses from a date—I emphasise—no earlier than 2030.

The amendment provides the framework for the prohibition of those buses, and the detail of implementation will be delivered through

regulations. Those regulations will come to the Parliament and there will be a chance to scrutinise and consult on them. The consultation by the Scottish Government is already taking place, but the Parliament will also have that opportunity.

I once again ask members of the Parliament to support the motion.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the motion on legislative consent for the Bus Services (No 2) Bill, which is UK legislation.

Business Motion

17:26

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-18788, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 16 September 2025

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| 2.00 pm | Time for Reflection |
| <i>followed by</i> | Parliamentary Bureau Motions |
| <i>followed by</i> | Topical Questions (if selected) |
| <i>followed by</i> | Stage 3 Proceedings: Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill |
| <i>followed by</i> | Committee Announcements |
| <i>followed by</i> | Business Motions |
| <i>followed by</i> | Parliamentary Bureau Motions |
| 10.00 pm | Decision Time |
| <i>followed by</i> | Members' Business |

Wednesday 17 September 2025

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| 2.00 pm | Parliamentary Bureau Motions |
| 2.00 pm | Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs |
| <i>followed by</i> | Stage 1 Debate: Leases (Automatic Continuation etc.) (Scotland) Bill |
| <i>followed by</i> | Business Motions |
| <i>followed by</i> | Parliamentary Bureau Motions |
| <i>followed by</i> | Approval of SSIs (if required) |
| 5.00 pm | Decision Time |
| <i>followed by</i> | Members' Business |

Thursday 18 September 2025

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| 11.40 am | Parliamentary Bureau Motions |
| 11.40 am | General Questions |
| 12.00 pm | First Minister's Questions |
| <i>followed by</i> | Members' Business |
| 2.00 pm | Parliamentary Bureau Motions |
| 2.00 pm | Motion of Condolence |
| <i>followed by</i> | Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills |
| <i>followed by</i> | Ministerial Statement: Improving Care on the Isle of Skye |
| <i>followed by</i> | SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee Debate: SPCB |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| | Supported Bodies Landscape Review | same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[<i>Jamie Hepburn</i>] |
| <i>followed by</i> | Business Motions | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Parliamentary Bureau Motions | <i>Motion agreed to.</i> |
| 5.20 pm | Decision Time | |
| Tuesday 23 September 2025 | | |
| 2.00 pm | Time for Reflection | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Parliamentary Bureau Motions | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Topical Questions (if selected) | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Stage 3 Proceedings: Housing (Scotland) Bill | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Committee Announcements | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Business Motions | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Parliamentary Bureau Motions | |
| 10.00 pm | Decision Time | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Members' Business | |
| Wednesday 24 September 2025 | | |
| 2.00 pm | Parliamentary Bureau Motions | |
| 2.00 pm | Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic; Finance and Local Government | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Stage 3 Debate: Housing (Scotland) Bill | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Scottish Government Business | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Business Motions | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Parliamentary Bureau Motions | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Approval of SSIs (if required) | |
| 5.00 pm | Decision Time | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Members' Business | |
| Thursday 25 September 2025 | | |
| 11.40 am | Parliamentary Bureau Motions | |
| 11.40 am | General Questions | |
| 12.00 pm | First Minister's Questions | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Members' Business | |
| 2.30 pm | Parliamentary Bureau Motions | |
| 2.30 pm | Portfolio Questions: Climate Action and Energy, and Transport | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Stage 1 Debate: Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Financial Resolution: Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Business Motions | |
| <i>followed by</i> | Parliamentary Bureau Motions | |
| 5.00 pm | Decision Time | |

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 15 September 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

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:26

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S6M-18789 and S6M-18790, on committee substitutes.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Jackie Dunbar be appointed to replace Stephanie Callaghan as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Keith Brown be appointed to replace Stephanie Callaghan as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Public Audit Committee; and

Alasdair Allan be appointed to replace Jackie Dunbar as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Foysol Choudhury be appointed to replace Rhoda Grant as the Scottish Labour Party substitute on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

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

Social Security (Residence and Presence Requirements) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [Draft]

17:27

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-18785, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument. I ask Shirley-Anne Somerville to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament recommends that the Social Security (Residence and Presence Requirements) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.—[*Shirley-Anne Somerville*]

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

Motion without Notice

17:27

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 11.2.4 of standing orders, that decision time be brought forward to now. I invite the Minister for Parliamentary Business to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 5.27 pm.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:27

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are nine questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Ivan McKee is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Michael Marra will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-18779.3, in the name of Ivan McKee, which seeks to amend motion S6M-18779, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on improving Scotland's finances, 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.

