OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 12 February 2026

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

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

Thursday 12 February 2026

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	**1**
Freedom of Information	1
Exams (Assistive Technologies)	2
Ardrossan Harbour	3
Public Transport (Partnerships and Franchising)	4
Aberdeen and North-east Scotland (Economy)	5
Scottish Prison Service Policy for the Management of Transgender People in Custody	7
Peak Rail Fares (Removal)	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	**10**
Justice System (Death of Keith Rollinson)	10
Queen Elizabeth University Hospital	13
Men's Violence Against Women and Girls	16
Scotch Whisky Industry (Tariffs)	18
Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Service Delivery Review)	19
Police Stations (Lanarkshire)	20
Draft Budget 2026-27 (Business Rates, Hospices and the Care Sector)	21
Titan Crane	23
Orbex	23
Access to Pensions	24
Cladding	24
Sullum Voe Oil Terminal (Expansion of Clair Field)	25
Resident Doctors (Pay Deal)	26
EDINBURGH SOUTH COMMUNITY FOOTBALL CLUB AND GRASS-ROOTS FOOTBALL	**28**
Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)	28
Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)	31
Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)	32
Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)	34
Maree Todd (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)	36
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	**40**
SOCIAL JUSTICE AND HOUSING	**40**
Homelessness Prevention Pilots	40
Adult Disability Payment (Application Process)	41
Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (Aberdeen)	42
Social Security Scotland Staff (Training to Support Disabled People)	43
Private Sector Tenants (Discretionary Housing Payments)	44
Homeless Households (Permanent Accommodation)	45
Seasonal Workers (Accommodation)	48
SENTENCING AND PENAL POLICY COMMISSION	**50**
The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance)	50
BUDGET (SCOTLAND) (NO 5) BILL: STAGE 1	**62**
The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison)	62
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)	66
Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con)	69
Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)	72
Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)	74
Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD)	76
Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP)	78
Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	80
Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)	82
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)	84
Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)	85
Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)	87
John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)	89

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform) 90
Ross Greer 91
Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab) 93
Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con) 95
The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee) 98
MEDICAL TRAINING (PRIORITISATION) BILL 102
SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT SALARIES SCHEME 103
Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con) 103
DECISION TIME 105

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 12 February 2026

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

General Question Time

Freedom of Information

1. **Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the greater use of private bodies to deliver public services, what its position is on whether freedom of information law should be reformed to close loopholes, strengthen the powers of the Scottish Information Commissioner and enable the speedier extension of the coverage of freedom of information to relevant bodies. (S6O-05499)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): Scotland has the most robust FOI laws in the United Kingdom, and we will ensure that they continue to work effectively to enable access to information about Government and public services. As the member is aware, the Scottish Government is consulting on a substantial extension of FOI to private care providers. That will be the biggest extension since the legislation came into force.

The Scottish Information Commissioner is fully independent of Government and has considerable authority. The commissioner is also funded directly from the Scottish budget via the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body. Last year, the approved budget was £2.7 million.

Katy Clark: Private companies have increasingly become major providers of public services across sectors such as justice and transport. Multinationals such as Serco, G4S and Mitie receive substantial amounts of public money to deliver public services, but they do not need to comply with freedom of information laws. If the same service was provided by the Government, we would have the right to information. Does the minister agree that the public should know how their public services are being delivered and how public money is being spent?

Graeme Dey: I am broadly sympathetic to Katy Clark's general point. The Government will provide its response to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's stage 1 report on her bill imminently. It is a thoughtful and considered report, and I commend Katy Clark for the work that she has done on her bill, which has brought FOI into focus. I look forward to exploring such matters in detail in the stage 1 debate on Tuesday.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Can the minister provide figures for how many freedom of information requests have been made to the Scottish Government and the annual cost? Is he aware of whether that shows an increasing trend?

Graeme Dey: There has been a consistent rise in the number of FOI requests that the Government receives. The figures were roughly 4,200 in 2021 and 5,100 in 2023, and the number rose to 6,700 in 2025. That is an increase of about 60 per cent in four years.

Work is on-going to review the indicative processing costs to the Scottish Government that are associated with FOI. It is too early to share those results, but the early sampling shows that there is a significant range of processing costs, which go from approximately £100 up to £3,000, depending on the complexity of the question.

Exams (Assistive Technologies)

2. **Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of recent changes to Scottish Qualifications Authority policy permitting internet-enabled devices, such as Chromebooks, in exams, what action it is taking to ensure that pupils who rely on speech-to-text as their normal way of working are not, in practice, prevented from using this technology during exams. (S6O-05500)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): As an executive non-departmental public body, Qualifications Scotland has now replaced the Scottish Qualifications Authority. It operates at arm's length from ministers and is responsible for its own operational decisions.

Ahead of the 2025 exams, the body updated its policy to allow the use of internet-enabled devices in exams. That removes barriers for assistive technology users and ensures that students can use their normal way of working from the classroom in assessments. Qualifications Scotland is working with councils and CALL Scotland, which is funded by the Scottish Government, to provide support.

Maurice Golden: Chromebooks are used by the majority of local authorities. Parents and support for learning staff have reported that, despite the SQA's policy change, pupils are unable to use speech-to-text on Chromebooks in exams, because the required software is not being funded. Pupils who use speech-to-text as their normal way of working are therefore forced to use a scribe in exams.

Does the cabinet secretary accept that that places those pupils, who already face barriers to learning, at a clear disadvantage? Will she commit to finding a practical solution, whether through

funding or technical guidance, such as paying for individual invigilators to ensure that pupils do not access the internet, as a potential way forward?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Golden raises a hugely important point. We want to ensure that no pupils are disadvantaged by examination requirements or the support that is provided. I give Mr Golden an undertaking that I will take the matter to Qualifications Scotland, in relation to both his ask for funding and the guidance that might be provided. I hope that that gives him some assurance, and I am happy to get back to him in writing once I have received a further update from Qualifications Scotland.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Question 3 was not lodged.

Ardrossan Harbour

4. **Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on when the purchase of Ardrossan harbour from Peel Ports Group will be successfully concluded. (S6O-05502)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): As was stated to Parliament on 8 January, we are progressing the required review of legal, commercial and subsidy considerations based on the non-binding draft heads of terms. The matter remains complex and commercially sensitive, and our focus is on achieving purchase with a clean title and final sale and asset transfer.

As was indicated to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee last week, we expect the purchase deal to be concluded in advance of the dissolution of Parliament for the election. However, the final decision remains subject to the consideration of any associated risks, as well as to legal and subsidy control requirements. I will continue to keep Parliament updated on progress at the appropriate stages.

Kenneth Gibson: I greatly appreciate the cabinet secretary's commitment to securing the purchase and I understand the many complexities involved. Nevertheless, next Thursday, it will be a year to the day since she announced the intention to buy Ardrossan harbour, and the matter has still not been settled, although a price and heads of terms were agreed some time ago.

The cabinet secretary will appreciate that my Ardrossan and Arran constituents remain deeply frustrated. Will she advise what specific hurdles remain and how soon they will be overcome, so that she can achieve her ambition of ensuring that the purchase is concluded prior to the dissolution of Parliament?

Fiona Hyslop: I acknowledge the on-going frustrations that are felt by local communities, but negotiations take time. The member will be aware that non-binding heads of terms were agreed in principle between the two parties only a few weeks ago.

When I met the chief executive officer of Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd this morning, he confirmed that the engagement with Peel Ports is on-going and remains positive. A range and suite of documents will be required for the potential purchase agreement, which is now close to being finalised. There is work for Transport Scotland and Scottish Government teams to do, and I have expressed to them my need to have their advice as promptly as possible. Rather than using the word "hurdles", I would say that there are some necessary steps to go through, including those covering legal subsidy and the financial aspects of the overall deal, in order to allow transactions to conclude.

Public Transport (Partnerships and Franchising)

5. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it provides to local authorities to enable them to explore partnership or franchise approaches to public transport. (S6O-05503)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): In December, the Scottish Government sent a draft version of the franchising guidance to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee, and that draft was also shared with various stakeholders, including Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, for consideration and comment. We intend to formally publish the document in the spring, and work on the partnership guidance is on-going.

I am pleased that the draft budget included £4 million to support local transport authorities to build business cases for local bus improvement through franchising. We will develop appropriate governance arrangements and details of the administration of the fund in consultation with stakeholders, including the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Clare Haughey: I have spoken before in the chamber about some of the experiences that people in my Rutherglen constituency have faced because of service reductions and about the proposed cancellation of the 65 service, which was, thankfully, followed by a U-turn. All that has been compounded by South Lanarkshire Council's removal of the free school buses used by hundreds of young people. Does the minister agree that it is crucial for decisions about bus provision to be made with people, rather than done to them, and that moves towards partnership or franchise approaches will, ultimately, allow that to happen in an open and transparent way?

Jim Fairlie: Clare Haughey raises the really crucial point—I am not sure whether people fully understand it—that buses are vital to local communities and to our connectivity matrix.

As for school transport, under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, local authorities are responsible for making the arrangements that they consider necessary to provide free transport to schools in the local area. In doing so, they need to consider a number of things.

Regarding public transport, the Scottish Government is committed to looking, in partnership with operators and local authorities, at ways to ensure that everyone has accessible public transport, regardless of where they live. The partnership and franchising powers that are available to local transport authorities provide opportunities for people to engage with proposals to improve their local bus networks, and I encourage people to do so.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Glaswegians are paying the highest bus fares in any British city, at £6.30 for a day ticket and £3.25 for a single. We desperately need bus franchising to be sped up so that it can be implemented in greater Glasgow.

Will the minister commit to providing the full £4 million allocation to Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, which is the only regional transport partnership that is pursuing franchising? Will he also commit to urgent publication of the guidance? The reference to publishing that in the spring is too vague—can the process be sped up even more?

Jim Fairlie: As the member knows, the franchising system is on-going. The £4 million has been allocated to it, and I am sure that there will be other bodies that would say that the £4 million should not all go to SPT. That is still under discussion.

The guidance will be issued once people have had a chance to look at it properly and comment on it. As I just stated, it will be published in the spring.

Aberdeen and North-east Scotland (Economy)

6. **Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to boost the economy of Aberdeen and the north-east of Scotland. (S6O-05504)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): The Scottish Government is ensuring that the transition to net zero delivers benefits for businesses and communities across the north-east. The £500 million just transition fund is already working to boost the economy in Aberdeen.

We are working in partnership to deliver the £160 million investment zone, which will be key to the economy's diversification through embracing entrepreneurship and innovation. We are also investing £125 million over 10 years in the Aberdeen city region deal, to grow the region's economy by building on its strengths across the energy, life sciences and food and drink sectors.

Kevin Stewart: This week, research by Aberdeen-based consultancy Aspect found that energy sector leaders described business confidence as "spectacularly low" and

"back in 2015 crash territory".

Aspect's report cites Labour's tax on Scotland's energy as having done

"real damage to the UK's reputation as a place to invest".

The Labour Party is distracted as it tears itself apart in a brutal civil war after Anas Sarwar's botched coup attempt on his London Labour boss failed miserably. Meanwhile, Scotland's energy sector is paying the price for Labour mismanagement. Will the Deputy First Minister pledge to continue to highlight the stupidity of Labour's energy profits levy, to battle for change and to do all she can to protect jobs in Aberdeen and the north-east?

The Presiding Officer: Please answer on matters of devolved responsibility.

Kate Forbes: The short answer is yes. The energy profits levy, which was introduced by the Conservatives—although they seem to forget that fact—and which was extended and increased by Labour, is having a detrimental impact—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Kate Forbes: —on the workforce in the north-east. The Aspect report, which cites how low business confidence is and the damaging effect of the energy profits levy, is aligned with what we hear from employers, who are regretfully having to let people go because of the energy profits levy.

We have called on the United Kingdom Government to support the energy workforce. On that point, we are totally aligned with the unions, which are making the same call. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: I would ask those who are shouting from their seats to cease.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The economy of Aberdeen and the north-east would be boosted if the Scottish National Party Government paid up the remaining 83 per cent of the just transition fund; removed the SNP's presumption against oil and gas that has so damaged the industry, as Aspect found; reinstated the £80

million carbon capture fund that we were promised; gave us the rest of the £200 million city deal money that Aberdeen was promised in 2016; and reduced our eye-watering business rates. Are any of those things going to happen, Deputy First Minister?

The Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Kate Forbes: I am just trying to remember how much funding the Conservatives provided to the just transition fund. Despite asking them for many years while they were in government, I do not recall a single penny being given through the just transition fund for the north-east. An independent evaluation of the funding that we have provided through the just transition fund shows that at least 230 jobs have been created and safeguarded, more than 750 training places have been opened up and more than £30 million of private investment has been attracted. That has all been delivered because we paid up and invested, unlike the Conservatives.

Scottish Prison Service Policy for the Management of Transgender People in Custody

7. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether the First Minister and the rest of the Cabinet are ashamed that the written case for Scottish ministers and the Lord Advocate in the judicial review of the Scottish Prison Service policy for the management of transgender people in custody did not include a single mention of women's rights. (S6O-05505)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The judgment of the Supreme Court is accepted by the Scottish Government. We are ensuring, as any responsible Government must, that our policies comply with all our legal obligations, including, of course, the Scotland Act 1998 and the European convention on human rights.

It is the Scottish Government's long-held position that it does not regard it as appropriate to engage in public comment in respect of live court proceedings. That is different from saying that the position is that the Scottish Government cannot comment or is prevented from commenting generally on live litigation, although there will be cases in which the Contempt of Court Act 1981 is engaged to that effect, to ensure that there is no risk of impediment or prejudice to the proceedings.

In all cases, we have an obligation to uphold the independence of the judiciary, and we do not want the Government to ever be seen as interfering in the work of our independent courts.

Douglas Ross: That may be an answer to one question; it is just not an answer to the question that I asked. I am going to repeat it, but first I have to take exception to the justice secretary saying that this Government agrees with the Supreme Court ruling. It does not. It is in court arguing against that very Supreme Court ruling.

A body language expert would have a field day at the moment, because of the uncomfortable look on the front bench. Not a single one of them is looking up at the moment. The First Minister cannot even look at me, so I will ask the justice secretary the question again. Are John Swinney and the rest of his Cabinet ashamed that, in this court case and their written argument, they did not mention women's rights once? If they are not ashamed, why are they not?

Angela Constance: In general terms, I am reminded of the words of Hillary Clinton at a United Nations conference on women's rights. The quote is:

"human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights".

I would hope—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Angela Constance: I would hope that, in this chamber, we would all have the humility to recognise that there is no monopoly on concern for women's rights and women's equality.

With regard to Mr Ross's comments in which he disputes our acceptance of the rule of law and the Supreme Court judgment, I can point to action across Government and, indeed, justice where our compliance with that policy is demonstrated. We recently published for consultation the new guidance on stop and search. In the interests of open justice—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, cabinet secretary.

Angela Constance: —the Government published its written case and the note of arguments. It is, of course, for the courts to determine and judge on those arguments, and—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary.

Angela Constance: —I am sure that that will be done in its entirety.

The Presiding Officer: I have to go on to the next question.

Peak Rail Fares (Removal)

8. **Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what

assessment it has made of the impact of the removal of peak rail fares. (S6O-05506)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Transport Scotland undertook an evaluation of the pilot scheme for the removal of peak fares in August 2024. It surveyed passengers and found that 80 per cent of respondents were making more trips by rail, and around three quarters of those people suggested that the primary reason was the pilot. Work is under way to evaluate the long-term effects of removing peak fares for good, and we expect to be able to share initial findings once the policy has been in place for at least six months.

What is certain is that the removal of ScotRail peak fares for good is saving money for hundreds of thousands of people in Scotland who travel by rail. In Jamie Hepburn's constituency, passengers travelling from Cumbernauld or Croy to Glasgow save around £4 each time they purchase a return ticket to travel during the busiest commuter times.

Jamie Hepburn: Since the removal of peak rail fares, there has been a very welcome increase in rail usage from Croy railway station, which is in my constituency. However, that has exacerbated car parking pressures on the site. Will the cabinet secretary set out what support there might be for exploring an expansion of car parking there and for encouraging more use of services on the Cumbernauld line, given that there is an underutilised car park at Greenfaulds railway station?

Fiona Hyslop: There is currently no investment to expand the car park facilities at Croy, and it does not feature in our plans. However, a route exists for the business case to be submitted by third-party promoters, such as regional transport partnerships or local authorities.

Greenfaulds station has seen a growth in patronage, and passengers there will be able to benefit from the cross-border service on the Stirling to London Euston route.

Passengers travelling from Croy enjoy a frequent, fast and reliable service, which is supported by the Scottish Government's investment in removing peak fares for good and by our announcement that we are freezing ScotRail fares for a year from April.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time.

Before we move to First Minister's question time, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery the Hon Todd Goudy MLA, who is the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan. [*Applause*.]

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Justice System (Death of Keith Rollinson)

1. **Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** Sue Rollinson's beloved husband of 33 years went out to work as a bus driver but never came home. Keith Rollinson was violently attacked by a teenage thug and died in hospital. As he lay dying, Sue and her daughters were told not to touch him. Sue told me:

> "We weren't even allowed to hold his hand because the police said that it might contaminate the evidence."

The killer was sentenced to four years and four months. He was not sent to prison. Instead, he was sent to charity-run accommodation with a swimming pool and a courtyard garden. He has not spent a single night in prison. He killed an innocent man two years ago, but he could be freed and back home within weeks. Does John Swinney think that that is justice?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Before I come on to the important point that Mr Findlay has raised, I record my sadness at the death of Jeane Freeman, who was one of my Cabinet colleagues when she was the health secretary. She served the Parliament and the country with distinction through many difficult and challenging moments during the Covid pandemic. She also contributed to enhancing Scotland through the design of our social security system.

I express my sympathies and those of the Government to Jeane's partner, Susan, and her friends and family on the loss of a magnificent woman, who was taken from us all too suddenly and all too early in her life.

I express to Russell Findlay my understanding and appreciation of the depth of concern about the issue that he has raised on behalf of Sue Rollinson. I know that Mr Findlay met the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and Richard Lochhead, who is Mrs Rollinson's local MSP, earlier this week. I understand the concern that has been expressed.

What happened to Mr Rollinson was absolutely and completely unforgivable and unspeakable. The courts considered the issue and have taken the decisions that they have taken. A parole hearing on the case was held on 11 February, and a decision was postponed to a future oral hearing. The Parole Board for Scotland is responsible for considering the length of a sentence and how much time is spent where as part of that sentence.

Russell Findlay: John Swinney cannot say it, so I will say it for him: a violent killer not spending

a single night in prison and potentially being back home after two years is not justice. It is sickening, and it is an affront to Sue Rollinson and her family.

The killer was given a shockingly short sentence because of guidelines that were introduced by a Scottish National Party quango. Judges are told not to jail criminals aged up to 25 and to impose lighter sentences. Those guidelines traumatise victims by treating murderers and rapists as though they are children. That is all based on the nonsense belief that they are not mature enough to be responsible for their crimes.

That is one of the many ways in which the SNP Government has spent years weakening Scotland's justice system. For the sake of victims such as Keith Rollinson, will John Swinney do the right thing and finally scrap those disgraceful guidelines?

The First Minister: As Mr Findlay correctly says, the information and guidance on sentencing come from the independent Scottish Sentencing Council, which takes a considered view of all such questions and does so at arm's length from ministers.

The young person sentencing guidelines make it clear that all sentencing options, including imprisonment, remain open to the court. It is important that I put that point on the record, because it is just not the case that the sentencing guidelines make the provisions that Mr Findlay has talked about. The guidelines make it clear that the option of imprisonment remains open to the court.

Decisions on sentences are taken by the independent judiciary. An important principle of our judicial system is that the judiciary is able to operate independently of the Government, with the ability to exercise, as I set out, the full range of options, including imprisonment, that are open to it in such cases.

Russell Findlay: My description of the SNP's sentencing guidelines was 100 per cent accurate. Keith Rollinson's killer previously attacked another bus driver, yet, after that, he was still allowed to keep his free bus pass. Our party has been campaigning for years to deny free travel for those who commit crimes and antisocial behaviour on the buses. John Swinney agreed to make that happen in May last year, but, nine months on, it has still not happened, because the SNP Government botched the legislation. Jim Fairlie is shaking his head, but he botched the legislation.

Sue Rollinson is, rightly, furious that her husband's killer will still be entitled to a free bus pass when he gets out. Can John Swinney guarantee that that killer will have his bus pass removed, and will he say exactly when that will happen?

The First Minister: The draft code that will enable the decisions that Mr Findlay is talking about to be made was shared with the parliamentary committee that will scrutinise these issues on 28 January. The statutory instrument is due to be debated at the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee's meeting next Tuesday, 17 February. The steps to take forward the programme for government commitment that I made to remove free bus travel from any person, of any age, who does not act responsibly will be put to the committee on 17 February. The committee is free to take its own decisions, but I encourage it to take the decision to put that into practice.

As I said in my first answer, the individual who was convicted of the crime in relation to Mr Rollinson will have his parole determined at a future hearing of the Parole Board. I therefore cannot give a definitive answer on the question about the timescale, because I do not know what decision the Parole Board will take.

Russell Findlay: In attempting to decipher all that, it sounds as though the killer may well still have his free bus pass, despite killing a bus driver.

Keith Rollinson's tragic case highlights so much that is wrong with the SNP's weak justice approach: laws that keeps some killers out of prison, guidelines that ensure that other serious criminals are not jailed and the early release of thousands of criminals. It is no wonder that Angela Constance has her back to me. There is so much more that I could say, and none of this is by accident; it is by design.

Now, John Swinney is going to free some prisoners after serving just 30 per cent of their sentences. The SNP: stronger for criminals.

The last word today goes to Sue Rollinson. I told Sue that Keith would be proud of her, and she said:

"Keith will be looking down and saying, 'Oh my goodness, Sue—where did you get that strength from?'"

Well, Mr Swinney, she gets her strength from her love of Keith and from the suffering that she has endured at the hands of the SNP justice system. Does John Swinney have any understanding of the pain and anguish that his Government is inflicting on good and decent people across Scotland?

The First Minister: I have every sympathy for Mrs Rollinson and what she has endured. She and her husband should never have had to experience the awfulness of what they have experienced. I can express only my sympathy to her, but I can also set out what is happening in relation to criminal justice in Scotland today.

Under this Government, recorded crime is down by 38 per cent since 2006-07. At the same time,

people are being sentenced for invariably longer periods in prison as a consequence of the success of the Government in taking forward— [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: At the same time, people are being sentenced for invariably longer periods in prison as a consequence of the success of the Government in taking forward, through the Crown, the prosecution of many crimes that were previously unaddressed. Individuals are now spending longer, on average, in prison as a consequence of the decisions that this Government has taken. For example, the average length of a custodial sentence for weapons possession increased by 52 per cent between 2007-08 and 2022-23.

I have every sympathy with Mrs Rollinson for what she has experienced, and I assure her that this Government is doing everything that it can to ensure that those who commit crimes are apprehended, prosecuted and, when the courts make this decision, imprisoned as well.

Queen Elizabeth University Hospital

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I echo John Swinney's comments about Jeane Freeman. We send our love and condolences to Susan and to all of her family, friends and colleagues.

As I said in the chamber yesterday, I will forever be thankful, as will the families and doctors at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, because Jeane Freeman was willing to listen, to learn and to act. We thank her for her service to our country and to our national health service.

For weeks, John Swinney has denied that political pressure was applied to open the Queen Elizabeth university hospital before it was ready. However, on 29 March 2015, weeks before an election, John Swinney told the Scottish National Party conference, in relation to the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, that,

"with the SNP Government, 'on time and on budget' is the rule—not the exception."

Weeks later, an independent report was received that stated that the children's hospital was not safe and that there were high risks of infections and therefore high risks to life for immunocompromised patients. The report was ignored and the hospital opened anyway. Children died as a result. Will the First Minister now finally take responsibility and apologise to the families?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues that Mr Sarwar raises are part and parcel of the independent public inquiry that is being taken forward by Lord Brodie.

As Mr Sarwar knows full well, the Government first became aware of the issues in relation to the water contamination system in 2018. That information is all in front of the inquiry and it is for Lord Brodie to consider those issues as part of the independent inquiry.

The Government established that independent inquiry to undertake that process, and we shall leave Lord Brodie to do exactly that.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney is denying reality and continuing to mislead this Parliament. Let us look at the evidence. Despite his denials, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde said:

"Pressure was applied to open the hospital on time and on budget, and it is now clear that the hospital opened too early."

The Scottish Government's meeting note states explicitly:

"Political pressure was also being felt and no consideration was given to delay the opening of the hospital, despite the issues being faced with completion and operation."

Weeks before the hospital was opened, John Swinney told his party conference, in relation to the hospital, that,

"with the SNP Government, 'on time and on budget' is the rule—not the exception."

That is clear political pressure. Families are hurting enough, so why is John Swinney insulting their intelligence and exacerbating their pain?

The First Minister: A few weeks ago, Anas Sarwar came to the chamber and brandished a supposedly secret document about political pressure being applied to the opening of the hospital. The document was not in any way secret, because it had been submitted to the independent public inquiry by the Government. Now, Mr Sarwar comes to the chamber and his big reveal is the contents of a conference speech that I gave in front of thousands and thousands of people, which was broadcast on live television. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: I do not quite understand what sensational point Mr Sarwar is trying to put forward. The argument that he is putting forward smacks of desperation. We have established an independent public inquiry, which we will leave to make its judgments about the issue so that the families who are involved can get the truth, which is what they deserve.

Anas Sarwar: John Swinney forgets that the families are watching him and listening to his answers. Let us look at what the families are having to hear and endure: it is not just the pain of losing a loved one but that politics was put before

patient safety and pressure was applied to open the hospital; that the hospital opened before it was safe and ready; that a report warned of the risk of infections, but it was ignored; that the Scottish Government received 14 alerts of infections, but it did not take the appropriate action; and that, even now, the hospital has not been validated. Just yesterday, the SNP tried to block information on current safety at the hospital. To add even more insult, a Scottish Government official attempted to bribe grieving families with cash and a trip to Disneyland rather than confront the truth.

What does John Swinney say to those families who are having to go through that hell because of his Government's decisions?

The First Minister: I would say to the families that the Government has done two things of significance in this area. The first thing is that the Government has established an independent public inquiry, which we respect. We respect its independence and we will not tolerate political interference in the inquiry, which Mr Sarwar has tried to do. We will not play politics with the inquiry and we will not interfere with it; we will allow Lord Brodie to undertake his steps.

The second thing that the Government has done is that, when we become aware of issues of concern, we act. We did that in relation to the Royal Hospital for Children and Young People, where we acted and we intervened to stop it from opening, because we were aware of information. Mr Sarwar knows full well that the Government was not aware of the information that he puts to me.

The last point that I want to make is that Mr Sarwar has made many comments about the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. I think that it is important that I put on record important points about the safety of the hospital, because it is used by thousands and thousands of people every day. The independent inquiry heard from the independent expert, Andrew Poplett, that the water system management is now "extremely well-managed", with "significant improvement" having been made. Mr Poplett noted that the facilities team is exceeding the standard guidance and is adopting a proactive and preventative approach that prioritises patient safety.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde recently commissioned and has now received two independent reports on the water and ventilation systems to provide further assurances. The findings of those independent reports were both positive, with a fully compliant ventilation assessment in December 2025, and a fully compliant water system assessment in January 2026. The reports will be considered by the safety and public confidence oversight group that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care announced recently—

The Presiding Officer: Please be brief.

The First Minister: —which was welcomed by the Labour Party in its motion yesterday.

My advice to Mr Sarwar, in his absolute desperation, is to stop playing politics with this issue, to respect the independent inquiry, as this Government will do, and to allow the families to get to the truth of what has happened. That is what we are committed to, not the desperate acts of Anas Sarwar.

Men's Violence Against Women and Girls

3. **Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** I echo the First Minister's tribute to Jeane Freeman and send my love and that of my party to our friend Susan.

Nothing that the Prime Minister or others can say now will change the fundamentals of the scandal that is rightly engulfing them. Peter Mandelson was lauded and given huge influence and, ultimately, one of the most important jobs in the British Government, despite it having been public knowledge for years that he had remained friends with Jeffrey Epstein after he had been convicted of child sex offences.

Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor clearly felt that he was above the law—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

Ross Greer: —and, so far, he has been proven correct. The late Queen and the current King put up millions of pounds to make his problems go away, but the problems were real people—real women and girls who had suffered abuse. The victims and survivors are in danger of being forgotten and of being erased by the political fallout. That cannot be allowed to happen.

Men's violence against women and girls is not just an elite problem—it is endemic at every level of our society, and every man has a role to play in solving it. What is the First Minister's message to women and girls in Scotland who have survived and who continue to endure men's violence?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I agree that the suffering of women and girls in the case of Jeffrey Epstein is of the highest level of concern. I am struck by the fact that all those concerns were bypassed by the Prime Minister in his appointment of Peter Mandelson as the United Kingdom's ambassador to the United States. It is jaw dropping that that decision was taken.

With regard to the responsibilities that I hold, I have made it clear from this podium on a number of occasions—and I take actions in Government,

along with my Cabinet colleagues, to this end—that we make strenuous efforts to tackle the issue of violence against women and girls in our society through a range of measures, including those forming part of the equally safe strategy, and to ensure that we set out the fundamental point that the issue at the heart of such violence is the behaviour of men, and that men's behaviour must change.

Ross Greer: I agree absolutely with the First Minister that the issue here is men's behaviour and men's violence. Tackling violence against women and girls means changing underlying attitudes. The uncomfortable truth is that far too many men and boys do not see women and girls as equal or worthy of respect and dignity. Here in Scotland, many boys and young men leave school having been taught nothing about the importance of consent and respect in relationships.

Over the past few years, I have worked with the—[*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another. I am very conscious that the galleries are full. People would like to be able to follow our proceedings.

Ross Greer: I am surprised to hear the Conservatives interrupt on this of all topics.

Over the past few years, I have worked with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills to update the statutory guidance on relationships education. Frankly, it is unbelievable that the current guidance, which dates only from 2014, has no section on consent. The new guidance that we developed, which was published last week, starts with a chapter on the importance of consent. If we are to break the generational cycle of misogyny and men's violence against women and girls, that guidance needs to be put into use in every school.

Does the First Minister agree that every young person in Scotland, and especially every young man, should be taught about the importance of consent and respect in relationships before they leave school?

The First Minister: Whatever the parliamentary mood on this question, I want to make it clear that I attach the greatest importance to this issue and to the representations that Mr Greer has made to me on it over the years. I pay tribute to the way in which he has pursued the issue—in the face, I might add, of parliamentary resistance, which, as we have heard, has been the case today as well.

The relationships, sexual health and parenthood education programme aims to equip young people with knowledge and understanding of issues such as consent, appropriate relationships and boundaries, to help them make informed choices that promote and protect their own and others' health and wellbeing. I thank Mr Greer for his contribution to enabling that to be the case. I believe that that programme should be in place across our education system. It is an essential part of equipping young people, and in particular young boys, with all the information that they require to undertake responsible lives and for us all together to take the action that is necessary to ensure that violence against women and girls is consigned to the dustbin of history in our country.

Scotch Whisky Industry (Tariffs)

4. **Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister how often he or the Scottish ministers engage with the Scottish Government's Washington DC international office regarding the Scotch whisky industry and other economic interests in the United States. (S6F-04672)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government interacts closely and regularly with its Washington office on the important work to promote Scotland's cultural, social and economic interests, including support for the whisky sector, which contributes £5.4 billion to our economy.

As Michelle Thomson will know, I have been active in trying to secure the removal of the tariffs on Scotch whisky. We continue to await progress from the United Kingdom Government on prioritising Scotch whisky in negotiations and securing the tariff exemptions that the sector deserves. Our Washington office will remain central to ensuring that that and our wider economic interests stay high on the agenda.

Michelle Thomson: I thank the First Minister for setting out the value of representing Scotland on the global stage.

Given the current chaos at Westminster while the Labour Party tears itself apart, I am concerned about the price that Scottish industries are having to pay. UK Labour's taxes on Scotch whisky and Scottish energy are destroying jobs and hammering our economy.

Does the First Minister agree that the Labour Party cannot be trusted to put Scottish economic interests first? Can he say more about how his Government is working to protect Scotland's premier industries?

The Presiding Officer: First Minister, please answer on devolved matters only.

The First Minister: To be honest, Michelle Thomson hits the nail on the head. Now that we know from Anas Sarwar that the Labour Government in the United Kingdom is absolutely useless and that the Prime Minister should leave office, little attention will be paid to the central

issues that affect our economic wellbeing, principally the issue of tariffs on whisky.

Although this Government in Scotland will always act to champion and take forward the interests of our country, we are being undermined by a useless Labour Government in London that Anas Sarwar encouraged everybody to support. It shows quite clearly what poor judgment Anas Sarwar has.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (Service Delivery Review)

5. **Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will provide an update on the service delivery review of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. (S6F-04675)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will determine how its resources should best be deployed to adapt to changing risks, keep our communities safe, remain effective and efficient, and ensure that we have resources in the right place and at the right time.

Last summer, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service carried out a public consultation on its strategic review, and the large number of responses are being independently analysed. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service board will then decide which of the options should go forward for implementation over the next five years.

Rachael Hamilton: I thank the First Minister for that answer, but, shamefully, the review has now been delayed until after the elections in May, which is unacceptable to my constituents in Hawick who deserve to know the future of their local station.

The SFRS warned that 500 firefighter posts could be cut over the next three years. That is stark, because it follows warnings that, in addition to the number of firefighters falling by nearly 1,200 over the past 12 years in Scotland, that review could lead to the removal of 166 firefighter posts.

If, God forbid, something catastrophic should occur in the areas where those cuts are happening, will the First Minister shoulder responsibility for the hollowing out of the fire service?

The First Minister: It is very important that, in all parts of the country, we have an effective and efficient fire and rescue service. However, as members will understand, there will be tremendous challenges in allocating resources that are appropriate for the conditions and circumstances that we face. One practical example is that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service must wrestle with the fact that our climate is changing and so there are significant new demands relating to issues such as wildfire and flooding. Those are two very substantial issues that can affect all parts of the country. We must ensure that we have the right resources in the right place, which is the purpose of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service strategic review.

The SFRS will engage on all those questions, and the Parliament will, of course, be able to interact on them, too. However, I give the assurance that I understand that we need to have in place an effective fire and rescue service in Scotland, and I believe that we do.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Is the First Minister aware of the concerns of local communities about the impact of the closure of Marionville fire station without a local replacement? Given the strong cross-party support to deliver a station that will meet the needs of our growing communities in the area, will he step in to support our call on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to save Marionville station?

The First Minister: I am familiar with the issues around Marionville, which members have raised a number of times, and I have sought information and advice on those questions.

The situation there is part of the dilemma that I talked about in my answer to Rachael Hamilton, whereby we must make careful judgments about the placement of resources. There will be changes to population spread. There is a substantial expansion of the population in the east of Scotland, and in particular in the east of the city of Edinburgh and into East Lothian. All those issues will be part of the detailed consideration that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will undertake, and I know that the issues that Sarah Boyack raises will also form part of that consideration.

Police Stations (Lanarkshire)

6. **Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that police stations across Lanarkshire, including in Bellshill, will be closed permanently to the public or have their hours reduced from 1 April. (S6F-04667)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Decisions on the management and use of the police estate lie with the chief constable, but I recognise that people in the Lanarkshire area will have concerns about the plans that Mr Griffin has raised with me.

I can confirm that police officers will remain embedded in communities across Lanarkshire, and community policing continues to be a priority for Police Scotland in all those areas.

Mark Griffin: Bellshill police station, along with other stations across Lanarkshire, will close to members of the public on 1 April, in order, Police

Scotland says, to free up officers from being behind a desk. However, they are behind a desk only because the Scottish National Party Government slashed Police Scotland's budget and forced the redundancies of thousands of support staff, who did an excellent job at lower cost.

What does the First Minister say to the people of Bellshill who need physical access to a police station to safely report a crime, particularly women who are at risk of domestic abuse, who cannot afford to leave an electronic trail behind them?

The First Minister: One of the points that has been made to me about the situation at Bellshill police station is that the decision was arrived at by Police Scotland due to the lower level of footfall that was presenting there. There will be operational decisions that Police Scotland has to make in relation to facilities that are not being used as frequently as they might have been in the past.

On the question about the reporting of crimes, there are many different ways to report a crime. There are systems and initiatives in place to ensure that women who report crimes of violence are able to be protected. I encourage Police Scotland to ensure that there is wider awareness of all the issues and of the different routes to report a crime.

Draft Budget 2026-27 (Business Rates, Hospices and the Care Sector)

7. **Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD):** To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will make further changes to the draft budget 2026-27 published in January in relation to business rates, hospices and the care sector. (S6F-04670)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues raised by Jamie Greene are ones that the finance secretary has been working on, and I thank Jamie Greene for his constructive engagement in the budget process.

I can confirm that an additional £2.9 million will be provided to ensure that hospices can maintain parity for their staff with national health service agenda for change. An additional £20 million will be provided to local government for social care, which can be used for matters such as funding the real living wage for adult and child care services. On business rates, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government will later today outline that licensed premises and music venues that are liable for basic and intermediate property rates will see their relief increase to 40 per cent, subject to the £110,000 cap per business in Scotland.

Jamie Greene: I thank the First Minister for that. In the draft budget, I welcomed our calls for more funding for colleges, young entrepreneurs, autism assessments and our islands, but I have also made it clear that we need to see more for hospices, care providers, and hospitality and self-catering businesses, all of which are crying out for more support. Today it sounds as though we have made some progress for social care, for hospices and on business rates. My calculation puts the amount at just shy of £300 million for Liberal Democrat priorities. Why did we get that progress? Because we chose to negotiate properly and get things done. That is why we will support the budget this afternoon. I ask the First Minister to spell out the difference that the Liberal Democrats have made to this year's budget.

The First Minister: First, I welcome Mr Greene's commitment on behalf of the Liberal Democrats to support the Government's budget—that is indeed welcome. The budget is a product of constructive engagement to serve the people who sent us here. That is what this is all about: Parliament engaging—[*Interruption*.] The Government does not have a majority, so we need to work with others to get the budget through. This year, we have experienced constructive collaboration with some political parties in order to advance on the issues. I am sure that the people of Scotland will notice that.

I welcome the support that the Liberal Democrats will give us this afternoon for the budget. Let me make it clear that a Government under my leadership will always work to serve the people of Scotland, addressing their priorities and meeting their needs.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): I am sorry to encroach on the love-in between the Lib Dems and the nationalists, but as a result of the Scottish National Party's brutal business rates regime, many of Scotland's pubs are calling last orders for the final time and, as Innis & Gunn warned yesterday, those pubs that survive are being forced—reluctantly—to hike prices to eye-watering levels. Is John Swinney happy to be remembered as the First Minister who forced hard-working Scots to pay £10 a pint?

The First Minister: If Mr Hoy knew anything about the way in which taxation operates in the United Kingdom, he would know that alcohol taxation is a reserved tax that is determined by the United Kingdom Government, and that countless Labour and Tory Governments have made it more and more difficult for the spirits and beer industry in this country to survive because of their stupid decisions on alcohol taxation. [*Interruption*.]

Let me just say to Mr Hoy—[*Interruption*.]—

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear one another.

The First Minister: —who has contributed the square root of absolutely nothing to the budget process, that the Scottish Government is managing to navigate its budget through Parliament without a majority and—thankfully—without contaminating ourselves with the destructive force of the Conservative Party.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. In the time that we have left, concise questions will give more members an opportunity to come in. We will now have constituency and general supplementary questions.

Titan Crane

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): The Titan crane is a beacon of the industrial heritage of Clydebank and shipbuilding on the Clyde. It survived two world wars, including the Clydebank blitz. In 2007, after maintenance work and the creation of a visitor centre, the crane was opened to the public. It is a memory of our industrial past—one that helped make Clydebank world renowned and the backbone of Scotland's shipbuilding industry. Unfortunately, the Labour council failed to maintain the crane, and it now remains closed to the public and left to rust.

Will the First Minister join me on a visit to the Titan crane to see for himself its significance and potential, and will he commit to the Scottish Government doing everything possible, with others, to ensure that it reopens and makes a massive contribution to the tourism industry in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very familiar with the Titan crane. I have been up it. It is an incredible landmark that recognises the industrial heritage of the Clydebank area, which is of such significance in Scotland's story. It is a magnificent facility. The duty of care falls on the local authority, West Dunbartonshire Council, which I encourage to provide adequate care and maintenance of the site. The Government will engage constructively in every way we can to ensure that the crane can be accessed by members of the public. I thank Marie McNair for raising the issue and the significance of the Titan crane to Scotland's industrial landscape.

Orbex

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The First Minister may be aware that Orbex is set to enter administration, putting at risk more than 150 very high-skilled jobs in Forres. That will be a devastating blow to Moray and to the United Kingdom's wider space ambitions. We all want to stop further rural depopulation. Will the Scottish Government seek to engage with Orbex? What support can be offered to the residents and staff, who will be deeply worried?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am familiar with the news. I had the pleasure of visiting Orbex, which is an incredibly innovative, creative and inventive organisation. It faces uncertainty, given the decisions that have been announced. My colleague Richard Lochhead, the Minister for Business and Employment, will meet with the company and the administrators today. The Deputy First Minister has been closely engaged with the interim administrators, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the United Kingdom Government to further understand the steps that can be taken to safeguard the opportunities at Orbex.