17:28

Meeting suspended.

17:30

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S6M-18779.3, in the name of Ivan McKee. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Sweeney. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the voting system. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Dornan. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not connect to the voting system. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Boyack. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

Foysol Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am having connection issues, too. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Choudhury. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

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, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (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)
 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)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 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)
 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)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 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)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-18779.3, in the name of Ivan McKee, is: For 67, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The amendment in the name of Michael Marra falls.

The next question is, that motion S6M-18779, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on improving Scotland's finances, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

James Dornan: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. This time, I will say it more quietly. I could not connect to the voting system. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Dornan. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My device would not connect to the voting system. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Burnett. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

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, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (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)
 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)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Mairi (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 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)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 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)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskeil, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-18779, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on improving Scotland's finances, as amended, is: For 66, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes that Scotland's public services have been hampered by the UK Conservative administration's austerity budgets; recognises the deep harm that the UK Conservative administration has done to the economies of the UK and Scotland with Brexit, and that this has reduced Scotland's public spending by £2.3 billion annually; further recognises that this loss of public finances impacts on Scotland's vital public services, including Scotland's NHS, support for a just transition, and skills training; notes that a public sector reform programme is underway with the aim of saving public money while protecting the delivery of frontline services; believes that the UK Labour administration should either explore the application of wealth taxation or devolve the necessary powers to Scotland so that the Scottish Parliament can do so; welcomes that the Scottish Government has already announced plans for a three-year spending review to be published alongside the upcoming Budget, and believes that it is only with the powers of independence and full control of the fiscal levers that a truly sustainable and fair system can be developed to support efficiency and public service delivery.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Mark Griffin will fall.

The next question is, that amendment S6M-18780.3, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, which seeks to amend motion S6M-18780, in the name of Craig Hoy, on the impact of accommodating asylum seekers on Scottish local government, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect. I would have voted no.

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

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)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (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)
 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)
 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) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Mairi (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 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)
 Russel, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (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) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (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)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-18780.3, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, is: For 72, Against 45, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The amendment in the name of Mark Griffin falls.

The next question is, that motion S6M-18780, in the name of Craig Hoy, on the impact of accommodating asylum seekers on Scottish local government, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

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

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)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (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)
 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)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Máiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 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)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (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)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-18780, in the name of Craig Hoy, on the impact of accommodating asylum seekers on Scottish local government, as amended, is: For 91, Against 27, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament reaffirms individuals' rights to asylum under international law, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol; upholds the European Convention on Human Rights, and highlights Scotland's

place in the world as a welcoming nation to those fleeing persecution, conflict or danger.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-18771, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on the Bus Services (No 2) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Richard Leonard: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to connect to the voting system once again. I would have voted yes.

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

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I was unable to connect to the voting system. I would have voted yes.

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

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)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (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)
 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)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Máiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 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)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Michael Marra]
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD) [Proxy vote cast by Willie Rennie]
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (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)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-18771, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, on the Bus Services (No 2) Bill, which is UK legislation, is: For 93, Against 0, Abstentions 27.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees, in relation to the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, introduced in the House of Lords on 17 December 2024, and subsequently amended, that the five clauses affecting registration of zero-emission vehicles for local services in Scotland, so far as these matters fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament and alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

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

As no member has objected, the question is, that motions S6M-18789 and S6M-18790, on committee substitutes, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that—

Jackie Dunbar be appointed to replace Stephanie Callaghan as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee;

Keith Brown be appointed to replace Stephanie Callaghan as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Public Audit Committee; and

Alasdair Allan be appointed to replace Jackie Dunbar as the Scottish National Party substitute on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that Foysol Choudhury be appointed to replace Rhoda Grant as the Scottish Labour Party substitute on the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-18785, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on the approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recommends that the Social Security (Residence and Presence Requirements) (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2025 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Bladder Cancer Diagnosis

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-18138, in the name of Stuart McMillan, on improving bladder cancer diagnosis in Scotland. The motion will be debated without any question being put.

I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons, and I call Stuart McMillan to open the debate.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the view that it is important to improve bladder cancer diagnosis, care and treatment in Scotland, in light of reports that outcomes for patients lag behind outcomes for bladder cancer patients elsewhere in the UK and in Europe; further notes the view that there is a need to improve the availability of staff and resources to improve the standard of care, and to support all those involved in diagnosing and treating bladder cancer in Scotland, including in the Greenock and Inverclyde constituency, such as nurses, GPs, urological surgeons, oncologists and other specialised healthcare professionals; acknowledges what it sees as the current dedication, tirelessness and passion shown by those individuals and organisations, such as Fight Bladder Cancer, that work to ensure that the best care is provided for this potentially life-changing disease, and notes the calls for all organisations to play their part in ensuring that the general public has awareness of this cancer and its symptoms so that bladder cancer can be caught and treated as early as possible.

17:44

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank colleagues from across the chamber for signing the motion so that we can have the debate. I also commend the work of Fight Bladder Cancer—a relatively small organisation that is dedicated to raising awareness of the symptoms of bladder cancer and the support that is available for those who are diagnosed with it. I first became aware of Fight Bladder Cancer shortly after the 2021 election, and I was delighted to host its first parliamentary reception in February 2023. That followed the organisation's officially becoming registered as a charity in Scotland in July 2022.

As I highlighted during my opening remarks at that event, Fight Bladder Cancer's work was first brought to my attention by one of my constituents, Laura MacKenzie, as she is an ambassador for the charity. She highlighted the charity's four main objectives: to support patients and their family and friends, and all people who are affected by bladder cancer; to raise awareness about the causes and symptoms of bladder cancer so that it can be caught early; to campaign for and support research into bladder cancer; and to affect policy at the highest levels to bring about change in bladder cancer diagnosis and treatment.

According to Fight Bladder Cancer, nearly 1,700 people are diagnosed with bladder cancer each year in Scotland, and the majority of them are over 60 years old. Worryingly, around 50 per cent of bladder cancer cases are preventable. That tells a huge story about the work that is required to highlight the symptoms of bladder cancer, so I want to take the opportunity to list them in order to raise awareness.

The signs and symptoms to look out for include blood in your wee, which is the most common symptom of bladder cancer; urinary infections that do not respond to antibiotics; pain when weeing; needing to wee frequently; tiredness; abdominal pain; weight loss; incontinence, and lower back pain.

According to Fight Bladder Cancer's website, very few people will experience all those symptoms, but that is why people should talk to their general practitioner if they experience any of them. Other, less serious conditions can have the same symptoms, too, but—again—that is why it is critical that people do not delay, and speak to their GP.

My motion highlights the need to improve outcomes for patients with bladder cancer. That is because, according to Cancer Research UK, bladder cancer is the fifth most common cancer in the United Kingdom after breast cancer, prostate cancer, lung cancer and bowel cancer.

A report from Fight Bladder Cancer notes that:

"survival for patients with bladder cancer has not improved over the last three decades, with certain groups affected by bladder cancer, including women and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, experiencing poorer outcomes".

The report highlights other research, which states that:

"Bladder cancer patients experience a high rate of recurrence, long and invasive surveillance and expensive treatment".

It notes that:

"Patients also report worse overall experiences than most other common cancers".

Not only is that not good enough for patients; it is also costly for our national health service, as the report notes:

"Bladder cancer has the highest cost of any cancer, when considered on a per-patient basis".

I believe that every member in the chamber agrees that prevention is better than the cure—to be frank, that could be said for anything. That approach helps to ensure patients do not endure more invasive and extensive treatment, which is also more expensive to deliver.