I am very clear that this is a significant issue, because the space sector has real potential, with significant economic benefits for Scotland. The Government will do all that it can to support a secure future for Orbex. Significant leading technology is being developed there, and we will do all that we can to help to protect it for the future.

Access to Pensions

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): The First Minister, like me, will have received correspondence from a number of constituents who are former Scottish public servants and who cannot access information about their pension or cannot access their pension at all once they are entitled to it. This morning, we saw that a lady from elsewhere in the United Kingdom who has cancer and has six months to live is having to borrow to pay her bills because she cannot get her pension. The issue arises from the outsourcing of pensions management to Capita, which had a terrible record in armed forces recruitment previously. Will the Scottish Government take the issue up with the UK Government to seek assurances that those who are immediately impacted will get their pensions, will be able to understand what pension they are entitled to and will be compensated for the financial detriment that they have experienced?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am familiar with the issues that Mr Brown raises, and the Scottish Government has been in contact with the UK Government about them. There are many examples of disruption and hardship being caused to individuals. I assure Mr Brown and the Parliament that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government is in active dialogue with the UK Government, which has the responsibility to resolve those issues.

Cladding

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I have been contacted by residents in a development that is affected by cladding here in the capital. For more than five years, residents have been waiting while the developer and the Scottish Government

continue discussions but no real progress has been made. Almost £100,000 of public money has been spent on two single building assessments, yet the residents have now been told that the developments are effectively worthless. They are facing a block building insurance cost of around £450,000 a year—more than double what it should be. Will the First Minister come with me to meet those residents so that he can understand the need for progress in order to protect them from those costs, and will he put in place a plan for Scotland to finally get the assessments done and find a long-term solution for those people?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has put steps in place to address cladding issues, the seriousness of which I acknowledge. The measures that have been put in place by the Government involve very detailed, site-by-site work to resolve the particular issues that are involved. The Cabinet Secretary for Housing is dealing with all those questions. I assure Mr Briggs that the Government has propositions in place that can address those issues, and I will be happy to engage on individual questions.

Sullum Voe Oil Terminal (Expansion of Clair Field)

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The First Minister will be aware of the recent research from the University of Strathclyde's centre for energy policy, which indicates that jobs at the Sullom Voe oil terminal depend on BP's decision on the Clair expansion. It is estimated that around 250 jobs could be impacted across the Shetland economy, which would be devastating for our island community. Can the First Minister indicate what action his Government will take following that new research?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As Beatrice Wishart will know, the Scottish Government has been actively pressing the United Kingdom Government—indeed, I have done so myself with the Prime Minister directly—about the importance of removing the energy profits levy because of the damage that is being done to the sector and the impact that it is having on the Scottish economy. There has not been sufficient upsurge in renewables activity to counterbalance the issues in relation to oil and gas.

I assure Beatrice Wishart that those issues are regularly pressed with the United Kingdom Government. I want to ensure that it understands the significance of the impact of its decisions on Scotland. To be blunt, I do not think that it does understand that at the present moment, in any way, shape or form. The hardship and the impact on the Scottish economy and on households will be significant if the energy profits levy is not removed. We will be pressing for that to be done.

Resident Doctors (Pay Deal)

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The strike by resident doctors in England is a damning indictment on the Labour United Kingdom Government. Some 95,000 walked out in December 2025 alone. Noting the announcement this week on the situation in Scotland, will the First Minister join me in welcoming the pay deal for our doctors, and will he call on Anas Sarwar, and whichever of his colleagues still support him, to welcome that strong record of delivery for our dedicated national health service staff in Scotland?

The Presiding Officer: On devolved responsibilities, please, First Minister.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am delighted that, in exercising our devolved responsibilities, we have avoided a resident doctors strike in Scotland, unlike the rest of the United Kingdom. We now know that the United Kingdom Government is useless. We know that because Mr Sarwar has told us how useless the UK Prime Minister and the UK Government are.

I am so delighted that the negotiations by the Scottish Government and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and the commitment of the resident doctors have got us to a position where we have avoided industrial action, we have been able to open general practice walk-in clinics and we have falling waiting times—all because of the leadership of a Scottish National Party Government on health.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's questions.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In his response to questioning from Russell Findlay, the First Minister made remarks in relation to a meeting of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee on 27 January, when, apparently, the committee was presented with a code of conduct by the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, Jim Fairlie, in relation to bus passes.

However, the committee meeting in question was on 20 January. At that meeting, the minister took a unilateral decision to not share his code of conduct with the committee—nor did the minister press the motion on the Scottish statutory instrument before the committee. It was clear that the committee was not minded to support it.

It is the minister's incompetence that has been at the very heart of the delay in introducing legislation to remove bus passes from those committing antisocial behaviour on buses.

The Presiding Officer: On the point of order, Ms Webber.

Sue Webber: Will the First Minister now take the opportunity to correct the record to reflect the reality of events?

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Webber. That is not a point of order, as members' contributions are not a matter for the chair.

The First Minister: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I just want to make it clear that there is absolutely no reason whatsoever for me to change the *Official Report* of what I have said to Parliament today.

The Presiding Officer: Those are not points of order. We will now conclude First Minister's questions.

12:48

Meeting suspended.

12:50

On resuming—

Edinburgh South Community Football Club and Grass-roots Football

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I ask the people who are leaving the public gallery to do so as quickly as possible as we move to the next item of business, which is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20146, in the name of Daniel Johnson, on securing a long-term home for Edinburgh South Football Club and recognising the important role of grass-roots football. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I ask members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak button and I reiterate my appeal to those who are leaving the public gallery to do so quietly and as quickly as possible.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises what it sees as the significant contribution that Edinburgh South FC (ESFC) Inch Park Community Sports Club makes to grassroots sport and community participation across the Edinburgh Southern constituency; notes that the ESFC is one of the largest community football organisations in the country, with over 1,000 players across 75 teams, and supported by more than 200 volunteers; understands that the area of Inch Park, which is known locally as the "nursery site" has been identified as the preferred location for a new all-weather pitch and new changing facilities to support year-round participation and reduce cancellations; acknowledges that ESFC's plans have received support from the SFA; notes calls encouraging more local authorities and leisure centres to work alongside football clubs to secure sustainable long-term homes for clubs; believes that good access to high-quality and affordable football facilities is essential to supporting participation, improving health and wellbeing and offering opportunities for young people in communities across Scotland, and recognises what it sees as the important role that grassroots football clubs play nationwide in fostering inclusion, developing talent and strengthening communities.

12:50

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): [*Inaudible*.] My competence with the technology in the chamber is matched by my competence at football.

In these sorts of debates, many of us will say that we came into politics and the Parliament to make a difference, but we all know that it is the organisations in our communities that really can make that difference. I am in awe of what Edinburgh South Community Football Club and Inch Park Community Sports Club do. They are community wealth building in action. We have just passed legislation on that, and Inch Park

Community Sports Club was formed from an asset transfer.

Edinburgh South Community Football Club is one of the biggest footballing organisations not just in Edinburgh but across the country. It has 75 teams that play in boys', girls', women's and men's football, with more than 1,000 participants taking part weekly and more than 200 volunteers. The community sports club does so much more, by running free counselling, after-school clubs and so on. Those organisations are at the heart of the community of south Edinburgh and they support groups across the area.

Like many community sports clubs, they need to grow, expand and develop their facilities. They need 4G pitches to continue to compete at the right level, and they have land on their doorstep—it is tantalising. If members go down to Inch park and look through the railings, they will see what the council calls the nursery, which is just wide open land. There is a bit of concrete and some skips and other things there. Essentially, the council uses the area to store stuff. It is a perfect size for a football pitch and yet, despite pursuing the issue since 2018, the answer that the groups have been getting is, "Not quite yet. Let's have another look."

If we are serious about community empowerment and community wealth building, we cannot put this sort of problem in front of communities. We have to get behind them. The reality is that, despite all the meetings, we are not making progress. I was pleased that, when I pointed out to council officials that I had secured this debate, we got another meeting. I do not think that it should take a member of the Scottish Parliament lodging a motion to bring the issue to the Parliament to secure a meeting that was promised would be held in January just before Christmas.

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Ben Macpherson): I welcome this debate, particularly as I was formerly an under-12s player for Inch boys club. I also recognise the contributions that the Spartans Community Foundation has made in the north of the city. Is that not an example of what can be created when the council and other organisations work together? If there is anything that we in the northern and eastern sides of the city can do to support the contribution that Mr Johnson is trying to make on behalf of south Edinburgh, please can we do it?

Daniel Johnson: I am grateful to Ben Macpherson for intervening, although I think that he has shown that he is probably more qualified than I am to speak on the topic. His wider point is absolutely right: we need collaboration and co-operation and, critically, we need local authorities to come to the table and to work proactively with local organisations, because they have the wherewithal and structures to do that. Volunteers bring an awful lot of willingness and enthusiasm, but that must be facilitated.

Ultimately, we are talking about public assets and public land that belong to the people who are seeking to develop and use them. The issue has a long timeline. Plans looking at how the Inch park nursery site could be developed were commissioned in 2020. A masterplan designed in conjunction with the City of Edinburgh Council was submitted as part of an application for levelling up funding in 2022. Despite that effort and those detailed plans, and despite all the engagement, there has been a lack of progress.

I will widen out the subject. I recognise that not every member who signed my motion or will speak today wants to speak about Inch park, but community sport matters more widely. I note that Brian Whittle is going to speak, and I suspect that he is about to make a point about the hugely important wider health impacts of participation in sport. We know that sport is important for mental health. I am not necessarily good at playing team sport, but I know what I learned from doing that. If you play football or rugby at school, you learn about teamwork, discipline and communication. It is not all about becoming good at sport, because many people will not—I can attest to that—but you learn how to work with other people and you gain incredible health benefits.

I want the project to move forward, ending a situation in which people in the Inch look through the railings and wonder what they could do with the land if they were allowed to make better use of it and develop it. That land belongs to them. We were debating the Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill the other day and discussing what happens when communities are enabled and when there is a presumption that we will say yes to them. It does not feel as if that is happening here. We must bring the council to the table to get the plan moving. Rather than talk about storage facilities, or parking—that is what the council says the groups need to find—we should see that land being used for the people who live in the Inch.

That should be the wider approach. Land that is owned by the public should be used by the public for the benefit of the public. That is what community empowerment and community wealth building are about, and we need to see much more of it.

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

12:58

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I will not start by talking about my own

footballing prowess, because you have seen me play, Deputy Presiding Officer, and will be able to adjudicate on that. I will leave that subject there.

I am glad to speak in the debate, which reflects the importance of football and its benefits for the social wellbeing and health of our country. Football is also an economic driver and has a central importance to the lives of many in Scotland. There is nothing wrong with us returning to the subject of football, particularly in the context of Daniel Johnson's constituency interest.

I confess that I was not au fait with enough of the detail to feel confident in signing his motion, but I am sympathetic to it, and it has been interesting to hear what he said about Edinburgh South Football Club and Inch Park Community Sports Club. We need to see more of that approach across the country. I acquainted myself with some of the activities of Edinburgh South in advance of the debate, and I am impressed by the club's strong and clear commitment to supporting hundreds of players across all levels and abilities, right up to a first team that plays in the East of Scotland Football League. It reminded me of some of the clubs in my constituency, which I will return to later. In particular, it reminded me of Cumbernauld Colts Football Club, which was formed in the same year as Edinburgh South.

The fact that Edinburgh South has the Scottish Football Association quality mark and is a platinum legacy club testifies to its achievement—that is not an easy thing to achieve. I had a cursory glance at the league table and saw that Edinburgh South's first team is doing rather well in the east of Scotland league first division, which means that they will not be contesting against any of the four teams that play in the league system that are from my constituency, which is on the west side of the country. I am safe to say that I wish them well for the rest of the season.

I want to focus on the part of the motion about recognising the importance of the role of grass-roots football, as it impacts my constituency. Like others, we have a tremendous range of clubs operating at youth and amateur levels, and there is women's football as well. I place on record my thanks to all those clubs.

I will focus on two in particular. The first is the aforementioned Cumbernauld Colts, which, as I said, was formed in 1969, primarily as a youth club. As Edinburgh South does, the club supports hundreds of players across all ages and abilities, right up to a first team in the Scottish lowland league. I am concerned that, sometimes, the club does not get the support that it should get from the local authority.

Cumbernauld Colts, through the cashback for communities fund, was able to get an artificial surface installed at Broadwood. Thereafter, there were tensions between the club and the council in relation to utilising the stadium. That situation has improved a little; however, given that the club was the driving force in getting that surface installed, that should have been recognised a little more. We should also recognise that the club gives so much back to the town—if it were not there, there would be a significant hole to fill.

The other club that I want to mention is Kilsyth Athletic, which was founded in 1999 and which, again, supports hundreds of players from across the local area, ranging from youth football right up to a first team competing in the west of Scotland league. The club is based at Kilsyth sports field, where there are challenges. The site is not being maintained well enough by North Lanarkshire Council; effectively, it is used as a flood plain for the Garrel burn. Such things need to be managed, but that impacts on the ability to use the playing field. Simple things such as the car park being in disrepair cause problems for the club's ability to use it.

The club is interested to see a repair there and has identified people who might be able to do that, but it seems to be caught up in bureaucracy—the people who can do it are not an accredited provider with the council. We should be working around such things. We should be trying to make sure that things can happen for clubs such as Kilsyth Athletic, Cumbernauld Colts and—returning to Daniel Johnson's case—Edinburgh South.

They are important institutions, in terms of their contribution to the sport of football and their wider community contribution. They deserve our support. This summer, we will see the pinnacle of football: the world cup, which, thankfully, Scotland will play in. However, let us remind ourselves that football starts in the community and that we must do everything that we can to support community football clubs.

13:03

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank Daniel Johnson for securing this debate and for giving me the opportunity to speak. I did not have anything written down. I wondered where I would go with this—would I go in a different direction from the one I usually go in? No—I am going to go down exactly the same route.

When Daniel Johnson was talking about the impact that football, or any kind of sport, has on people at a young age, it struck me that it is about lifelong learning. My concern has always been for how the youth of today can have the same ability to participate that we had.

I recognise that I go back a wee bit further than a lot of people in the chamber, but I played football at school: in primary school, we played inter-school football tournaments, and my speed about the park ensured that I was the goalkeeper—talk me through that one. We had the opportunity to get on the bus on a Thursday afternoon and go to play. I was at Troon primary school; we played Symington and Dundonald and all the different primary schools. We had that opportunity to play.

In secondary school, I played rugby. My concern lies in the reduced ability or opportunities for our children to participate in sport these days, which I often talk about. I have used this example before, but when I was at Marr college, there was—

Daniel Johnson: Will the member give way?

Brian Whittle: Of course I will give way to Daniel Johnson.

Daniel Johnson: Brian Whittle raised an important distinction in what he said about primary school and secondary school. Some of the opportunities that exist at secondary school just do not exist at primary school. We see fewer and fewer dedicated physical education teachers at primary schools, and the opportunities to do PE and, critically, to take part in competitive sport are very different from what they were 30 or 40 years ago. I am not going to suggest how many years ago the member might have been at primary school, but—

Brian Whittle: Let us say 50.

Daniel Johnson: —does he agree with that point?

Brian Whittle: Daniel Johnson is absolutely correct. When I was at Marr college playing rugby, 36 schools in Ayrshire played rugby. Last time I looked, there were six. Grass-roots access to playing rugby is limited. My eldest grandson now plays for Marr college and he is on the Scottish Rugby pathway. He got on to that pathway by playing at the Marr rugby minis, and his coach was the captain of Kilmarnock rugby club, which I played with once I had retired from track and field. That coach has taken the school team right the way through to some fantastic results.

That whole system is now missing. I am not going to say, “In my day”; I think that those are dangerous words to use, because it is not that this is not my day. However, we have to find a different way. Daniel Johnson rightly talked about the impact of participating—the confidence and resilience, the aspiration, the teamwork and the discipline that sport brings to a rounded person. However, there has been a huge reduction in opportunities to participate, and there is now a cost associated with participation that many cannot meet.

If we really want to tackle poor physical and mental health and Scotland’s poor health record, we should start with community sport and community activity, because they are the foundation of how we tackle those things in the long term.

I will be really interested to hear what the minister says in responding to the debate. The Government always says, “We are putting more money into this and there is more money for that”, but in this case that is not true on the ground. I am still involved as a performance coach. When we look at what is happening on the ground, we see that, these days, sport is becoming the bastion of the middle class and private education. That has to change.

I am really thankful that Daniel Johnson has given me the opportunity to come out and say again the same thing that I always say, because it is hugely important.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Whittle. I can advise you that, although few football careers start in goal, many of them, as I know from experience, end in goal.

The final speaker in the open debate is Davy Russell.

13:08

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): I, too, thank my colleague Daniel Johnson for bringing the motion to Parliament for debate.

I love football. Believe it or not, I am still playing two or sometimes three games a week. I am getting a wee bit slower, but I get there. Although I do not know much about Edinburgh South Community FC, other than what I have found out from Daniel Johnson, football clubs in my area have the same problems.

When we talk about football, the most important word is “inclusion”. For decades, Scottish football has been a nucleus of inclusion in our communities, our cities and our schools. It crosses cultural and language barriers and allows people from vastly different backgrounds to play. Men, women, pensioners, including in walking football, and children—they all play footy. They celebrate together and, on occasion, commiserate. There are also some heated debates afterwards about whether something wis or wisnae a penalty.

That aside, football is tremendously important to our culture. Nowadays, we might think that we are known for whisky, haggis and Hogwarts, but I assure you that is disnae matter where you go on this planet, everybody knows Celtic and Rangers. They are known the world over. Unfortunately my

local team—Hamilton Accies—has not made it to that echelon. They have not played at Bernabeu stadium or Parc des Princes. Nevertheless, they are loved just the same.

There are tonnes of grass-roots football clubs, such as the ones in my constituency—Eddlewood Football Club, Fairhill amateurs, Larkhall Thistle and Mill United boys' club. Some amount of footballers come out of my constituency too—Phil O'Donnell, Jim Bett, Bobby Shearer and Ally Maxwell. There are a lot of good footballers, and they all started at grass-roots level in wee local teams. They went from boys' football up to amateur and then progressed further. There is step-by-step football development. Without local clubs and grass-roots football, Scotland probably widnae be in the World Cup this summer, because there widnae have been a route for the team to follow.

Local football clubs also help to foster healthy lifestyles, which was touched on earlier. The benefits are physical and mental, as people have the opportunity to take off the stress of day to day life and get away from the screens that dominate their days. The opportunity to be present in a team game is therefore more important than ever.

Local football teams also provide an opportunity for another role model in a child's life. Coaches—or a pal's dad, because nine times out of 10 that is who the coach is—volunteer and spend their free time managing the team. When my boy played on Saturday mornings—when I might have been hungover—I would be standing getting soaked with all of the other dads and some mums as well, watching them play football, and at the end of the game everyone would shake hands. A lot of friendships from then still carry on to this day.

The phrase it takes a village to raise a child comes to mind. The facilities and opportunities that are offered by clubs such as Edinburgh South are the modern equivalent of that.

I also take this opportunity to talk about Eddlewood Football Club. It is probably slightly behind in some respects, because it is not as big as other teams—although it has a big catchment area—but it recently completed a community asset transfer, so it is going to have a grass park and we are trying to get funding for an astroturf park. It will be a main community hub. It is fortunate that 2,000 brand new houses are being built near it, because that will help the footfall. The community development fund will also contribute to the upgrading of its facilities.

So far, it has raised money for solar panels and heat pumps. When I played with the club, there were cold water tanks for the showers, so we would be staunin under them. We actually only used to wash our boots in it; we didnae ago in the shower. The club is raising money and upgrading facilities, and just getting on with it.

Eddlewood and Edinburgh South are community exemplars. That is why I support the motion for a team from across the country. I had not heard much about Edinburgh South until I read the motion, but I whole-heartedly support and congratulate Edinburgh South. Congratulations for its efforts and being a community exemplar are well deserved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer : I call the minister, Maree Todd.

13:14

Maree Todd (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Tapadh leibh, Oifigeir Riaghlaidh. Thank you, Presiding Officer, and thank you to everyone who has contributed to this very interesting debate on the vital role that grass-roots football clubs such as Edinburgh South play in supporting and strengthening Scotland's communities.

We covered many of the same themes during George Adam's recent debate about the hugely positive impact that St Mirren has on its local community. What is evident, though, is that grass-roots clubs are just as important as professional clubs.