It is imperative, then, that we consider how we can support our NHS to better diagnose bladder cancer. A key part of that—as I have indicated—is making sure that we raise awareness of the key signs and symptoms. I cannot stress that point enough, and I refer to the statistic I mentioned previously: half of bladder cancer cases are preventable. Part of that preventative work is about considering how we can maintain healthier lifestyles, and Fight Bladder Cancer has put together a range of resources to help with that.

According to NHS Inform,

"Most cases of bladder cancer appear to be caused by exposure to harmful substances, which lead to abnormal changes in the bladder's cells over many years.

Tobacco smoke is a common cause and it's estimated that half of all cases of bladder cancer are caused by smoking."

It is almost 20 years since Scotland introduced the smoking ban, which was a key public health policy that has helped massively in shifting public attitudes towards smoking. Scotland led the way on that policy in the UK, and I believe that we are ambitious enough to want to lead the way on bladder cancer.

In closing, I draw attention to Fight Bladder Cancer's white paper from May 2024. The document includes a range of recommendations that are UK-wide, but there are takeaways for us in Scotland to consider. While there is no one policy or action that will deliver all the changes that are required, there are key areas where we need to effect change.

First, we need to establish an exemplar pathway for bladder cancer care to help to deliver quicker referral and diagnosis for those with suspected bladder cancer.

Secondly, strengthening the bladder cancer healthcare workforce will help to achieve better outcomes for bladder cancer patients. We know that that is a key recommendation across several areas in our health service, and that Scotland is not alone in facing staffing challenges.

Thirdly, we can boost awareness, support and participation throughout the bladder cancer pathway for patients, carers and families, and ensure that patients are empowered to make informed decisions about their care. We know that taking a holistic approach to healthcare and keeping patients informed at all stages of their treatment journey is absolutely vital. Again, that could be said about any aspect of healthcare. It helps to keep patients invested in how they can make small lifestyle changes to support their treatment, and it helps to safeguard their mental wellbeing during what will be a very difficult time.

I once again thank members for supporting the motion, and I thank those who will be speaking in debate. I also thank Fight Bladder Cancer for its efforts to improve outcomes for bladder cancer patients in Scotland, and I look forward to continuing to work with the organisation to help to deliver that in Scotland.

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

17:51

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): First, I thank Stuart McMillan for giving us the opportunity to discuss bladder cancer. Mr McMillan has highlighted the topic very well, and I thank him for his insight and information.

With more than 1,500 cases of bladder cancer across Scotland every year, it is a health issue that impacts on every corner of Scotland, including people in my South Scotland region. I am pleased that we can reach out to the wider public and raise awareness today of the impact of bladder cancer. Reaching people is crucial for early detection. As with other health conditions, as Stuart McMillan highlighted, the earlier that symptoms are reported and diagnosis takes place, the better the chances for treatment to be effective, and the better the prognosis for patients.

The current cancer strategy adopted by the Scottish Government puts early diagnosis and treatment at its heart. I know that, in turn, the health professionals across our NHS feel the same. We should equip health professionals, in particular those in primary care settings, with the training and support that enables them to work with patients in identifying symptoms early and, if a diagnosis is made, enable expedited access to the cancer care pathways.

As I said, however, ensuring that the wider public knows what to look for to help the professionals make a diagnosis is crucial. This has been highlighted, but it is worth repeating: the earliest, and often the first, symptom of bladder cancer is blood in the urine, or haematuria. Blood in the urine can change the colour of the urine to pink, red or brown, so that is the first sign to focus on and raise awareness of.

Other early symptoms can include changes in urination habits such as frequent or sudden urges to urinate, or pain or a burning sensation when urinating. Pelvic or back pain and frequent urinary tract infections may also occur. I know that our NHS works closely with external groups such as Fight Bladder Cancer to raise awareness in the wider community, and I urge NHS boards across the country to continue and elevate that work to improve the wider public's awareness of bladder cancer and its symptoms.

Anyone who is watching the debate should spend a few minutes on the Fight Bladder Cancer website, reading the information for themselves and even sharing the short video on the social media networks; I shared it on mine earlier today, ahead of the debate.

I was a nurse before I entered the Parliament, and I saw at first hand the toll that cancer takes on those who are living with it and on the families around them. Over the years, we have seen how diagnosis and treatment have improved as the medical technology has advanced, but too many lives are still cut short or made harder through cancer that cannot be treated fully.

I pay tribute to the amazing staff across the NHS, including in NHS Dumfries and Galloway, who are helping to tackle bladder cancer. It can be harder to operate services in a more rural setting, with all the challenges that that presents, but I know from my own experience, and from the experience of my constituents across D and G, that staff work tirelessly to support their patients.

I make one small request of the Scottish Government: to review the current arrangements that place Dumfries and Galloway in the South East Scotland Cancer Network. Our transport and other links connect to Strathclyde rather than the Lothians—I have raised that issue on many occasions on behalf of constituents. There may be good reasons for that decision, which was taken more than 20 years ago, but the practical effect for people in the south-west is a lot of extra travel to access secondary treatment that could otherwise be provided as part of the West of Scotland Cancer Network.

I commend Stuart McMillan once again for lodging the motion and for giving us the opportunity to speak about the topic this evening.

17:54

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a practising NHS GP.

I thank Stuart McMillan for bringing this underknown cancer to debate. Bladder cancer is the 11th most common cancer in the UK, with around 60 people diagnosed every day according to Action Bladder Cancer UK, and yet outcomes remain uneven. In Scotland, five-year survival continues to fall short compared with the rest of the UK, and with much of Europe. That is not because our clinicians lack dedication or expertise, but because too many cases are diagnosed too late, and because services across the country are stretched.

So, what can we do? The first and most important step is to raise awareness. We have

heard already that blood in the urine—even once—must never be ignored. If you have persistent urinary symptoms or, basically, if anything changes as you go to the toilet, you want to seek some help. If people recognise those warning signs, getting early help can absolutely help against cancer. The one thing that I would love to say—and I think that all of us across the chamber would agree with this—is: if things change in your body, or you find that that change does not go away, come and speak to a GP. We are a friendly bunch, and we will be happy to hear what is going on.

But awareness on its own cannot close the gap. Diagnosis and treatment depend on having the right staff, equipment and capacity in place. Across Scotland, GPs, nurses, urological surgeons, oncologists, radiologists and many others provide extraordinary care under great pressure.

There is some good reason for optimism. At the University of Dundee, researchers have developed a light-based test that detects certain chemicals in the urine. In trials, that test was accurate more than eight times out of 10, and it requires only a urine sample. At the University of Edinburgh, researchers are exploring ways to personalise bladder cancer treatment by studying biological markers and advancing imaging features, and they are working to match therapies more closely to each patient's individual tumour. Elsewhere, a study funded by Cancer Research UK, with the University of Birmingham and industry partners, has shown that a new urine-based test can detect tumour DNA in 87 per cent of cases. That technology could reduce the need for repeated invasive camera examinations, which are often uncomfortable. Such innovation, whether at Dundee or Edinburgh university, or through partnership across the rest of the UK, is already changing what is possible.

Artificial intelligence is another emerging tool. AI systems are showing promise in reading scans and analysing pathology results. With appropriate safeguard, those tools could help clinicians identify high-risk patients more quickly, and prevent any delays. Scotland is well placed to take and play a leading role in integrating AI responsibly into clinical practice.

Alongside clinical advances, we must also recognise the vital role that charities and patient organisations play. For example, Fight Bladder Cancer supports patients and families, raises awareness, and ensures that the patient voice is heard in policy and research. That work reminds us that progress is about not only survival stats, but dignity, reassurance and hope.

The priorities, then, are clear. We need stronger public awareness of symptoms, sustained

investment in staff and resources across primary and secondary care, commitment to research and innovation, and deeper partnership with charities and communities.

By bringing all those elements together, we can change the story of not only bladder cancer but all cancers in Scotland: we can improve survival, reduce variation in care and ensure that every patient has the best possible chance. That is not about adding to clinical workload, but about building capacity, sharing knowledge and empowering patients. With focus and collaboration, Scotland can move from lagging behind to leading the way in bladder cancer care.