There are more than 2,500 clubs spread across the country, all providing opportunities for young people to engage in physical activity and be part of something that supports their mental and social health. Those community clubs do far more than simply develop players; they develop people. They give children and adults alike a place to belong, grow in confidence and build friendships that, as others have said, last far beyond the pitch. They teach teamwork, discipline, resilience and respect—qualities that matter just as much off the pitch as on it. For many young people, a coach can be one of the most influential adults in their lives, helping them to build character, confidence and self-belief.

Clubs are often run by volunteers, who give their time, energy and passion because they believe in what football can do. The dedication of the coaches, committee members, kit washers, drivers and parents standing in the rain keeps Scottish football moving forward. They are the unsung heroes who turn up long before sessions begin and leave long after they end, not for recognition but in the belief that football can change lives. Without them, our game would simply not exist.

Brian Whittle: Does the minister agree that, more than just enabling others to participate, volunteers are looking after their own health and

mental wellbeing and that they are participating in sport just as much?

Maree Todd: Absolutely. Volunteering is undoubtedly good for the person who volunteers. We think that it is an altruistic act, but it is actually pretty good for the volunteer, too. I am very proud of the number of young people who volunteer in sport in Scotland, and I would be delighted to encourage more to get involved.

When I was preparing for the debate, I reflected on a film premiere that I recently went to in my constituency. The seaboard villages, along with the Scottish Football Museum, created a film to celebrate 100 years of grass-roots football in that area. If anyone has a wee 45 minutes to spare, I suggest that they watch the film on YouTube. It is an illustration of the power of football and the inclusion that Davy Russell talked about—the community cohesion, social connection and the health and wellbeing impacts. We have some sporting excellence, too. Grass-roots clubs are essential for the future of Scottish football. Every professional player and Scotland international—every moment of national pride—has their roots in a local club, a dedicated coach and a community that believed in them.

For clubs across the country, the key challenges remain largely the same. The on-going challenge of recruiting and retaining volunteers to support increased participation and ensuring the affordability for families of sports participation, combined with the rising cost of living and the need to make accessible suitable facilities for clubs, is compounded by a continuing increase in demand. The Scottish Government understands the important role that sporting facilities play in improving people's lives, whether it is through their taking part in sport and physical activity for the first time or in developing, progressing or achieving success, with the physical, mental and social health benefits that that brings.

I agree with Daniel Johnson that good access to high-quality and affordable facilities is essential to support participation, whether that be in football or other sports. Edinburgh South is an SFA platinum quality mark accredited community club that has been operating for more than half a century. It runs teams for children, youth, boys, girls, senior men, women and amateurs. It represents more than 1,000 players, with 200 volunteer coaches and officials spread across 75 teams. According to the club, that makes it the second biggest community club in Scotland and the biggest in the east of Scotland.

Edinburgh South's ambition to improve its facilities and provide year-round participation and improved provision of changing rooms is absolutely to be commended. I urge partners to work together to achieve the best possible solution.

Daniel Johnson: I fear that I may have interrupted the minister when she was about to address this point. Jamie Hepburn and I are always slightly surprised when we alight on the same analysis. On Jamie's point about council bureaucracy sometimes getting in the way, how might the Scottish Government work with local authorities to make community empowerment a reality, especially—but not only—with a focus on community football?

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

Maree Todd: I was about to say that I am not sighted on the proposals or the specific issues. From what has been said today, I understand that, although the City of Edinburgh Council is not being obstructive, it is not providing much active support to the club as it seeks to develop its plans. I also understand that the consequences of that could be profound. Through funding from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, another round of SFA grass-roots funding is becoming available, and I understand that the club wants to catch that. I urge partners such as the council, the leisure facilities and any interested businesses—because, for business, it is a good investment in the local community—to get around the table and work collaboratively to solve those challenges.

We recognise that the operators of facilities face significant challenge as rising operational, energy and building materials costs place a real strain on resources. I am not sure whether concern over that is what is preventing the City of Edinburgh Council from getting involved. The cost of protecting and maintaining the existing infrastructure and developing new facilities has increased and continues to do so at an unprecedented rate. Sportscotland has undertaken a review of the condition and long-term investment needs of the sporting facilities estate, which will provide us with a better understanding of the current condition of the wider estate across Scotland and enable us to collectively work together.

No one party has the solutions, and I guarantee that the Government is keen to work with partners to address the problems that will be identified. We want to ensure a more affordable, inclusive and sustainable sporting facilities estate that provides more and better opportunities and that removes barriers to people's taking part. A huge investment from the Scottish Government and the national lottery, targeted by sportscotland, is going into facilities. Fundamentally, we want to support the unique reach of football and football clubs in Scottish society, to positively impact the physical and mental health and the wellbeing of our

communities. We announced extra funding for football in the run-up to the world cup, to support those outcomes, as part of a summer of sport package. We are working with partners on proposals for that.

I reiterate that we must not underestimate the huge value of grass-roots clubs in their local communities. I wish Edinburgh South all the best with its plans, and I am more than happy to hear of future developments.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate, and I suspend the meeting.

13:23

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Social Justice and Housing

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The next item of business is portfolio question time, and the portfolio this afternoon is social justice and housing.

Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Homelessness Prevention Pilots

2. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the pilot of the proposed “ask and act duty” related to the Housing (Scotland) Bill. (S6O-05508)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): The 15 pilot projects that will test out the ask and act concept started in mid-November last year, and they will run until the end of December this year. The pilots cover half of Scotland’s 32 local authority areas, including cities, towns, rural areas and islands. More than 70 organisations are taking part, from large health and social care bodies to small charities. The pilots will report at quarterly intervals and at the end of this calendar year. The first round of iterative reports are due this month. I thank everybody who is involved in the pilots for their commitment and leadership.

Colin Beattie: For the pilots to be successful, it is essential that support services and specialists serve communities. What steps has the Scottish Government taken to improve such services?

Màiri McAllan: The 2025 public service reform strategy commits to enabling communities to shape the services that matter most to the people living in the area. The pilots demonstrate that reform in practice. For example, Renfrewshire’s whole-system approach provides early assistance in communities and mental health wards; in North Ayrshire, early years services and health visitors refer families in need to upstream support; and, in North Lanarkshire, existing partnerships are being built on to support families through a collaborative hub, which includes those from health, social care and the police.

Learning from the pilots will improve services in communities so that people do not have to navigate multiple systems or repeat their stories a number of times, and so that they can get the support that they need early, before a point of crisis.

Adult Disability Payment (Application Process)

3. **Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures are in place to ensure that the adult disability payment application process is fully accessible to people with aphasia. (S6O-05509)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Social Security Scotland is committed to inclusive communication so that people with diverse communication needs, such as people with aphasia, can apply for adult disability payment in a way that is accessible to them. People can apply online, by post, over the phone or through face-to-face contact with local delivery staff, who can support people practically with the application process. The agency also funds independent advocacy services, which support people through the application process.

The Scottish Government's positive and compassionate approach ensures that access to adult disability payment is as straightforward as possible, so that more disabled people can get the support to which they are entitled.

Rona Mackay: In Strathkelvin and Bearsden, my constituents value the dignity that has been built into Scotland's system. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that stands in stark contrast to the approach of the United Kingdom Labour Government, which has retained the toxic Department for Work and Pensions culture that it inherited from the Tories, proving that, for disabled people, the only thing that changed at Westminster was the colour of the rosette?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary to respond on matters within her responsibilities.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The Scottish Government is exceptionally proud that the values of dignity, fairness and respect were built into the social security system by my colleague Jeane Freeman.

Rona Mackay has elaborated on exactly what a Labour Government does when it is in power. It cuts the level of fuel payments for pensioners and cuts benefits for disabled people. The cuts to universal credit are still in place, and it removed the two-child limit only when it was eventually shamed into it.

The First Minister has made it clear to disabled people's organisations that we will not move away from our system, which is based on dignity, fairness and respect, and we should rightly be proud of that.

Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (Aberdeen)

4. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on properties impacted by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in Aberdeen. (S6O-05510)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): I understand that Aberdeen City Council committed to making an enhanced voluntary acquisition offer to home owners in November last year. Since then, I understand that it has completed the purchase of 61 privately owned properties and that the remaining owners are obtaining and considering enhanced offers. I understand that the council is undertaking preparatory work ahead of demolition in Balnagask and that it is putting in place additional safety measures. I am assured that it is engaging with the Torry community campaign group to ensure that residents are supported throughout that process.

Future demolition works will be done in compliance with all necessary guidance and legislation, with a particular focus on not impacting existing properties with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete.

Liam Kerr: A report out today suggests that pressure will soon be applied to Aberdeen's RAAC victims to accept the council's final offer and move out before the bulldozers move in. Many want to accept the offer but do not have savings or are too old to qualify for loans to help them to find a new home. The report states that Aberdeen City Council, which is ever more out of its depth, needs help to get this right for the people of Torry.

I helped the Government to find £10 million to help to resolve the issue. Now, the people of Balnagask need the Government's time, as well as its money. Will the Government step in and assist the council, or has it washed its hands of the matter?

Màiri McAllan: I understand very well the stress and strain that residents who have RAAC in their properties have been living with. That is why I sat down with residents in Aberdeen and with members of the council to seek to broker progress, and it is why I pressed the council to conduct one-to-one meetings with residents and to continue that approach. It is also why I carefully considered Aberdeen City Council's request for funding flexibility, which has allowed it to free up £10 million. It is now for Aberdeen City Council, working in concert with local residents, to take matters forward in a locally appropriate way.

Social Security Scotland Staff (Training to Support Disabled People)

5. **Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what training Social Security Scotland staff receive in supporting disabled people to be physically active. (S6O-05511)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Social Security Scotland staff training focuses on disability awareness, equality and trauma-informed practice, which helps staff to understand how conditions affect daily living. The training is kept under regular review to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of disabled people and staff.

Although Social Security Scotland is not a healthcare provider and therefore does not deliver physical activity training, the Scottish Government encourages disabled people to improve their wellbeing through suitable physical activity. To support that, Scottish Disability Sport has invested £750,000 to expand opportunities nationwide.

Brian Whittle: As the cabinet secretary knows, I asked her a similar question in writing, and I was told that Social Security Scotland does not deliver such training because it is not a healthcare provider. It is true that physical activity benefits physical and mental health, but to suggest that the national health service is the only service that can provide such advice is absurd. If the purpose of Social Security Scotland is to help people with disabilities to have a better quality of life, rather than just being a vehicle to put money into their pockets, surely its staff should be trained to do something as basic as supporting people to lead a healthier life. We need to assure those with a disability that being active will not impact their benefits.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I agree with Brian Whittle's last point, which is that we need to encourage and support disabled people to be active. I do not doubt his sincerity on the issue one iota, but he is part of a Scottish Conservative Party that wants to place parts of the inhumane Department for Work and Pensions system back into the Scottish social security system. I have heard directly from disabled people that that will increase stigma and their fear.

In all honesty, I am quite happy to work with Brian Whittle to see what more can be done overall, but he must reflect on how his party is increasing stigma for disabled people across the country.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Social Security Scotland was established to deliver a more holistic approach to social security, including through preventing further decline in wellbeing. What active training do staff receive in order to understand the needs of disabled communities and groups such as veterans? Such training should include awareness of the impact that isolation and reduced physical activity can have on general wellbeing, physical and mental health, and recovery.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The agency, social security officials and ministers have had direct contact about particular aspects of how veterans access the social security system. The Scottish Veterans Commissioner has views about that, and Social Security Scotland is alive to those issues, because we want to ensure that everyone who is entitled to a benefit—which very much includes veterans—is encouraged and supported to apply. I would be happy to provide Paul Sweeney with further information about the work that the agency is doing with veterans on exactly that.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish Government's first annual joint meeting between the Cabinet and disabled people, which took place at the start of February. Will the cabinet secretary tell us more about the outcome of that meeting and about how disabled people's lived experience is helping to inform the work of Social Security Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I thank the disabled people's organisations and disabled people who came along to take part in the Cabinet takeover, which I hope will be the first of many. It was an informative discussion on a wide variety of issues.

I mentioned to Brian Whittle the fear that is being created by the increasing stigmatisation of disabled people and the way that they are discussed by certain sections of our media and by certain politicians. The Scottish Government is determined to ensure that we never move away from our principle of working with disabled people to ensure that our policies are right for them. I am proud of what we have done in relation to social security, and I am keen to work with disabled people to see what more we can do in the future.

Private Sector Tenants (Discretionary Housing Payments)

6. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the support provided through discretionary housing payments for households in the private rented sector that rely on local housing allowance to pay their rents but face a shortfall due to LHA rates. (S6O-05512)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): The Scottish Government invests significantly in discretionary housing payments to support households that are struggling with

housing costs. In the current financial year, we have made available £100 million, including £10.9 million to mitigate the impact of the frozen local housing allowance rates and more than £79 million to ensure that no one in Scotland pays Labour's bedroom tax.

The United Kingdom Government's decision to maintain the freeze in LHA rates in 2026-27 is more than disappointing. It will widen the gap between housing support and rents, and it will cause harm and increase homelessness in Scotland. The Scottish ministers have repeatedly urged the UK Government to act on LHA rates. On 30 January, I wrote to my counterpart in the UK Government to highlight the impact of the freeze on homelessness and poverty, and I reiterated my calls when I met Steve Reed on 4 February.

Bob Doris: The cabinet secretary's answer highlights the fact that the UK Government's flawed approach to local housing allowance for the private rented sector means that low-income households in receipt of benefits do not receive enough money to pay their rent, with the Scottish Government seeking to plug that gap through discretionary housing payments. Will the Scottish Government consider reforming DHPs—some councils have called for greater flexibility and additional resource—and will it continue to urge Westminster to review LHA rates, which are currently frozen and which significantly penalise the under-25s?

Màiri McAllan: I agree with Mr Doris. We will continue to act where we can within devolved powers, but our call is clear: the UK Government must unfreeze local housing allowance rates and ensure that they permanently reflect at least the 30th percentile of local rents. Research by the Resolution Foundation estimates that doing so would lift 75,000 children out of poverty by the end of the current parliament at Westminster. The fact that a Labour Government refuses to take action that could free 75,000 children from the pain of poverty tells us everything that we need to know about UK Labour.

Homeless Households (Permanent Accommodation)

7. **Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to help people in homeless households into permanent accommodation. (S6O-05513)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): To support people into permanent homes, the Scottish Government is supporting implementation of rapid rehousing and significantly increasing the supply of affordable and social housing.

The Scottish budget will deliver £926 million of investment in affordable housing in the next financial year, which represents the largest single allocation on record to affordable housing. It also includes £15.5 million in measures to address and prevent homelessness, including £8 million to deliver rapid rehousing transition planning, which is vital.

The establishment of a new housing agency will advance progress towards our housing ambitions and will help us to deliver our new target of providing 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, at least 70 of which will be for social rent and 10 per cent of which will be located in rural and island Scotland.

Murdo Fraser: The reality is that the Scottish National Party has been in power for nearly two decades, and we currently have a record-breaking number of 10,480 children in temporary accommodation. Does the cabinet secretary accept that that crisis requires a significant increase in the delivery of social housing, which has fallen to its lowest level since 2017? Does she recognise that, when housing shortages are so acute, the Scottish Government should be prioritising those who already have a local connection to Scotland?

Màiri McAllan: I am exceptionally proud of the Scottish Government's record on the delivery of affordable homes. Since we came into government, 141,000 affordable homes have been delivered in Scotland, 101,000 of which are for social rent, which is the most affordable form of rent.

The recent homelessness statistics, which were published last week, continue to point to the strain in supply and demand of housing in Scotland, which is similar across the UK, but there are signs in those statistics that the Government's investment is working. In particular, I draw attention to the fact that we are now seeing substantial drops in the number of households with children that are in unsuitable temporary accommodation.

However, I reassure Murdo Fraser that a combination of that record funding for affordable homes, coupled with the greatest multi-annual certainty that we have ever offered and the development of the agency, will mean that supply and demand are brought back into balance.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I have a constituent who is homeless and is staying with his mother following the break-up of a relationship. He has applied for permanent two-bedroom accommodation, which is required for him and his two children, because he shares residency on an equal basis with their mother. However, Midlothian

Council will allocate only one-bedroom accommodation because he does not receive child benefit. That is usually okay as a test, but I would argue that that is not so in this case. Does the cabinet secretary agree that my constituent requires two-bedroom accommodation because he shares residency equally with his former partner, and that allocation should not be based simply on which party receives child benefit?

Màiri McAllan: I thank Christine Grahame for drawing my attention to her constituent's case. The decision about housing allocation will be determined by the local authority, which is the authority with the statutory responsibility for housing. However, I will take away the point that Christine Grahame made about the interaction of housing allocation and social security, and I will write to her about that.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): People can find themselves homeless for a variety of reasons and they deserve a warm, habitable space as well as being treated with dignity. This week, I heard from a constituent who was moved from emergency accommodation six years ago. He describes now living in an old, cold and damp house. What more can the Scottish Government do, considering the average age of housing stock, to ensure that both permanent and emergency forms of accommodation are in good condition?

Màiri McAllan: I could point Beatrice Wishart to a number of measures and I am grateful to her for raising the matter with me. Perhaps the most relevant example involves the regulations to implement Awaab's law in Scotland, which I recently put before the Parliament. These regulations are intended to ensure that cases of damp and mould are inspected quickly and dealt with promptly by landlords in the social and private rented sectors. We would all agree that the roll-out of that law across Scotland will ensure that no one has to live in a damp and mouldy home.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): This SNP Government is committed to ensuring that everyone in Scotland has access to a warm, affordable home. Can the cabinet secretary explain how the 2026-27 Scottish budget invests significantly in homelessness prevention and measures to help people to remain in their homes? Will she join me in calling on colleagues across the chamber to vote for those measures in the budget process that will follow in the coming weeks?

Màiri McAllan: I absolutely join Willie Coffey in that call to support the Scottish Government's budget. There are very clear reasons to do so if members are concerned about the housing conditions of people in Scotland. The budget contains the largest allocation of capital funding for affordable homes that we have on record since 1989. It includes a record £106 million for discretionary housing payments, which is an increase of £6 million, and a series of other measures that will improve the housing situation in Scotland and do what this Government is determined to pursue, which is exactly as Willie Coffey put it, that everyone should have the right to a warm and secure home.

Seasonal Workers (Accommodation)

8. **Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its work to ensure that seasonal workers can expect to be provided with accommodation which meets agreed standards during their stay in Scotland. (S6O-05514)

The Cabinet Secretary for Housing (Màiri McAllan): I thank Richard Leonard for his question and his continued interest in this important area. As we discussed in our meeting on 29 January, the Scottish Government simply will not accept that people should need to live in substandard accommodation in Scotland. As I indicated during our meeting, I am committed to addressing the gap in legal standards, but that will take time for officials to complete. In the meantime, I have also made it clear that I expect local authorities to exercise their duties to create byelaws to further protect seasonal workers.

As I committed to Richard Leonard to do, I will be writing to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on this matter very soon. By way of an update, since our initial scoping work concluded, officials have been exploring what provisions are already in place and the potential to include seasonal worker accommodation standards in the existing regulatory framework.

Richard Leonard: I thank the cabinet secretary for that reply and for meeting me and the Worker Support Centre just last month. I have raised the absence of any accommodation standards for migrant seasonal workers repeatedly in this Parliament. Low-paid migrant seasonal workers, crammed six to a damp, mouldy, dilapidated, unsafe caravan, are having £2,000 deducted from their wages every month for rent. Now we are told that local councils and national Governments have had the power to introduce standards going all the way back to 1987, but, in four decades, nothing has been done and no protections are in place.

No other housing standards in Scotland are left to the discretion of local authorities or to the vagaries of local byelaws. What is it about those migrant workers that they are being discriminated against in this way?

Màiri McAllan: The Government has always been clear that there are existing provisions. They

are in sections 314 and 315 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 and they oblige a local authority to make byelaws with respect to accommodation for agricultural and seasonal workers. Where there is extant law, my first priority is to make sure that it is being used, as opposed to layering on top of that further law that complicates the scenario. I again call on local authorities that have such practices happening in their areas to use the existing law and to make provision in their areas.

Mr Leonard and the Worker Support Centre are absolutely right that current housing standards do not cover agricultural seasonal workers' mobile homes. As I have committed to him and to the Worker Support Centre, we are currently working to develop that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio questions on social justice and housing. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business, to allow front-bench teams to change position.

Sentencing and Penal Policy Commission

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Angela Constance on the sentencing and penal policy commission. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement; therefore, there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:52

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): In my statement to the Parliament on 3 February, I announced my intention to lay regulations to change the automatic release point for some short-term prisoners to 30 per cent of their sentence. I am taking that action because the prison population remains unsustainably high and to ensure that the prison estate is safe for those who work and live there. The decision was not taken lightly, and public safety and the protection of victims remain priorities.