17:58

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Stuart McMillan for bringing the debate to the chamber. I also thank him for his contribution in raising so many of the issues that people with bladder cancer face.

Having listened to the debate, I also thank Emma Harper for her contribution about her nursing experience and Dr Gulhane for his contribution about some of the other technologies that we can use. All the speeches so far have been really helpful. It is important that the Parliament considers this cancer, given that we have such poor outcomes in Scotland. Mr McMillan described the reasons for that well, so I will not set them out again. Raising awareness of cancers such as bladder cancer is pivotal to ensuring early diagnosis and improving prognosis.

In my short contribution, I want to raise the issue of health inequalities. The current health inequalities in Scotland are significant. Unfortunately—as, I know, we all agree—they are worsening, particularly in relation to healthy life expectancy, with stark differences between the most and least deprived areas. We all want to make a difference to that.

Health inequalities exist across a range of health conditions, including coronary heart disease, diabetes, chronic pain, poor oral health and—crucially, given tonight's debate—cancers. We have to make sure that communities come forward for screening in a timely manner. The latest public health figures show that the incidence of all cancers was 24 per cent greater in the most deprived areas than in the least deprived and that death rates were 78 per cent higher. We take that very seriously. I am sure that the minister will remark on it, as I know that she works hard to ensure that we have strategies to address it.

Screening and early detection are incredibly important if we are to turn around cancer outcomes, particularly for bladder cancer, as we have heard tonight. People do not always come

forward for tests and screening, but screening gives us the opportunity to make sure that our most vulnerable constituents access important services. At times, the Government has run early cancer detection campaigns, which I support. In my research for the debate, I was particularly pleased to read about the STV and Fight Bladder Cancer blood in pee campaign, which ran in Scotland in December 2024 to raise awareness of bladder cancer. That was one of the few things that I could find specifically on bladder cancer.

Emma Harper: The STV campaign was excellent but, for folk such as me, who live in the southern part of Scotland that does not get STV, do you think that it would be a good idea to lobby ITV Border to mimic that campaign?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Carol Mochan: That is a fantastic suggestion. Emma Harper is right to say that, if a good campaign is working, we should get it out across Scotland. We should all put our forces behind that, through any channel that we can use.

The campaign that I mentioned talked in its notes about lower-income communities. It tried to encourage people from all backgrounds to access their GP immediately if they had any problems. The initiative aimed to combat late diagnosis, which, as we have heard, is a major contributor to the poorer outcomes for bladder cancer in Scotland. By encouraging people in lower-income areas, in particular, we can get better outcomes.

Again, I thank Stuart McMillan for bringing the issue to the chamber. I acknowledge the great speeches from other members, and I know that the minister will also give us a good speech. I hope that, through having the debate, we have started to play our part in turning the issue around. I thank all the health staff, charities and affected families for the information that they share, which allows us to debate in this way.

18:03

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): I, too, thank my colleague Stuart McMillan for the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to close the debate on improving bladder cancer diagnosis in Scotland. I record my appreciation of Mr McMillan's hard work and his continued engagement and awareness raising, especially in relation to less well-known cancers such as bladder cancer. As Carol Mochan said, the debate has been very helpful in that respect, and I thank all my colleagues.

On behalf of the Scottish Government, I recognise all those who are affected by bladder cancer. Adjusting to a cancer diagnosis is never

easy, and I understand the impact that it has not just on the individuals who are diagnosed but on their loved ones. I give recognition and thanks to third sector organisations and groups such as Fight Bladder Cancer that provide invaluable support, help and information to people. As others have noted, the Fight Bladder Cancer website is a fantastic resource for anyone who is affected by bladder cancer. The group is part of the Scottish cancer coalition, and I thank it for the support that it gives the Scottish Government, which is very much appreciated. My conversation with the charity when it was in the Parliament was extremely helpful and informative. As Emma Harper and others have highlighted, and as I have noted, the Fight Bladder Cancer website is an incredibly important resource.