Before making regulations to change the release point, Scottish ministers must, by law, consult a range of named organisations, as well as any other persons they consider appropriate. The Scottish Government wrote to the consultees after my statement to the Parliament last Tuesday, and 28 responses were received. A broad range of views were expressed, and it will not be possible to outline all of those to the Parliament today; however, in the interests of transparency, it is my intention to publish responses that were shared during the consultation, where permission is given. My officials have written to respondents to seek their permission to share the responses that were provided.

In general, there was a recognition of the impact and risks of having a high prison population. Some respondents felt that the proposals were necessary to mitigate those impacts; others wanted the focus to be on longer-term reform to address underlying drivers of the prison population, alongside an analysis of the measures undertaken. I will say more today on the need for that change to be delivered alongside longer-term reform.

A range of issues were raised by consultees, including the need for clearer information for victims and the wider public on release arrangements, to support public protection and to manage the impact on demand for public sector services and on the community, and, consequently, the impact that that could have on the outcomes for those being released.

I have listened to those views, and I and my officials will continue to work with stakeholders on all aspects of delivery. The Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service will work with victim support organisations to raise awareness of those changes and to encourage those who are eligible to sign up to the victim notification scheme to do so. When a release date changes as a result of the legislation, all registered victims will be notified of the new release date in advance.

It is critical that partners have time to plan and prepare support for people who are leaving custody. That is why the changes will not take effect until after the early emergency release scheme ends, in April. Those who are eligible for immediate release will be released in tranches, to help to manage the impact on community services. I am committed to reviewing the impact of those changes next year.

I have always been clear that there is no single or simple solution to an issue that has been faced elsewhere in the United Kingdom and beyond. However, there are solutions that do not compromise public safety. As a Parliament and as a society, we need to discuss how we can achieve a system in which justice is served and the right balance between effective community justice and imprisonment is struck.

I am therefore pleased that the independent sentencing and penal policy commission published its final recommendations last week. I am grateful to the commissioners and the chair, Martyn Evans, for the diligent work that they have carried out. Their detailed report offers us a clear opportunity to rethink our approach as a country. By following the evidence, we can continue to safeguard the public and prioritise victims while accepting that simply increasing the prison population does not make Scotland safer. A renewed focus on prevention and reducing reoffending will lead to better outcomes for individuals, communities and our justice system as a whole.

I will set out today the Government's response in principle to the commission's most central recommendations, but more in-depth consideration of the 73 recommendations will be required. Ultimately, it will be for a new Government and Parliament to make decisions on the changes that are needed.

The commission has recommended a prohibition on sentences of less than one year, subject to clarity on legislative competence, and an extension of the presumption against short sentences to sentences of two years or less. We will explore those recommendations carefully and engage with the UK Government, given that some short sentences are imposed in reserved areas of law. However, I note that the UK Government has introduced a similar presumption.

Although there is a longer-term trend away from shorter sentences, a high number of them continue to be imposed. In 2023-24, 73 per cent of short-term sentences were for less than 12 months, and a further 15 per cent were for 24 months or less. We know that community sentences can be more effective in reducing reoffending than short sentences are and that short sentences can disrupt lives and adversely affect employment opportunities, housing stability and access to healthcare. Indeed, the reconviction rate for those who were given community payback orders in 2021-22 was 28.4 per cent, compared with 52.6 per cent for those who completed custodial sentences of one year or less. However, as the commission points out,

"If greater numbers of people are to be sentenced in the community, victims' interests, safety, and confidence must be"

central, and that

"shift must be accompanied by clear safeguards and credible measures that protect victims".

I agree with the commission's observation that investment is needed to

"underpin delivery of high quality community disposals".

The Government will invest a further £10 million in community justice services in 2026-27, taking our total investment to a record £169 million. That increase builds on additional investment of £25 million over the past two years, underlining the Government's commitment to strengthening community justice across Scotland.

In line with the recommendations, we will also focus on simplification, flexibility and enhancing support, recognising that tailored and targeted interventions that address the drivers of offending behaviour can often be more effective.

The commission also recommends explicitly excluding the possibility of remand in cases in which

"there is no real prospect of"

a short custodial sentence. Significant progress has been made in relation to that via the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Act 2023, which introduced a new bail test that is aimed at ensuring that remand is used as a last resort. We are seeing an increase in the capacity of, and confidence in, alternatives to remand, with a total of 1,500 bail supervision cases in 2024-25. I note that a recent change has been made in England and Wales to apply fewer exceptions to bail where there is no real prospect of an immediate custodial sentence. We will be able to learn from their experience.

The commission recommends that different uses of electronic monitoring technology be considered. There has already been sustained progress in relation to that, with almost 2,500 people being electronically monitored on any given day. The Scottish Prison Service expects to make use of GPS for home detention curfews in the next few months, and we will consider where else that technology can be deployed.

The commission also makes a clear recommendation on the release point for long-term prisoners. As I have previously stated to the Parliament, I remain committed to reviewing that in order to achieve a better balance between time spent in custody and time spent in the community under strict licence conditions as part of a person's overall sentence. Having looked at the evidence, the commission considered that extended supervision would be beneficial to the management of risk as well as for reducing reoffending. We will carefully consider the commission's recommended option of reverting to the release point of two thirds of the way through a sentence, which was in place prior to 2016.

As the commission points out, Scotland is not uniquely criminal and should not inherently have a higher prison population than any other country. It has provided us with the opportunity to make bold, evidence-based changes across the justice system, and, once again, I thank it for its commendable work.

We must be open-minded and collaborative, as other countries have been. Where safe, appropriate and more effective alternatives to prison exist, we should use them. The evidence clearly shows that a high prison population does not equal a safer society. Instead, the recommendations can support a reduction in reoffending and, therefore, a continued reduction in crime. We all want to see that.

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

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I am amazed that a Government that has insufficient time to consult on non-fatal strangulation or to consider a prostitution bill deems a three-day consultation with 28 unpublished responses to be authoritative. However, that speaks to this knee-jerk, unstrategic response to a prison crisis that is of the Scottish National Party's making.

In response to Teresa Medhurst telling the Criminal Justice Committee yesterday of the risk of a "catastrophic failure" in our prisons, this afternoon the SNP will vote through what she described as a budget allocation that falls short of what the Scottish Prison Service needs to reach the full range of the delivery agenda, to bring much-needed improvements and to ease current pressures.

Given that Martyn Evans cautioned against the mass early release of prisoners under so-called emergency schemes, which return inmates to the community without adequate support and increase the likelihood of reoffending, does the cabinet secretary acknowledge that the early release of prisoners was the wrong thing at the wrong time?

Some 800,000 hours of unpaid community sentence work remained outstanding across Scotland last year. What evidence shows that a mass influx of new criminals will improve that figure or the outcomes of such sentences?

The cabinet secretary insists that short sentences do not work, but she is reducing the time served to only 30 per cent of a sentence, which will mean more short sentences. Is that not just another example of the confused, muddled thinking that permeates the Scottish Government's response to the prisons crisis?

Angela Constance: I recently received correspondence from Mr Kerr that is in the same vein as his questions to me. What I have heard are knee-jerk quotes and a knee-jerk response to a substantive piece of work. If we do not want to have to continue deciding on short-term emergency measures, we have to find the space for, and build a consensus around, longer-term solutions while bearing in mind that the evidence points to the fact that a high prison population does not equate to a safer Scotland.

I am hearing nothing from Mr Kerr other than some policy wonk language about the need to develop a cohesive, long-term, holistic strategy. As soon as there is an attempt to do that, he dismisses outright all solutions. It sounds to me as if the Tories really do not want to find a solution.

On the member's specific questions—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

Angela Constance: —the consultation was necessarily short, for reasons that I have explained and because I was mindful of the need for good parliamentary scrutiny. In the coming year, if the budget passes, £1 billion will be invested in prisons.

On the member's questions about community payback orders, as I think we all know—certainly, anybody who understands how community payback orders work will know—people who have been instructed by the courts to do 200 or 300 hours of unpaid work do not do that work in all weeks, so there will be outstanding hours at any

given time. The use of community payback orders is increasing.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Scottish Labour is concerned about how the public now view sentencing in Scotland's justice system. There have been constant changes to how long short-term prisoners are kept and to the time that they spend in our jails. Communities are feeling uneasy and are finding it difficult to follow how sentencing works in Scotland. Only a year ago, short-term prisoners served 50 per cent of their sentence. Today, or soon, it will be 30 per cent, and we know that that is driven by high prison numbers.

Over a long time, I have listened to successive cabinet secretaries talk about alternatives to custody. It is fair to ask what groundwork has been done in those 19 years and what long-term thinking has been done over the period, so that the cabinet secretary can confidently say that the Government has robust alternatives to custody.

I thank the Scottish sentencing and penal policy commission for its work, in which it recommends a presumption against sentences of up to two years, potentially, whereas the Government is looking at short-term sentences of a year or less.

If any serious long-term thinking has been done, can the cabinet secretary say with confidence that she will be able to implement the proposal fully and soon, using electronic monitoring? And does that mean using GPS technology? That would be the first step, at least, in providing some confidence in the Government's thinking here.

Angela Constance: I agree with Ms McNeill about the public understanding of sentencing in Scotland and the structures of the sentences that prisoners serve. I accept that point and, indeed, the points that are raised in the sentencing and penal policy commission's report about the need to improve public understanding of how sentencing works. That understanding is crucial for confidence.

On the point about increasing public confidence, however, we have to be prepared to step back from campaigning and build consensus around what actually works to keep our communities safe. We owe that to the communities that we seek to serve and, not least, to victims.

I speak as a cabinet secretary who has written parole reports and supervised community payback orders. I am also the cabinet secretary who has substantially increased investment in community justice services. If the budget passes, I will have increased it by £35 million in total. Over the past decade or so, there has been an increase in excess of 50 per cent in investment in justice social work.

On the points that have been made about technology, although all those matters need to be carefully considered and managed, it is important to build on the substantial progress that has been made in electronic monitoring and to take it to the next level. I believe that that will be important in reducing reoffending and increasing victims' confidence.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): In the vein of what we have just been talking about, the cabinet secretary and the commission have acknowledged that victim safety must be at the centre of sentencing policy. If changes to the justice system are being implemented, what assurances can you give that that will be done hand in hand with public safety?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always speak through the chair.

Angela Constance: Protecting victims and the public from harm is and always will be our absolute priority, and that is consistent with our aims for community justice. As a Government, we have seen crime reduce, and we all want that to continue so that we have fewer victims and safer communities.

The evidence shows that community justice can be more effective than short custodial sentences in reducing reoffending and assisting with rehabilitation. However, as I said in my statement, we are also clear that, if more people are to be managed in the community, victims' interests, safety and confidence must be at the heart of the changes. If society is to have confidence in the system, clear safeguards and credible measures will need to be in place. That is an important point to reiterate following my exchange with Ms McNeill and others on the importance of electronic mechanisms.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): New figures published today by the Scottish Grocers Federation show that 99.6 per cent of convenience stores now experience shoplifting daily, almost four in five report increased violence, and more than three quarters of staff suffer mental health issues as a direct result of retail crime. With the presumption against short sentences, has the cabinet secretary in effect decriminalised shoplifting in Scotland?

Angela Constance: Absolutely not. It is important to remember that a sentence in this country can be a custodial sentence, but we also sentence people in the community either to attend supervision or to undertake unpaid work.

Ms Dowey might be interested to know that the commission made some interesting recommendations on how to respond to prolific offenders. Perhaps what needs to be done

involves new and extended supervision arrangements.

Ms Dowey will be aware of the work that we are doing on retail crime, which is important given its links to serious organised crime and the cost of living crisis. We continue to invest in the retail crime task force. I hope that the Conservatives will welcome that, because it is £9 million in the next three years. That is an important point and, I hope, a reason to support the budget later.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): As the independent commission examined how Scotland can achieve a sustainable prison population, does the cabinet secretary agree that the report's recommendations can serve as a useful contribution to a wider societal discussion about how we can achieve that end?

Angela Constance: In short, yes, I do. Although the steps taken by this Government have been necessary to provide immediate relief to ensure that prisons are safe and effective, I have always been clear that a long-term change in our approach to custody is needed to strengthen the justice system and align Scotland with other western nations that have tackled the issue successfully.

This is a complex subject to which there should be no knee-jerk reaction. We should have a sensible, considered and mature discussion that is based on the commission's evidence and the report that we have seen, to ensure that we get a balance where justice is served for victims, public safety remains paramount and our prison population is sustainable.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): In the "Justice That Works" report, emphasis was put on the importance of rehabilitation, but we have heard today that some prisoners will be released after serving only 30 per cent of their sentence. Teresa Medhurst has talked about the ageing estate resulting in "catastrophic failure" and commented on a bottleneck in the rehabilitation services that we are talking about. Is it not the case that the proposal is setting up prisoners to fail and, more important, putting communities at risk, with prisoners being released without rehabilitation, while we shift to community sentencing?

Angela Constance: I appreciate Mr Whitfield's interest and, in particular, his interest in rehabilitation. It is important to recognise a couple of factors. The majority of short-term prisoners are released under no compulsion and are automatically released with no supervision. There are important safeguards in this measure, in that some offenders are excluded from the release programme.

With previous release programmes, we found that the rate of return to custody varied between 5 and 13 per cent. That is because of the extensive work by partnership organisations, justice social work services and the third sector in supporting the Prison Service when it identifies people who will be released earlier. Those people are all returning to our communities, and the pre-release work that is done by Upside and justice social work speaks to what we should more routinely do with short-term prisoners in the future.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): The commission has made several recommendations that emphasise the importance of prevention. Does the cabinet secretary agree that effective prevention policies require a cross-portfolio and integrated approach to take account of the impact of varying societal factors, such as health and housing?

Angela Constance: We know that people who are in contact with the justice system experience multiple and severe disadvantage. Intervening at the earliest stage and ensuring effective education and access to healthcare, housing and other support services are all vital aspects of preventing crime in the first place, which ensures safer communities and fewer victims. That is why, for example, our vision for justice is aligned with keeping the Promise and recognises the importance of having partners working together to ensure that appropriate support and intervention are delivered. We also know that early intervention can allow individuals to address a range of needs that can contribute to offending or to the risk of offending behaviour. Dealing with all of that is in the wider interest of our communities.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to Martyn Evans and the commission for their detailed and well evidenced recommendations. There is substantial evidence about how poverty, trauma and inequality drive offending and about the lifelong negative impact of incarceration on women and other marginalised groups. Given that, and following on from Fulton MacGregor's question, will the cabinet secretary commit to clear, whole-Government engagement that links justice reform with anti-poverty and public health strategies? Will she also ensure that there are equality impact assessments of high imprisonment rates, early release measures and the potential reforms, particularly for women, young people, disabled people and racialised minorities?

Angela Constance: There was a lot in Ms Chapman's ask. I give her a commitment that I will take that away and respond to her formally in detail. Her point about inequality is well made. We need a whole-system approach, and the

commission's report is challenging on the issue of what more must be done to embed prevention.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Scottish Liberal Democrats have long been clear that investment in community sentencing is vital if we are to tackle Scotland's staggeringly high prison population level, which is both unsafe and unsustainable. I therefore welcome the commission's report. Whatever the make-up of the next Government, it will have to review and appropriately take forward the recommendations.

If the measures are to be effective, they must command the confidence and consent of victims, courts, the police and communities, so will the cabinet secretary set out what stakeholder engagement she believes will be necessary to ensure that the reforms work in the interests of victims and communities?

Angela Constance: It is important that all the recommendations are given careful consideration and prioritisation and that we do that work alongside all our justice partners. I am happy to engage further because, as I said earlier, building consensus about what will work to make our communities safer is something that I have campaigned for during most of my adult life.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Given the value and importance of community payback orders in reducing reoffending, does the cabinet secretary agree that those who are released early from prison should undertake work in the community throughout the time that they would otherwise have served in jail? For example, there is rubbish scattered along the verges of our trunk and country roads, and I am sure that having several hundred extra pairs of hands tackling that would make a huge difference, while helping offenders to productively pay their debt to society.

Angela Constance: That is a really good question and a really interesting point. Although community payback orders and unpaid work can be used as alternatives to custody, they are a sentence in their own right, and we do not currently have the legal powers to impose another sentence on a sentenced prisoner. Some very interesting work was undertaken in Denmark, where more than 3,500 people were released from prison via a community service programme. There is much to learn in that regard from our European friends and neighbours, and I think that that would also help to alleviate public concerns.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It would be good to have some honesty from the cabinet secretary on the matter. All the issues arise because of the SNP's total mismanagement of the Scottish prison estate and the justice system as a whole. When the cabinet secretary says that a high prison population level does not equal a safer society, that is illogical. Removing dangerous and violent criminals from the streets make those streets safer. Of course it does—it is illogical to suggest otherwise.

I can tell members how the public view these things: they view the SNP's justice policy as soft touch and lenient to the point of pandering to the offenders. Even the content of the commission's report picks up on that. How can the cabinet secretary possibly repeat that victims and community safety are a priority for the SNP, when the SNP is busy releasing serious criminals back into the community?

Angela Constance: The vast majority of prisoners will one day return to our community and it is beholden on us all to make sure that they return to our community in a far better position to lead a life and make a contribution. At a fundamental level, our justice system is about prevention, punishment and deterrence, but it is also about rehabilitation. I would happily discuss that further with Mr Kerr in detail, because I know that he has strong views on and experience of the justice system. With the greatest respect to him, we have to have the honesty to look at the evidence and engage with people—yes, to discuss and debate, but also to act and to decide what will work to keep people safe.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): On the issues that have been raised already in relation to reoffending, although prison sentences will always be required, evidence shows that community-based sentences reduce reoffending and relieve the pressures on prison populations, including at HMP Dumfries, as well as addressing the cost of prisons to the public purse. Does the cabinet secretary have any comparative figures for retaining someone in the prison population as opposed to giving them a community-based sentence?

Angela Constance: It is difficult to make those comparisons. As I have said before, the annual cost per prison place in 2024-25 was £52,260, so, in my view, investing in community sentences rather than short custodial sentences to deliver justice and reduce reoffending is a more effective use of taxpayers' money. That is why, in the upcoming budget, I will invest a further £10 million in community justice services, which will take our total investment in them to £169 million.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Does the cabinet secretary support the report's bizarre, madcap proposal to rebrand automatic early release as "supervised reintegration"? If she has any hope of making the streets of Scotland safer, should she not pursue this simple plan—to build more prisons?

Angela Constance: The Conservatives, as per usual, are tough on rhetoric and soft on solutions. We are building more prisons in Scotland. The problem with the Conservatives is that they want to put all their eggs in one basket, and that is a prison-building programme.

Look at the evidence: there is not one cause and there is not one solution to the issue, so we need to get serious. Yesterday, Mr Kerr the Younger referred to me as "Pollyanna"; I live in hope that, even on the Conservative benches, there will be some people who will see sense—indeed, perhaps they will even see common sense—and be prepared and have the courage to follow the evidence about what will work and will, at the end of the day, make our communities safer.

The evidence shows that a high prison population level does not equate to a safer Scotland. If other countries can make reforms to their prison population without compromising public safety, why cannot Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement. Before we move to the next item of business, there will be a short pause to allow the front-bench teams to change position.

Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-20720, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill at stage 1. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

15:25

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Shona Robison): I am very pleased to open this stage 1 debate on the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill. The budget invests £68 billion in Scotland's families; in the essential services that support them, such as the national health service; and in the infrastructure that underpins our national prosperity. With the support of members across the chamber, the choices that we have made will be felt meaningfully by people here in Scotland.

This budget will give every primary school child in Scotland the chance to learn to swim; it will establish new high street general practitioner walk-in centres and provide almost £22.5 billion to deliver and reform the health and care services that we all rely on; it will encourage entrepreneurship by providing support and funding to our young future business leaders; and it is expected to leave more than half of Scottish taxpayers with more money as a result of living here in Scotland.

Since the draft budget was introduced, the Government has engaged widely across the Parliament and beyond. We have listened carefully to the views of committees, local government, business, the third sector and wider civic society, and I have valued my constructive discussions with Opposition members and parties across the chamber. As the First Minister noted earlier, such engagement helps to ensure that we have the best support for the people of Scotland. I am therefore very pleased that the Liberal Democrats have confirmed their support for the budget.

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

Shona Robison: I will give way to Craig Hoy, who, of course, has not managed to secure anything through the budget process. I am sure that he will be full of suggestions.

Craig Hoy: I would not want our party's name associated with anything in this budget because, at the end of the day, this Scottish Government—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

Craig Hoy: This Scottish Government has just said that it has engaged positively with stakeholders. What does she say to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which says that the budget is insufficient to avoid significant cuts or large increases to council tax?