Cancer remains a national priority for the Scottish Government and across NHS Scotland, which is why we published our "Cancer Strategy for Scotland 2023-2033", along with the initial three-year cancer action plan. Our strategic aim is to improve cancer survival rates and to provide excellent, equitably accessible care. The strategy and plan take a comprehensive approach to improving patient pathways, from prevention and diagnosis through to treatment and post-treatment care.

We have also developed the early cancer diagnosis vision to reduce later-stage disease by 18 percentage points by 2033. As we have heard today, raising awareness of bladder cancer and its symptoms is crucial in detecting the cancer early and improving outcomes for those who are diagnosed. I thank Stuart McMillan, Emma Harper and Sandesh Gulhane for clearly outlining the symptoms.

The Scottish Government continues to invest in a range of programmes to detect cancer earlier, because we understand that the earlier cancer is detected, the easier it is to treat. That includes content on our Get Checked Early website, which highlights symptoms and advises when to seek professional advice, including for bladder cancer.

The roll-out of our rapid cancer diagnostic services is a useful addition to how cancer can be diagnosed in Scotland. They provide primary care with access to a new, fast-track diagnostic pathway for patients with non-specific symptoms that raise suspicion of cancer, such as weight loss and fatigue, which can feature for those with bladder cancer. Scotland's rapid cancer diagnostic services are ruling cancer in or out faster for those with non-specific symptoms, which supports our earlier cancer diagnosis vision. Additionally, we are establishing urology diagnostic hubs across NHS Scotland to provide efficient and patient-centred care for urology patients. The hubs aim to reduce the number of appointments that patients

are required to attend and provide rapid access to diagnostics. There are currently seven such hubs across NHS Scotland.

Just last month, the Scottish Government published the updated Scottish referral guidelines for urgent suspicion of cancer. The guidelines support primary care clinicians to identify those with symptoms that raise suspicion of cancer and to identify those who require urgent assessment by a specialist. Referrals are closely monitored to ensure that capacity and support are available for those on an urgent suspicion of cancer pathway, including for bladder cancer.

The Scottish Government recognises that bladder cancer and urological pathways are some of our most challenged. That is why regional networks are developing improvements related to workforce recruitment and maximising capacity across the existing workforce. We are directing more than £14 million of the £110 million planned care funding that was made available in 2025-26 across NHS Scotland to reduce cancer waiting times, with a focus on colorectal, urological and breast cancer as our most challenged pathways. We have also committed to additional funding of up to £10 million for chemotherapy services.

The Scottish Government is focused on supporting our NHS and social care staff now and into the future. The wellbeing of staff remains a priority, and our workforce is central to implementing our vision and delivering the outcomes of the strategy and plan. We are working with NHS Scotland to address staffing as a matter of urgency, and we are working closely with NHS boards and clinical leads from across the country to address pressures in a sustainable way. That includes retaining staff in specialist roles and prioritising staff wellbeing, because evidence shows that positive wellbeing enhances staff retention and engagement, which in turn raises standards of patient safety and care quality.

Although I am proud of the continued prioritised investment to improve cancer services, we must keep reminding ourselves that at the centre of those investments and programmes are people—people who receive life-changing news when they receive a cancer diagnosis. Understanding the needs and experience of people who are diagnosed with cancer must remain at the heart of what we do. The results from the latest Scottish cancer patient experience survey show that 95 per cent of people are positive about their overall cancer care experience, which is reassuring and a positive result driven by those who deliver care in our NHS.

We are working in partnership with Macmillan Cancer Support to improve the service that we offer to patients with cancer through the transforming cancer care programme, which is

worth £27 million. It is the first programme of its kind in the UK that provides specialist key support workers who offer emotional, financial and practical support to people with cancer. Patients with cancer will be invited or referred to an improving the cancer journey service to speak to a link officer, who will complete a holistic needs assessment and generate a care plan to meet their needs. Service users will be followed by the link worker in the community, to monitor progress with agreed actions.

We will continue to work with Macmillan, our other third sector partners and NHS boards to further improve the experience of people who are diagnosed with cancer.

I again offer my sincere thanks to all members for their contributions in the debate and to all organisations that offer vital support services to those affected by bladder cancer.

Meeting closed at 18:10.

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

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