Shona Robison: I had an excellent meeting with COSLA group leaders yesterday, including the Conservative group leader, and I have had lots of messages today welcoming the money for the real living wage and the additional money for social care.

It will go on the record that Craig Hoy does not welcome anything in the budget. All the money for affordable housing, all the money to support businesses, all the money to support children and families—Craig Hoy does not support a penny of it. I think that that will haunt him for some time to come.

We have also been transparent that this is a budget in which we have had to make difficult choices. With increasing demand on public services and low funding growth, there have to be trade-offs. However, I am confident that the choices that we have made are ones that will secure a fair, healthy and prosperous society for Scotland's people.

Tackling child poverty remains the Government's top priority, and the budget sets out investment that will make a material difference to families across Scotland. For example, by August 2027, we will deliver a universal breakfast club offer for primary school children and will increase wraparound activity clubs for those children. We are also investing more than £111 million in our tackling child poverty fund and in whole family support to provide wraparound support to families in poverty.

Support for the most vulnerable includes universal services such as free prescriptions and university tuition—services that this Government chooses to continue to invest in.

I turn to non-domestic rates. I committed to passing on to hospitality any additional consequential funding from the United Kingdom Government's recent announcement on business rates for pubs and music venues in England. We consulted the business community prior to finalising our package, and I confirm that the Scottish Government will provide 25 per cent additional relief for the next three years for licensed hospitality and music venues that are on the basic or intermediate property rates, including pubs, restaurants, hotels, nightclubs and licensed clubs.

Along with the 15 per cent relief for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors for properties on the basic or intermediate property rate, which was announced at the budget, total relief for eligible licensed hospitality premises and music venues will be 40 per cent for the next three years—capped at £110,000 per business per year. The Scottish Fiscal Commission will cost that, but we estimate that it will provide about £9 million of additional support during 2026-27.

I have also listened to concerns that have been raised by those in the self-catering sector. I will introduce a specific revaluation transitional relief for that sector, which will cap increases in gross liabilities due to revaluation at 15 per cent year on year, up to the next revaluation.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Some would say that we are short of money for social work, care and other things while some hospitality businesses are very profitable. They are expanding, busy and doing very well, so why should they get more support?

Shona Robison: I take John Mason's point, but we also have to ensure that our hospitality sector, which is the life-blood of many towns and villages across Scotland, can continue. Given all the headwinds that it has had, such as the increase in employer national insurance contributions and the hike in VAT, which has put up the cost of all produce, we believe that the package is appropriate. We estimate that the measures will provide about £40 million in additional relief in the next three years, which demonstrates our commitment to supporting business.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I welcome the measures that have been set out. In my constituency, some businesses were going to have their profits wiped out altogether, so I hope that the changes will make a significant difference to them. It is not only for one year, either; it is for three. However, what lessons can we learn from the valuation process? We cannot come back here again to discuss the issue every time that we have a valuation problem.

Shona Robison: Revaluation is an independent process, as agreed by the Parliament. There are always winners and losers in such processes, but I am sure that there will be reflection on how we ensure that transitional relief is received when it is required. There are always lessons to be learned.

Although the budget is rooted firmly in the Government's priorities, it has also been shaped by meaningful engagement with others, with whom we identified many areas of common ground. That included a shared priority across parties to support our Scottish colleges. I welcome the positive recognition of the 10 per cent uplift on last year's core budget by the Finance and Public

Administration Committee, which reflects the response from commentators and the sector.

Some parties and members advocated for specific areas in the budget. I thank those members for their constructive approach. It means that we will deliver improvements in neurodevelopmental assessments and care of children and young people, which will see investment of more than £7.5 million in 2026-27 and growing future investment. We will also invest £9 million in the next three years to support communities that are impacted by the closure of the Fife ethylene plant at Mossmorran, and we will provide a three-year settlement for disabled people's organisations, with £3.5 million of funding in 2026-27 and in each of the subsequent two years.

The draft budget set out an initial commitment of £6.5 million for hospices in 2026-27, with further engagement planned to understand what support would be required to deliver pay parity for hospice staff with the national health service's agenda for change. I confirm that we will prioritise an additional £2.9 million for that sector.

In that spirit of listening and engagement, I can also confirm that—provided that the bill passes stage 1 today—the Government intends to lodge amendments at stage 2.

The fair settlement for local government came through cross-party discussions. We are proud that the budget includes almost £15.7 billion of funding for local government, which is a 2 per cent real-terms increase in 2026-27, compared to last year's budget. However, since the budget was published, I have continued to engage with COSLA and listen to its concerns. As a result, I can confirm my intention to allocate a further £20 million to the local government settlement for social care, which councils can use to fund the real living wage for the adult and childcare sectors.

The investing in communities fund supports community-led organisations and deprived and fragile communities to tackle disadvantage and poverty on their own terms, delivering projects, services and activities that are identified and developed by communities themselves. Like members across the chamber, I have seen the value that those community projects have in our constituencies across Scotland. We recognise calls to provide stability for those organisations, which is why we propose to allocate a further £5.33 million of new resource funding and prioritise a further £1.6 million from within the budget, taking the total available funding to £9.13 million and extending the fund in full for 2026-27. That is in stark contrast to the UK Government, which has cut funding for local growth in Scotland.

As the First Minister announced earlier today, another amendment that the Government proposes is the delivery of a freeze to all ScotRail fares, including season tickets and flexipasses, until April 2027. That will be welcome news for many commuters. I will allocate £4.3 million of additional resource funding in 2026-27 to the transport portfolio to deliver the freeze to ScotRail fares. That will build on other measures in the budget, such as the removal of peak fares on the northern isles ferries for our island communities and the continued removal of ScotRail peak fares for good.

This afternoon, I will write to the Finance and Public Administration Committee to set out the detail of the proposed amendments that will be lodged at stage 2 for its consideration.

I remind members that, although the Government has set out a budget that delivers a strong economy, strong public services and stronger support for families, it remains a shared responsibility to deliver that for the Scottish people by supporting the budget bill.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill.

15:37

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, following publication of our "Report on the Scottish Budget 2026-27", and I look forward to receiving the stage 2 amendments that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government touched on a moment ago.

This is the final stage 1 budget bill debate in this parliamentary session, so I am keen to discuss issues that the committee has raised that have been key themes throughout our scrutiny over the years. I also wish to thank our excellent committee team of MSPs and clerks, who have worked so hard and with dedication throughout the past half-decade. I can see Liz Smith nodding in approval.

This year's draft budget was published much later than usual, on 13 January 2026, as a consequence of the late United Kingdom budget. As the committee noted, that provided an unacceptably short time for parliamentary scrutiny of the Scottish Government's proposed tax and spending plans for the next financial year. It is not the first time that the committee has called on the UK Government to give much greater regard to devolved budgets when setting the timing of future fiscal events.

The need for greater transparency in relation to budgetary information has been another

consistent theme. The committee recognises improvements that have been made by the Scottish ministers throughout this parliamentary session in providing more budgetary data and presenting it more clearly. However, like many witnesses and commentators, we are frustrated and disappointed that, despite repeated requests, the Scottish Government has fallen short of baselining all routine in-year transfers. We therefore recommend that formal agreement be reached between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Fiscal Commission on how regular in-year transfers should be presented.

We also seek greater clarity on which elements of funding announces new money, to provide certainty for public bodies and local government and avoid the unhelpful and unnecessary confusion that has occurred this year, notably in relation to increased funding for the college sector and where money saved from mitigating the two-child cap will be spent.

The committee also expressed concerns that one-off ScotWind leasing revenues are being used to plug funding gaps rather than being allocated to net zero projects, as intended. As we note in our report, the Scottish Government appears to bank on the fact that it will not need to draw down ScotWind funds, because new moneys are considered certain to become available, particularly in the run-up to the next United Kingdom general election. The committee is not convinced that that is an efficient or effective way to manage Scotland's public finances.

The committee's 2026-27 budget report recognises significant financial pressures faced by the Scottish Government and its limited flexibilities to manage cash flow over years. We therefore believe that a comprehensive review of the fiscal framework is now urgent. It is encouraging that the two Governments are currently discussing the scope of that, and we welcomed the opportunity just before Christmas to input the committee's views on the priority areas for the review. We support a continuation of that consultative approach while balancing the need for early resolution.

On Scottish Government spending plans, the college sector will receive a very welcome uplift in funding, which the committee had called for. Housing has had an even more impressive boost, and although we welcome the additional £20 million that has been announced today, the committee has significant concerns that pressures on local government finances may lead to large council tax rises and some local authorities struggling to meet their statutory obligations. We have therefore urged the Scottish Government in our report to discuss with local government how and where further support might be provided to ease such pressures if additional funds become available.

The sustainability of social security spending and its impact on other areas of the Scottish budget that are being squeezed is a long-term committee concern. It is disappointing that the Scottish ministers have yet to undertake the reviews that we asked for on the fiscal sustainability of social security spending, the extent to which it supports economic activity and the outcomes arising from universal payments and services. We therefore urge the incoming Government to undertake that work without delay.

On taxation, although we recognise the fiscal pressures on the Scottish budget, we have asked the next Scottish Government to consider the most effective way to ensure a fairer, more gradual and transparent approach to raising income tax revenues than continuing to use fiscal drag—a policy that has also been imposed by successive United Kingdom Governments. A further priority in the next session of Parliament should be reform of local government taxation—not easy, given the likely level of loss aversion, but necessary.

The committee has consistently urged the Scottish Government to recognise and respond to the long-term fiscal sustainability challenges that lie ahead, given demographic trends. Unfortunately, the Scottish Government did not, as requested, fully respond to the Scottish Fiscal Commission's two key fiscal sustainability reports in 2023 and 2025.

Regarding the medium-term funding outlook, publication of the first Scottish spending review outcomes for both capital and resources this parliamentary session is welcome. Although that should bring more certainty to portfolios, public bodies and local government on the spending trajectory over the next three years, we agree with witnesses that more detail should have been provided and, despite our request, the Scottish Government appears not to have taken a zero-based budgeting approach to the spending review. Indeed, the document includes little detail on the approach taken, leaving uncertainty over the figures presented.

We will of course be taking evidence on the Scottish spending review and the infrastructure delivery pipeline in the weeks ahead. Witnesses shared concerns about whether plans to make £1.5 billion of cumulative efficiencies across the spending review period are achievable and how progress will be reported.

We urge the next Government to regularly report savings made, in order to allow scrutiny of progress towards overall efficiency targets and clarify any impacts on public service delivery. Although we welcome the Scottish Government's

infrastructure delivery pipeline, we had pressed for the document since December 2023, and it is, frankly, underwhelming. Detail should have been provided on costs, timelines and potential overruns for the projects.

In addition, the split between delivery and development casts doubt on exactly what will be delivered when and at what cost. Given that the UK Government will reduce Scotland's capital allocation in real terms over the forecast period, inclusion of shovel-ready projects to optimise capital investment would be helpful.

We urge the incoming Scottish Government to flesh out both the pipeline and the Scottish spending review document with much more detail.

The committee looks forward to receiving a response to our stage 1 report ahead of stage 2 proceedings on the bill next week, and I look forward to hearing members' contributions in today's debate.

15:43

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): This budget does not add up. It does not add up for Scottish taxpayers, with more people dragged into ever-higher tax under the Scottish National Party. It does not add up for Scottish councils, which are now considering brutal cuts and blistering increases in council tax, despite the discovery of an additional £20 million today for social care. It does not add up for Scotland's NHS, with health boards in effect facing no real-terms growth in spending. It certainly does not add up for Scotland's pubs and shops, which, despite today's U-turn on reliefs, still face crippling increases in business tax.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic (Kate Forbes): Does Craig Hoy accept that the one thing that this budget does do is add up, because it has to be balanced? Where would he find £1 billion?

Craig Hoy: The Scottish Government is under a legal obligation to make sure that this budget balances, but—[*Interruption*.]—before Mr Swinney has a breakdown, I will say that it is being balanced using non-recurring revenues, by raiding the ScotWind money to pay for recurring revenues.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: I will not give way.

The First Minister (John Swinney): Where would it come from?

Craig Hoy: The only place where this—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: First Minister, please let Mr Hoy continue.

Craig Hoy: If Mr Swinney wants to know where the £1 billion will come from, it will come from cutting the SNP's bloated benefits bill.

Members: Oh!

Craig Hoy: It would come from getting rid of the pork-barrel politics, where John Swinney is buying votes—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Hoy, could you please resume your seat for a second. I say to members that I think that we would expect better behaviour all round. We should listen to Mr Hoy, who has the floor.

Craig Hoy: I do not know who has rattled Mr Swinney's cage, but it is certainly rattled.

The only person the budget appears to add up for is Shona Robison, because she initially thought that it provided her with nearly enough coverage to get out the door in May, but analysts have warned that that will not hold. Whoever replaces her will, almost inevitably, be forced back to the Parliament with an emergency statement to fix the mistakes that she has made. [*Interruption*.]

Let us look at some of the detail in Shona Robison's plans. The Government insists that it is properly funding our NHS, but do not take my word for it. David Phillips from the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that funding allocations for health in 2026-27 look—and I quote, Mr Swinney—"increasingly detached from reality." Excluding social care pay, health and social care funding is up by only 1.6 per cent in cash terms, but down by 0.6 per cent in real terms. Agenda for change staff are due a pay increase of 3.75 per cent and resident doctors have been awarded 9.4 per cent. Something serious will have to give at the front line of our NHS.

Neil Gray: Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: No, I do not have time.

The cabinet secretary has repeatedly claimed that the budget offers a fair deal for Scotland's councils, but COSLA begs to differ. It has admitted that some services that are offered that are "critical to population health" will be slashed this April. Despite her claims, for the period that is covered by the budget and the spending review, councils are set to see a real-terms cut in their cash settlement. That means more cuts and higher bills, not just this year but right through to the end of the decade. Therefore, is it any wonder that the Accounts Commission has warned that, combined, Scotland's 32 local authorities face a budget black hole of nearly £1 billion by 2027, which is 500 times more than the £28 million that the Government has come forward with today? That means that there is a real risk of Scotland's councils collapsing into bankruptcy by the end of

the decade, while council tax bills for hard-working Scots are set to climb.

It is not just council tax that will rise as a result of this bad SNP budget. Yet again, the SNP is reaching for the only lever that it ever pulls: clobbering middle-income earners with higher income tax bills. By the end of the decade, one in three Scots will be paying the SNP's higher rate of tax. A tax that is intended for the few will be paid by the many. Why is tax soaring in Scotland? Under the SNP, the benefits bill is, frankly, out of control. By the end of the decade, SNP ministers will be spending £10 billion on social security. The truth is that the SNP is happy to park people on benefits, many with treatable mental health conditions, because the culture of dependency creates political advantage for John Swinney. It is the crudest form of vote buying. It is cynical, unsustainable and, frankly, wrong.

Neil Gray: Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: I do not have time.

The sad fact is that this dismal budget will pass in the Parliament because Scottish Labour is too weak, too divided, and too distracted to stand up to the SNP. The SNP Government has shown itself unfit for office, but Scottish Labour has shown itself as incapable of real opposition. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats will back the budget, despite being conned last year by the broken promise of no spending on independence. In a smoke-filled room somewhere in Bute house, post-election promises are no doubt being made. Alex Cole-Hamilton will be measuring the curtains along the ministerial corridors. The man who bought a Tesla and then sold it to virtue signal is eyeing up the Government's car fleet.

Beyond the cosy left-wing consensus and the dubious deal making, people out there in the real world are looking for a new approach.

Willie Rennie: Will the member give way?

Craig Hoy: I will not give way; I do not have the time, unless I will get the time back, Presiding Officer. There is no time. [*Interruption*.] I would be very happy to enter a smoke-filled room to find out what other deals are being done.

Ultimately, we go into the election campaign with a clear set of tax pledges. On income tax, we would raise the higher-rate thresholds, bringing them into line with the rest of the UK over the next parliamentary session.

Scotland's tax rates are too complicated and uncompetitive, so we would cut the basic and intermediate rates of tax to 19p. In recent weeks, we have also outlined a serious package of support for business that goes way beyond that of the SNP Government. We would pay for that by lowering the ballooning SNP benefits bill. Our welfare proposals will make work pay.

The cosy left-wing consensus here in Holyrood wants to keep taxes high and, along with Reform, it also supports more benefits spending. However, in 85 days, Scottish workers will have an opportunity to vote for a party that will both cut tax and reduce the benefits bill. That party is the Scottish Conservative Party.

15:50

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): On 13 January, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government announced a deeply underwhelming budget that tried to fix just a few of the SNP's mistakes. I said then that it would find favour, whether over a peace pipe or not, with the Liberal Democrats and the Greens, and so it has proved.

The Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill will be agreed to at stage 1 today. Labour will not stand in the way of police officers and nurses continuing to be paid, and local services continuing to be paid for, at the start of the new financial year in just a few short weeks. However, we all know that the budget will not last the year. Independent experts from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Fraser of Allander Institute are unanimous in their view that, as a result of the SNP's decisions, for whoever forms the Government in May, an emergency budget is now a racing certainty.

We know what chaos was wrought by three consecutive years of emergency budgets from the SNP, which was forced to rip up its plans mid-year due to its own incompetence. Only today, we have heard from David Phillips at the Institute for Fiscal Studies that the budget looks

"increasingly detached from reality … This does not feel like credible fiscal and public spending control to me."

Well, he is right. It is not credible, and, because of that, the budget bill does not deserve to be passed by the Parliament.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir.

To compound the mess, we found ourselves in the ludicrous situation in which the finance secretary published a three-year spending review to supposedly provide certainty to public services yet, within days, told the Finance and Public Administration Committee that it was not worth the paper that it was written on and that she fully expected it to change. It is budgeting on a wing and a prayer.

The hallmarks of 19 years of John Swinney budgets are creative accounting, financial sleight of hand and swingeing cuts to local government.

Craig Hoy: Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir.

The truth is that the SNP Government has decimated Scotland's public finances and taken treasured public services, such as our NHS, to the brink. Hundreds of thousands of Scots are on NHS waiting lists, and more than 10,000 children are in temporary accommodation.

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

Michael Marra: No, thank you, sir.

We have a housing emergency, a justice system that is past breaking point and an education system that is going backwards.

Neil Gray: Will the member give way?

Michael Marra: No, thank you. The health secretary should listen to this.

There is a culture of secrecy in which public sector managers offer bribes and holidays to grieving families rather than honest answers and accepting responsibility.

Neil Gray: Will Mr Marra give way?

Michael Marra: No, thank you.

This budget changes none of that. Instead, the SNP tinkers round the edges and tells us all, in the face of all the evidence to the contrary, that the NHS is turning a corner. It is ludicrous. The SNP has decimated local services and taken local authorities to the brink. If the SNP gets back in in May, it plans to cut nearly £0.5 billion from councils.

On non-domestic rates, yet again the SNP Government has failed to go far enough, leaving many businesses in dire straits. Today's announcement is an improvement on some of the measures that were announced on 13 January, but it does not properly address the looming revaluation. The Government should call time on that revaluation today. Scottish Labour supports an immediate pause to the new rates revaluation. The Government should act now.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Will the member take an intervention?

Michael Marra: Yes, sir.

Members: Oh!

Ross Greer: I am very grateful. I understand that, ahead of their impending leadership contest, Labour members are the primary audience for Mr Marra's speech—[*Interruption*.]

What I am confused about is why, given the great many flaws that he has apparently identified in the budget, Mr Marra did not propose a solution to a single one of them before the Labour Party decided to abstain, which will allow the budget bill to be passed, regardless of what the Greens or the Liberal Democrats negotiated. If the budget is so terrible, surely he would have proposed a change before allowing it to sail through. [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I can give you the time back, Mr Marra.

Michael Marra: I gently say to Mr Greer that I would not believe every word that the cabinet secretary says. Over four meetings, I set out a list of things that we wanted to see in the budget. At the end of that process, she said, "We'll get back to you." I am afraid that she never did. As I am used to saying, I do not take it personally when I am ghosted in such a way, but if we are going to dance, it takes two. [*Interruption*.] The Government has to be willing to strike a deal.

Shona Robison: Shall we?

Michael Marra: No, thank you—we can maybe dance later.

The fact remains that this SNP Government will never take the bold, decisive action that is needed to fix what it has broken in our country. The real opportunity for change will be on 7 May, when we finally kick out this knackered SNP Government and choose a new direction for Scotland with Scottish Labour.

The Deputy Presiding Officer : I will allow a little bit of reaction, but we still need to hear the member who has the microphone.

15:55

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): In our time in Opposition, the Greens have always taken a constructive approach to budget negotiations. We have always believed that our job is to make Green change happen. That is what we told voters we would do if we were elected here, and we were elected here. Making fiery and impassioned speeches can often feel very satisfying, but it does not save a single species, reduce emissions, create jobs or feed children. Change does that. Negotiating in good faith to deliver what the people of Scotland need and what our planet needs does that.

Most of the past decade has been one of minority Government, and I am very proud of the huge achievements of the Greens, through our budget negotiations, during our time in Opposition over the past decade. I have always appreciated

the Scottish Government's constructive approach. It has been easier for us to come to agreements in some years than in others, but I have always found the Government's default position to be a willingness to talk and engage with the ideas that we put forward.

Members can see across the country the impact of the changes that the Greens have secured. Even just in the past few weeks, the impact of our budget negotiations last year has been felt. Starting on 31 January, those who commute on the bus in Shetland are now benefiting from the fact that single bus fares are capped at £2. This month and next month, that is being rolled out across the rest of the Highlands and Islands. Particularly for those who have to commute by bus over long distances—the only public transport option available in many rural areas—that is already resulting in huge savings, which will quickly add up to hundreds of pounds for commuters. That is the real impact of constructively engaging in the budget process.

That policy builds on previous Green successes, the most obvious example of which is free bus travel for everyone under the age of 22. Hundreds of millions of journeys have now been taken by Scotland's young people, and genuinely life-changing opportunities have been made available to them as a result of that.

We also scrapped peak rail fares, which has saved commuters hundreds—and, in a few cases, thousands—of pounds a year. During a cost of living crisis, that is a policy that not only delivers for our planet by reducing private car use, but delivers for the public, because it helps families to save money.

This year, through our discussions so far, we have secured more money for bus franchising, bringing our buses back under public control and ending a four-decade-long Thatcherite experiment in privatisation. I am quite sure that that is what is holding the Labour Party back from giving its full support to the budget, given who is cutting the party six-figure cheques these days.

However, the Scottish Government and Scotland as a whole are still failing when it comes to reducing our transport emissions. We need to go further. That is why the Greens put forward other proposals for the budget, and why we are still keen to see more progress on that front.

I welcome today's changes in the budget. On 27 January, Gillian Mackay raised with the cabinet secretary the need for more funding for social care, and I am glad that the Government has made that possible. On 7 January, Maggie Chapman raised issues around the investing in communities fund, and I am glad that the Government has been able to find a solution to that.

Earlier today, I announced that, at this point, the Greens would be abstaining on the budget. I am proud of what we have achieved so far and I believe that agreement is possible with the Government, but our job is to be the challenger. Our job is to push the Government to go further, and often to push it to go outside its comfort zone, because we know that change is still needed. We know that people across the country are really hurting. We know that families cannot afford skyrocketing bills, the cost of the weekly shop and the cost of their daily commute, regardless of what form of transport they use.

We know that further change is possible. Yes, the powers of devolution are limited and, yes, Scotland's public finances are under a huge amount of pressure, but there are options still available to us. There is more that we can do to reduce the cost of childcare and public transport, and there is more that we can do to protect our planet. There is more that we can invest so that we can, once again, become a world leader on climate action and nature restoration. I believe that an agreement is still possible between the Greens and the Government. If the cabinet secretary is willing to continue those discussions, we will engage in them in good faith, and I hope that we will be able to reach an agreement before stage 3.

15:59

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (LD): The late Jim Wallace commented on the great cross-party efforts that brought about devolution in the first place. He said that he hoped that we could have a "new style of politics", because the founding principles of this Parliament were collaboration, consensus and compromise. There were cross-party talks in a Parliament in which no single party was ever meant to have a majority.

When the Parliament first convened, Donald Dewar, another great, said that we should be

"striving to do right by the people of Scotland".

However, some parties choose not to engage. They choose not to sit down and negotiate and fight their corner for the causes that matter to them. Perhaps they have their sights set on May's election. Looking at the polls, I do not blame them, because the only cosy consensus that I can see is on the complete evaporation of members on the benches opposite.

Where are we on the budget? On health, properly funded social care is important. Why? Because it frees up beds in hospitals and it gets people out of hospital and back home. Social care providers told us that they wanted a fairer funding deal to pay their staff properly. Let us be honest—the Government mucked this up the first time. The

Government knew it, the sector knew it, and so did I. That is why the issue went top of my list of asks.

That extra £20 million to ensure that every social care worker in Scotland is paid the real living wage matters. Will it fix the wider issues in the care sector? No, I do not think that it will, but it matters to those care providers who have been lobbying us fiercely these past two weeks.

On the issue of waiting lists, autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessment waiting times in Scotland are ridiculously and unacceptably high. Some people are waiting for six years, and 65,000 people are on an assessment waiting list. That is why the issue has been the subject of a long-standing Lib Dem campaign, and we are proud of that. The extra £7.5 million that has been announced that we negotiated will help to tackle the backlog, but we need to see progress speed up.

Every one of us has a hospice in our local community. They provide invaluable care for people who are at the end of their lives. It is a very live debate, but they did need extra cash. I asked for extra cash—£6.5 million in the draft budget, topped up today by the nearly £3 million announced by the First Minister. That takes us to about £9.5 million, which will help places such as Ardgowan hospice in my community.

I received an email this afternoon from Hospice UK. It was just one line, thanking me for fighting its case. The question is, how many other parties got one of those emails this afternoon? I know that the budget is all theatre, but it does matter. The reason that this stuff matters is that every penny counts towards supporting—

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Seriously?

Jamie Greene: Yes, seriously, Ms Baillie. Would you like to intervene, because you are shouting at me from the front there. Did you get an email from the sector thanking you for supporting it?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair.

Jackie Baillie: I actually did. The difference is that this is not the first time that I have stood up to support hospices or social care; I have done so consistently over a number of years.

Jamie Greene: The big difference, Ms Baillie, is that you walked away from the discussion and negotiation on day 1.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Through the chair, please.

Jamie Greene: The budget was going to pass anyway, thanks to Mr Marra and members on his front bench.

There is stuff in this budget that I am concerned about. For example, I called for a complete freeze on business rates for all hospitality businesses, as has been done in Northern Ireland. At the end of the day, this is not my budget; it is the Government's budget, and it must make and own those decisions. The £178 million relief package that we got was far more than what we had when I started the negotiation. The same goes for the funding for the college sector, and the same goes for the funding that we achieved for young entrepreneurs.

Will all of that save the Scottish economy from its perilous state? No, it will not, but the main difference between my approach and the approach of others in the chamber is simple: I did not walk away from this game with nothing.

Craig Hoy: Will Jamie Greene take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab) *rose—*

Jamie Greene: The budget was always going to pass, but the question for Opposition members, including Mr Hoy, is, what did they get out of this budget? I got £300 million. As far as I can see, that is £300 million more than anyone else in the chamber got.

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

16:04

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): First, I note that I am disappointed at the length of the debate. The budget is absolutely at the heart of any Government activity. For it to be conducted on a Thursday afternoon in what some people consider the graveyard slot, and with such restricted time, is not good enough. I therefore apologise in advance to all members that I will not be able to take any interventions due to time, although they are absolutely the point of the debate.

On that note, what a week! Whoever promised Anas Sarwar that he would live in interesting times was not wrong. The release of the WhatsApp messages on Monday this week between Anas Sarwar's old friend Peter Mandelson and Wes Streeting told us a lot of things. Notable, of course, is Streeting's explicit criticism of his own Labour Government for having "no growth strategy". That confirms what I have argued since its election. Although the UK Government holds most of the levers that are needed to create a coherent growth strategy—control of the tax regime and of key regulators, borrowing-to-invest powers and, of course, overall fiscal and economic powers—it has failed to use them. Here in Scotland, we have been

captured within the chaos and failure of successive UK Governments' making.

Within those challenges, we face the massive challenge of a fixed budget. It is therefore disappointing that, yet again, the Labour Party in Scotland refused to bring any proposals forward during budget negotiations and backed an abstentionist position. [*Interruption*.] Mr Marra may wish to heckle from a sedentary position, but he can intervene if he wants to and tell us why the Labour Party could not be bothered and, in fact, sought to abstain on the budget even before it was brought forward. Is he able to give me the compelling reason for doing that?

Michael Marra: I certainly am. Over four meetings, we set out a range of areas in which we wanted to see investment. I was told that I would hear back on that, but we heard nothing. As I have said already, it takes two to dance.

Michelle Thomson: Och, he is a wee lamb, is he not? For goodness' sake: the fact of the matter is that the Scottish Labour leadership appears to knife its own Prime Minister in the back, but it fails at every single turn to put the interests of the Scottish people first.

This is the context in which the Scottish Government has had to produce a draft budget in short order without knowing precisely what funding it will have to operate with as we still await clarification on consequentials.

I will dwell for a short time on two criticisms that I have previously shared regarding the constraints of the fiscal framework. First, I have said consistently that restricted borrowing powers limit the Scottish Government's ability to respond to in-year inflation, pay pressures and unseen events. The framework also constrains our ability to borrow to invest, which is fundamental in addressing productivity challenges.

Secondly, I continue to be concerned that the challenging context has led to a reliance on one-off funds—most noticeably, ScotWind money being called on to fund day-to-day spending. I have been consistent in calling for those funds to be used for long-term investment. Therefore, there needs to be—and I think that Mr McKee will have a view on this—an even stronger focus on public sector reform and on setting clear priorities.

On that point, too often cries from Opposition parties to increase spending across many areas of Government are not accompanied by explanations of where that money is to come from—witness Craig Hoy's remarks earlier. Frankly, that reveals that they are not ready for the challenges of Government.

As this is my last budget speech, I want to finish by recognising the work of the Scottish Fiscal Commission under the leadership of Professor Graeme Roy. Its analysis is critical for us all in supporting evaluation and evidence-based decision making. It does a super job. I am pleased to note that the commission is continuing to broaden its analysis and improve data quality, and I thank the commission for that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Given earlier remarks, it is perhaps worth reminding the chamber at this point that the timing of the debate was agreed at the Parliamentary Bureau and was subsequently agreed to by Parliament. I do not recall there being an amendment to the business programme.

I can also tell the chamber that there is a little bit of time in hand, so recompense for interventions will be given for the foreseeable. How long that will last, I do not know.

16:09

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The convener gave a very good summary of the concerns that the Finance and Public Administration Committee has expressed about the budget process. Before I move into my speech, I want to add some context from six of the expert analysts who attended the committee on Tuesday this week. They raised some very important issues that we should be thinking about.

First, there is not sufficient detail about Scottish Government policy priorities and how well they deliver on the intended outcomes, and, as a consequence of the very tight fiscal constraints, which policies have been deprioritised and why. Those points have frustrated the committee from time to time. Professor Heald made the particularly interesting remark that the Scottish Government is often more generous in its approach to spending than Governments in the rest of the UK. However, seldom do we see the reverse of that, and we certainly do not see where the money is coming from. That situation is at the heart of the policy decisions in the budget.

Secondly, the Auditor General for Scotland strongly made the point that there is no credible long-term plan to address the very significant challenges that arise from the bloated welfare state budget and the demands of health—which David Phillips spoke of today—and of social care. The Scottish Government appears to favour the short-term fix. We have concerns about the lack of a baseline in the budget and the fact that it is extremely difficult to track where money is being spent effectively.

Thirdly, the analysts said that local government is facing a very serious issue of fiscal unsustainability in the long run, which definitely

puts front-line services under threat. There is also the threat of significant council tax rises in April.

Those are all very important points that do not come from me or from the Scottish Conservatives but from highly respected experts—I agree with what Michelle Thomson said about the Scottish Fiscal Commission—who do a deep dive into the Scottish budget. We should listen to what they have to say.

In the light of those experts' concerns, we have to ask why policies have been adopted in successive Scottish budgets that undermine the Government's stated overall objectives, especially when it comes to economic growth. Why on earth does the Scottish Government believe that its policy on the non-domestic rates issue—although it is good to see some mitigation and relief in that regard—its visitor levy and its removal of the small business bonus for deer management businesses and some rural businesses will provide greater economic growth?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has just left the chamber, but three budgets ago, when he was Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy, we had an 8.3 per cent real-terms cut to the economy portfolio. We have had an increase in college funding, although the figure for it is disputed. However, there has been a 20 per cent real-terms cut in college budgets since 2021, when it is colleges that have to address the skills agenda and ensure that we get many more people back into the labour market.

Those are the concerns with the budget. This is not just about different party-political angles or about what policies would be better in which places. There are fundamental issues, some of which the convener has raised in the Finance and Public Administration Committee's report and some of which are being raised by the analysts who scrutinise the Scottish budget. We should be listening to what they have to say, because these are serious challenges, not just for this budget but for the next Government, whichever colour it might be.

16:13

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the Scottish Government for the announcements that it made today regarding additional resource for different policy areas.

Every budget is about challenges and choices—the challenges that the Government of the day faces and the choices that it proposes in order to deal with those challenges. A decade and a half of Westminster-imposed austerity, coupled with high inflation, has significantly eroded the value of the Scottish Government's block grant funding. That, in addition to an ageing population and strong global economic headwinds, has left our public services having to meet growing demand within increasingly challenging settlements. Those issues are not new to any of us in the chamber.

During the 2024 UK election, Labour campaigned to get rid of the Tories in order to stop austerity. I say to Mr Marra that Labour members cannot have it both ways: they cannot claim that austerity came from the Tories at Westminster and also claim that it did not have an effect on the allocation of budget to the Scottish Parliament. That economic illiteracy is an example of why Anas Sarwar was right about the Prime Minister not being up to the job. However, it also tells me that the Prime Minister, Anas Sarwar and now Michael Marra are making the case for Scotland to be an independent nation.

Daniel Johnson: In both this financial year and the next financial year, the block grant has a £5 billion increase. Is that the member's definition of austerity?

Stuart McMillan: A decade and a half of austerity: that is the point that I made.

The Tories made a complete mess of running the Government, and Labour, with its massive majority in the House of Commons, is now doing likewise. The national insurance contributions increase last year is a prime example of that, and £400 million has come out of the Scottish budget to deal with it.

The Scottish Government put £2.2 million to Inverclyde Council last year to try and offset the problem.

Michael Marra *rose*—

Stuart McMillan: I am sorry, Mr Marra.

The 8.5 per cent council tax increase would have been a lot less if there had not had to be that £400 million for the national insurance contributions increase. Thanks to Labour, Inverclyde council tax payers are paying a lot more money, and that will no doubt remain the case going forward. [*Interruption*.] I am sorry, Mr Marra, but I have already taken one intervention.

With the limited powers of devolution, the budget delivers on a range of things that will and do matter to my constituents. It delivers vital support for families facing cost of living pressures and strengthens the public services that we will be relying on. The new cost of living measures to support families across Scotland, including the delivery of the new universal breakfast club offer for primary school-age children and additional funding to extend wraparound activity clubs in the afternoon and early evening, are to be welcomed.

The health service will have the resources that it needs to continue reducing waiting times. With waits for hip and knee operations at record low levels, the longest waiting lists have fallen for seven months in a row. I welcome the commitment to replace the ageing Port Glasgow health centre, and I thank the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care for accepting the invitation to visit the existing facility last summer. Only in the minds of Labour members can a positive announcement be turned into a negative. I greatly welcome today's announcement of additional resources for hospices. I am in regular dialogue with the chief executive officer of Ardgowan Hospice, and I know that he will be pleased with that. However, I believe that there is still a discussion to be had about a more sustainable funding method for hospices across the country.

Unlike Craig Hoy and the Tories, I welcome the increase in the Scottish child payment to £28.20 per week and the introduction of the premium payment of £40 per week for eligible children under 12 months. That will help many of my constituents. That is part of the "bloated benefits bill" that Mr Hoy spoke about earlier. The payment helps people in my community and the communities that he represents. I also welcome the extra funding to help keep more children out of poverty from funds that were initially set aside to mitigate the UK Government's two-child cap.

I am conscious of the time, but I want to touch on one other point: the additional resource for neurodevelopmental assessments of the care needs of children and young people. I was a substitute on the Education, Children and Young People Committee when it undertook work on that last year. I have had a lot of engagement with constituents in Inverclyde about children with additional support needs. That additional resource will help families in my community, and I warmly welcome it. I also welcome the additional investment for changing places toilets, which will help people who have children with additional support needs and disabilities to get out and about in their communities, rather than being stuck in the house.

I warmly welcome those investments, in addition to the other ones that I have touched on—and there are others in the budget. I commend the budget to the Parliament.

16:18

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Having such a short time to discuss a budget allocating £68 billion is unsatisfactory, but I will not waste any more of my four minutes debating that point. However, I will repeat one thing:

"funding allocations for health in 2026-27 look increasingly detached from reality."

That comment was made by David Phillips of the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Excluding pay, funding is down by 0.6 per cent in real terms. That is a cut. However, there are pay rises of 3.75 per cent, going up to almost 10 per cent, and it is NHS services that will pay for the gap.

I do not begrudge staff a penny of that—they are really hard working—but we need to ask the Government where the money is coming from. The SNP cannot tell us, because it has no credible plan. Instead, the NHS is having to slash services because of efficiency savings totalling a staggering £1.1 billion next year. The Scottish Government is giving with one hand and taking away with the other.

The SNP's approach is to expect public services to deliver even more for even less, which is putting an intolerable strain on staff. Services are being slashed, and nowhere is this more evident than in social care.

There is little money for social care packages. We are told that social care requires £550 million to plug the funding deficit this year alone. Next year, the level of need is anticipated to be £750 million. There is not a penny in the budget to meet the pressure on some of the most vulnerable people in our society—older people, the sick and disabled people. More than 11,000 Scots are waiting for a social care assessment—an increase of almost 28 per cent on the same time last year. More than 2,000 are stuck in hospital with their discharge delayed. People in my constituency are unable to get a care package in Argyll and Bute because they are waiting for people to die so that funds for new care packages can be released. That is how dreadful the underfunding of social care has been, and the buck stops with the SNP Government.

I have another constituent, this time in West Dunbartonshire. He has advanced dementia and is in a nursing home because his family are desperate to give his wife respite, and they paid for it themselves. He requires round-the-clock supervision, and has been assessed as requiring nursing home care, but the health and social care partnership was not prepared to release funding for him. It wanted to send him home today to his wife, who has terminal cancer. He has seriously endangered himself in the past and the strain on his wife is profound at an already difficult time for her. I have intervened to make sure that he remains in the nursing home, but what intolerable stress that places on families, and it is down to a lack of money. That is the reality of social care in SNP Scotland.

Yesterday, I met social care providers that are deeply concerned about the Government's

approach. On the one hand, it says that it wants to work in partnership with the sector on fairer funding; on the other, it plans to cut £19 million from the staffing budget. The irony is not lost on the sector. The consequence of that cut would have been job losses, the slashing of services, some organisations going to the wall and returning to institutionalised models of care from the past.

I welcome what has been done on social care, and I also welcome hospice funding. I would say to Jamie Greene that some of us have been arguing about this for a long, long time. I am pleased that the SNP has now U-turned, but I have to ask what that says about its motivation in the first place, given how damaging the original decision would have been. It tells me that this Government is failing health and social care, it is funding crisis, not prevention, and it is asking health and social care workers to operate in intolerable conditions, risking burnout without the resources that are needed to provide quality care.

Let me finish on a note of consensus, with Michelle Thomson and Liz Smith. We need to thank the Scottish Fiscal Commission, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Fraser of Allander Institute for their work in shining a light on what is a less-than-transparent budget and for highlighting the challenges for the future.

16:23

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I welcome the approach that some are taking to the process of pulling together the budget—particularly the Liberals, but also the Greens, who are actively engaging with the Government to help shape what might come out of the other end of the budget. That is the approach that should be taken. The inability of others to engage seriously with the process of shaping and forming the budget baffles me, because it shows that, through the process of engagement, we can make a change and influence what is in the budget.

Any party that seeks to engage with the Government will always be able to say that the budget does not contain absolutely everything that they would like to see in it, but this is about the art of compromise that Jamie Greene was speaking to. I would go as far as saying that not attempting to shape the budget is an abdication of responsibility.

Michael Marra: Will the member give way?

Jamie Hepburn: Mr Marra is looking very exercised, so I will give way to him.

Michael Marra: I appreciate the member giving way. He is making a fine point to those on his Government's front bench, telling them about the process, and about how to negotiate and come to a position. When people go to them and they say that they will get back to them, they should probably get back to them.

Jamie Hepburn: I have known Mr Marra for the best part of three decades, going back to our university days. He has never struck me as someone who would be shy in coming forward and saying, "Are you going to get back to me?"

On Mr Marra's line about it taking two to dance, as I say, I have known him for a long time. I never took him for much of a dancer back in the day, but I certainly would have thought him capable of telling the cabinet secretary that he would like to continue the conversation. That is a very weak line of argument, Mr Marra.

I think that there are many things to welcome in this budget. Craig Hoy says that there is nothing to welcome, so I will pick up on a few things that we can welcome.

First, there is the funding for GP walk-in centres, which is something that Craig Hoy clearly does not welcome. Those are already being rolled out: there is one in Wester Hailes. I am engaging with my local health board because I would like to see one in my area. I would have thought that GP walk-in centres are something to welcome.

Secondly—this has been mentioned already, but I want to refer to it again—there is an extra £2.9 million for the hospice sector. I recently spoke with Mags McCarthy of the Scottish hospice leadership group. She is also the chief executive of Strathcarron Hospice, which is not in my area but serves it and carries out absolutely outstanding work. Jamie Greene was right to say that we all know about the excellent work that hospices do in our localities. That money will make a massive difference to those organisations, but that, again, is something that Craig Hoy thinks is not worthy of welcome.

Thirdly, there is a 10 per cent uplift in funding for colleges, which is another thing that Craig Hoy does not think is worth welcoming. I used to have the privilege and pleasure of being the minister with responsibility for further education and I was able to go around seeing the tremendous work that our college sector does. I know that colleges need additional funding, because that will enable them to be more responsive and adaptable to meet social and economic need. I am pleased to say that we see excellent college provision at New College Lanarkshire in my constituency, and I know that that funding will go a long way towards helping that college to continue doing its good work.

The fourth area that I welcome is that, building on the abolition of peak rail fares, there will be a

freeze in rail fares for the coming year. That is something else that Craig Hoy does not think is worth welcoming. I know who will welcome that: the many thousands of commuters who travel daily from my constituency, many of them going into Glasgow to work, and who rely on rail transport and will not have to pay any more than they do right now.

The fifth and final thing that I specifically welcome, which the cabinet secretary mentioned, is the funding being deployed towards providing breakfast clubs in all primary and ASN schools in Scotland. That will benefit 25,000 children in North Lanarkshire, where my constituency is. When we talk about the budget, we tend to talk about millions, but I want to bring down the numbers a little and talk about thousands. There are 25,000 children in North Lanarkshire who will benefit from that funding. Craig Hoy does not see fit to welcome the funding, but I welcome it and families in my area will welcome it.

For all those reasons, and more, this is a budget to be welcomed and is one that we should be supporting.

16:27

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): In my time today, I will focus on two key challenges that the budget fails to address and on which the next Parliament will have to act.

The first is the long-term sustainability of our education sector. It is increasingly clear that the challenge to the future sustainability of our university and college sector is one that the Parliament will have to face and that the next Government must address.

On the specific funding that the Government has provided for colleges, the £70 million uplift in the budget might seem positive, but it is misleading. The Education, Children and Young People Committee sought clarification and found that that figure includes the £30 million spent on the Dunfermline learning campus in 2025-26, which means that the uplift is £40 million.

It is telling that, after 19 years of the SNP in government, the Colleges Scotland briefing ahead of the budget was titled “A Budget to Save Scotland’s Colleges”. It talks about saving our college sector. We know that many of those institutions are in financial jeopardy. The budget might save them this year, but it will not do so in future years. Institutions across the country, such as Dundee and Angus College, remain in limbo regarding which investment plans they can take forward. With a significant backlog in maintenance and investment in our college estates, there is no clarification about which investments can be realised, and the sector now risks losing investment opportunities, too.

We need a vision for our education sector. I welcome the cross-party review of university funding involving Universities Scotland and the Government, but the next Parliament will have to decide whether to save some institutions if they are not to go to the wall. The budget certainly does not seem to take account of that.

The second key issue for me, as an Edinburgh and Lothian MSP—I hope that other members who represent that area and will be voting on the budget understand this—is that the budget does nothing to address the underfunding of Lothian. The City of Edinburgh Council remains the lowest-funded council per head of population, and NHS Lothian remains the lowest-funded health board per head of population.

We cannot ignore the fact that we are seeing a significant change in Scotland: a movement of population from west to east. The fact that our constituency boundaries have been redrawn during this parliamentary session demonstrates that, and 84 per cent of Scottish population growth over the next—

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: If I get some time back.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back if the intervention is brief.

Jeremy Balfour: I am wondering what engagement Miles Briggs has had with the cabinet secretary to get more money for Lothian. I appreciate that I did not get as much as I wanted, but at least I got some money for Lothian. What engagement did he have?

Miles Briggs: Jeremy Balfour knows that I have been lobbying the Government on the issue for the past decade. Sadly, the Government has not implemented the structural changes that we need. If the budget had taken into account population adjustment, I would have welcomed it, but we have not seen anything like that.

Jeremy Balfour highlighted some scraps from the table that he managed to achieve. The budget does nothing to take into account the growth in population and the negative impact that that is having on our public services. He should know as well as any of us who represent this great city do that a growing number of children are living in temporary accommodation and that the majority of that is linked to the crisis with our funding, which the Government is doing nothing to address.

Members across the chamber who represent Lothian need to understand that. The next Parliament needs to look towards—

Shona Robison: Will Miles Briggs take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, he will not.

Miles Briggs: I am not able to, sadly—if only we had more time, this would have been a much more enlightening debate.

This is a budget that will get the Government through an election. That is fine, and it is clear that it will pass this evening. It might also lay the ground for Deputy First Ministers Greer and Cole-Hamilton in the next Government. However, this is not a Government for growth or for reforming our public services. The budget will not address the challenges that our country faces, so we will not vote for it at decision time.

16:32

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): In Scotland, we have a relatively fixed budget to share out and, not surprisingly, almost everyone wants more. We should not be giving our limited funds to those who shout the loudest. That is my problem with the hospitality sector. It is very organised, it gets a lot of media coverage and it shouts very loudly. However, I use restaurants and pubs reasonably regularly, and it is clear that many of them are doing well. Groups such as DRG are expanding. If we cannot afford to give care workers a decent wage, there is no way that we should be further subsidising the hospitality sector.

I will support the Government's budget today, but I am disappointed at the slow pace of reform in relation to replacing council tax. I know that the SNP and almost all other parties are reluctant to upset voters or even to have a revaluation of properties. Such a revaluation would mean that roughly half the population would be winners and half would be losers.

However, the lack of action on council tax is not victimless. The current winners are those whose homes have gone up proportionately more in value since 1991. The victims are poorer folk in constituencies such as mine whose homes have not gone up much in value. The Greens have argued consistently for a major change in local taxation—they are the only party who has argued for it—so, if they are going to be kingmakers after the next election, I hope that they will make that a central demand of any agreements that they make.

Finally, we are trapped by a fiscal framework that is flawed and biased against Scotland. The major downside of devolution is that, at the end of the day, England—or the UK—makes all the big decisions. It makes decisions that suit it, and that does not include treating Scotland fairly. Historically, we have not been able to compete with London and the south-east of England, and, as we were reminded by Professor David Heald at the Finance and Public Administration Committee's meeting this week, if bonuses rise in the City of London and English Premier League footballers secure higher relative salaries, there will be increases in the income tax block grant adjustment for Scotland. Fundamentally, something has to change in our financial relationship with the UK.

16:34

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Reform): I was not called to ask a question when the finance secretary gave her budget statement on 13 January. That was a pity, because it would have been the first time that she and I had engaged on the matter—or, indeed, on any matter. I did not have the opportunity to dance with Shona Robison, although it is never too late. What was not a surprise was that the Lib Dems would support the budget. That was never in doubt. What we have seen is a pre-election charade—and we will probably see a post-election one—from the Lib Dems.

Had I been called, I would have asked about college funding. I would have pointed out that colleges have been underfunded for years and that the increase that was announced in the budget is just a case of playing catch-up and might not prevent colleges or campuses from closing.

I would have asked about business rates and pointed out that the budget does little for the hospitality sector, which is still on its knees. We have heard from Stephen Montgomery of the Scottish Hospitality Group that

"The inflation-busting rises faced by licensed hospitality in Scotland are simply unaffordable and unacceptable."

I would also have asked what council taxes we might expect, because every year, under the SNP Government, local government has screamed that it does not get enough, and every year it has been right. This year, some councils are predicting that council tax could go up by as much as 8 per cent. John Swinney says that that is unacceptable, but he stayed silent on a similar rise in water charges by SNP-run Scottish Water. We are going to see council taxes soar and councils being trimmed to the bone.

I do not think that the budget does anything for hard-pressed people, and it does not help businesses. I will not support it.

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

16:36

Ross Greer: I start by saying to Graham Simpson that, if he wants the Government or anybody else in this Parliament to speak to him, perhaps he should not have joined a party whose former Welsh leader turned out to be a Kremlin puppet and whose current star by-election candidate suggested that people born in the UK but with minority ethnic backgrounds are not necessarily British. Maybe he should take some responsibility for that.

I want to talk about tax—

Graham Simpson: Will the member give way?

Ross Greer: No. Time is far too short. [*Interruption*.] In fact, if the member would like to own the racist comments made by his party colleague, he is more than welcome to intervene.

Graham Simpson: Ross Greer ought to reflect on his insulting comments. Anyone who knows me knows that I am easy to deal with and I do not fit the description that Ross Greer has just given. He should apologise.

Ross Greer: If the member has joined a racist party, he needs to own the decision he has made. He might be embarrassed about it, but he is unwilling to distance himself from it.

Scotland has been on a journey on tax over the past 10 years. We are now touching on having £2 billion of additional revenue for our public services, such as our health service, as a result of the progressive income tax changes that we have made over the past decade—changes proposed by the Greens and accepted by SNP colleagues. We are a wealthy country, but that wealth is held incredibly unequally. Recent Scottish Government statistics show that the top 2 per cent have more wealth than half of the population, or 2.5 million people, combined. However, we are making some progress on fair redistribution of that wealth, and it is not limited to income tax measures.

On council tax, I absolutely associate myself with John Mason's remarks. However, the limited progress that we have made there has had an impact. With the council tax surcharges on second and empty homes, as well as the increase in the additional dwelling supplement, we have raised hundreds of millions of pounds for public services, and that has resulted in there being thousands fewer second and holiday homes and, indeed, empty properties across the country. Thousands more homes have become available for people to live in. The progressive changes that we have made are helping to tackle the housing crisis.

I want to take a moment to defend Scotland's social security system—a system that means that Scotland is the only part of the UK where child poverty is falling rather than rising. Craig Hoy and his Conservative colleagues are calling on us to cut that system. I point out that the most recent substantive study in the *BMJ* showed that, as of 2022, Conservative austerity at UK level had led to more than 330,000 excess deaths. If the Conservatives want to take ownership of possible cuts to the social security system, they need to acknowledge what the consequences of those decisions would be.

The Greens went into the negotiations with more money for colleges at the top of our list of priorities, and I am glad that we were able to secure that. I recognise that it was also a priority of Lib Dem colleagues. The opportunity to study at college can be life changing for people. Colleges are essential to local economies and to our wider society.

Miles Briggs: Will the member take an intervention?

Ross Greer: I am afraid that I do not have time, Mr Briggs.

Alongside the budget, we secured a separate agreement with the Government on the conditions attached to college funding, which need to be explored in a much wider context.

Scotland's public finances are under huge pressure. If we want to hit our climate targets or our child poverty reduction targets, we require far higher levels of spending than are currently available to us—unless we change how we spend that money.

We have set new conditions for colleges and universities on eliminating the use of inappropriate zero-hours contracts and tackling the gender pay gap. Huge amounts of public money go out the door to the private sector and large institutions such as colleges and universities every year, much of it with no conditions attached at all. However, in another context, a couple of years ago, we decided to make it a condition of any enterprise grant that employers must pay at least the real living wage. Many workers across the country are now able to live above the poverty line as a result of that change. We need to start making such fair work conditions mandatory criteria for the many contracts, grants and other ways in which the Government sends money out the door every year.

We also need to recognise that, much as we would like to have the resources that are directly needed to hit our objectives on child poverty, the climate or anything else, realistically we do not have that resource available to us. The money that we are spending, however, could be used to far better value if we were to set conditions of the kind that I mentioned.

16:41

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I always seek to strike a consensual tone. If there is one point from this afternoon's debate that we can all agree on, it is Jamie Hepburn's observation that no one wants to see Michael Marra dance. I strongly suspect that Shona Robison is not the first person to reject such an offer from Mr Marra.

I also think that we need to listen to the calmer voices in the chamber. Liz Smith, in particular, made a very important contribution. We do have some very important institutions in this country. The Scottish Fiscal Commission is a relatively new body, but, alongside Audit Scotland and the Fraser of Allander Institute, it provides real insights into Scottish public finances. It is clear from the insights that those institutions have provided that this budget does not deal with the long-term problems that all those bodies consistently identify.

This is not a budget with solutions. It only adds up if there are cuts in education, justice, rural economy and local government. If members do not believe me, they should simply look at figure 6 in the Fiscal Commission's summary paper on the budget. It shows a cut of more than £400 million to local government funding, too. That is the reality of this budget, and that is what the Government is asking us to vote for this afternoon.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I, too, commend the work of the Scottish Fiscal Commission. Does Daniel Johnson believe that we should listen to it carefully on Scotland's fiscal framework in the years ahead? Doing so would give us far greater results and flexibility when negotiating and agreeing budgets in the Parliament. The Fiscal Commission's advice could be a very important part of that process.

Daniel Johnson: That is all very well, but the Government negotiated the fiscal framework and then re-signed up to it. Indeed, when it was first agreed, John Swinney held it up and claimed it as a victory for Scotland, so any retrospective revisionism simply does not add up.

This budget is symptomatic of this Government. It follows 18 similar budgets in which difficult decisions have been deferred and exceptional revenues have been plundered. It is no wonder that the IFS—as referenced by Michael Marra and Jackie Baillie—has said that, on the health provisions, the budget increasingly looks "detached from reality." I say gently to members who are holding up their so-called budget wins to look very carefully at them.

This time last year, Liberal Democrat members proclaimed that they had found the funding for the Edinburgh eye pavilion. We still do not know where that funding is—indeed, we have only heard in recent weeks that that money is not confirmed.

The Government holds up the provision of £7 million to deal with the delays in autism assessments, but £7 million will barely touch those delays. It is a one-off payment for something that affects tens of thousands of people. We simply do not have the psychiatrists or the clinical psychologists to undertake those assessments, so the Government should not tell me, or everyone else, that that will fix the problem.

Miles Briggs is absolutely right. Until the budget deals with the deep structural problems of the health service, not least of which is the underfunding of services in Edinburgh and the Lothians, it is not a budget to take seriously. If it makes members feel better to vote for the budget, they should by all means do so, but they should not pretend that it is a solution, and they should not use a sanctimonious tone towards those who have objections to the budget.

The reality is that, according to the Fraser of Allander Institute, there is an underlying deficit of more than £650 million.

Kate Forbes: Will the member take an intervention?

Daniel Johnson: Do I have enough time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can have the time back for Bob Doris's intervention, but I cannot give you any more time.

Daniel Johnson: That sum of £650 million is quite astonishing. There is a simple question for this budget. As I pointed out to Stuart McMillan, the Government has, over this year and last year, received more than £10 billion in the block grant. The simple question is: where has that money gone? It has certainly not gone into improving public services, because there are hundreds of thousands of Scots on NHS waiting lists. We have a justice system that is well past breaking point, an education system with declining standards and the scandal of more than 10,000 children living in temporary accommodation.

The problems that we have stem, in part at least, from a failure to grow the economy. The deficit could be wiped out overnight if we had a Government that was focused on increasing jobs, wages and opportunities for Scots. The Scottish Fiscal Commission estimates that this year's performance gap—that is, the price that we pay for slower growth in earnings and employment in Scotland relative to the rest of the UK—is £800 million. Every 0.1 percentage point of additional growth in Scotland relative to the rest of the UK would deliver £25 million to spend on public services here. That would pay for about 750 qualified band 5 nurses, a new community hospital or, if this Government were in charge of roads,

about a kilometre on the A9. Where are the measures to improve productivity, grow wages and reduce economic connectivity? They are certainly not in this budget.

This is yet another disappointing budget, which will undoubtedly lead to yet another emergency budget revision along the lines of the three previous ones in this parliamentary session. That is why Scottish Labour cannot support another budget that simply kicks the can down the road and asks for the SNP to be elected again in May to fix the problems that it has created.

16:47

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow Daniel Johnson, and I agree with much of what he said. What really confuses me, though, is that if the budget is so bad, why will the Labour Party not oppose it at decision time? I remember budget debates in the chamber being full of drama. I remember Wednesday afternoons when we were on tenterhooks to see whether the budget vote would pass. Here we are, in a three-quarters-empty chamber on a sleepy Thursday afternoon, and there is nobody out there paying any attention whatsoever, thanks to the Labour Party selling the pass on the budget weeks ago.

Kate Forbes: Does the member agree that the one guaranteed consistency that we can rely on is that the Conservatives achieve absolutely nothing out of these budgets?

Murdo Fraser: Well, I have been here a lot longer than Kate Forbes has and I can well remember the Conservatives supporting Mr Swinney's budgets, in a previous iteration, when they were delivering good things for Scotland. The problem is that this budget does anything but that, because what it delivers is tax rises for the Scottish public.

The First Minister: Will the member give way?

Murdo Fraser: Oh yes—I will give way to the First Minister.

The First Minister: Was that not at a time when more considered members from the Scottish Conservatives were carrying out the negotiations than the ones who spectacularly failed to get anything out of this budget process?

Murdo Fraser: Maybe it was a time when we had a more considered First Minister, who was prepared to accommodate the reasonable choices of the Conservatives.

The budget proposes tax rises that will cost the Scottish public £1.8 billion next year, although some at the lower end will see a tiny reduction in their bill—not even enough to buy a second-class stamp once a week. Meanwhile, as Craig Hoy pointed out, spending on benefits continues to balloon out of control, rising to £7.4 billion in the coming year. Local government funding is being squeezed and services are being cut. As we heard, NHS spending is being cut in real terms, but the benefits bill continues to grow and grow.

My primary concern is about the impact on business and the economy. Today, thanks to the current non-domestic rates revaluation, businesses in Scotland are facing unaffordable increases in the rates that they will pay.

Earlier this week, I had at my surgery a constituent with a small business in the provision of self-catering accommodation in Perthshire who has seen her rates bill go from zero, because she was eligible for small business rates relief, to £20,000 annually. That increase is simply unaffordable, and she told me that it will leave her having to close her business. That situation is repeated across the self-catering sector.

The finance secretary said today—if I heard her correctly—that she will cap the increases at 45 per cent over three years, but that still means that that business will go from paying zero to paying thousands of pounds that it cannot afford. Businesses will close as a result of the choices that have been made by the finance secretary.

We see the same situation in the hospitality sector. Pubs, hotels and restaurants face horrendous increases of up to 400 per cent in their rates bills. We brought that issue to the chamber last week, asking the Government here to do the same as the Northern Ireland Executive did recently and put a pause on those revaluations. Whether it is self-catering, pubs, hotels or restaurants, the entire tourist and visitor sector of our economy faces a catastrophe. We will see business closures and job losses across the country, particularly in rural areas. We have an SNP Government that is hell-bent on destroying our tourist sector because of the choices that it is making.

The reliefs that have been announced today are welcome, but they go nowhere near far enough to address the increases that many businesses face. The cabinet secretary will preside over the death of Scottish tourism unless she thinks again.

SNP members are groaning, but I think that they should get out more, talk to people in the sector and hear the case studies that we have heard, because that is what is going to happen. Businesses that pay nothing at the moment will see increases of thousands of pounds in their bills.

Retail is also impacted. The SNP manifesto at the last election pledged to restore parity with England for firms liable to pay the higher property

rate. However, for the coming financial year, all premises liable for the higher property rate will pay £226.5 million more than equivalent-sized businesses south of the border. That gap has dramatically increased, because it is just £54.7 million in the current financial year—the figure is going up by more than four times.

As Liz Smith pointed out, we have an issue in the rural economy because of the removal of the small business bonus scheme from sporting rates. Sporting rates are charged on sporting rights, whether they are exercised or not. Most farms across Scotland have sporting rights and will be getting a rates bill for the first time ever. They will never have had one before, because they were eligible for small business relief. The Government says that it is interested in rural Scotland, but it does not look like that from where I am sitting.

As those taxes go up, services are being cut. Professor David Bell, giving evidence to the Finance and Public Administration Committee, said of the council settlement:

"The overall position is severe, and it will become critical."—[*Official Report, Finance and Public Administration Committee*, 20 January 2026; c 49.]

We are likely to see record-breaking increases in council tax set by local authorities across Scotland, meaning that it will not be just income tax and business rates that go up.

Overall, this budget hikes taxes, damages the economy and sees cuts in local services, and the only gainer will be the welfare bill. It is not a budget that deserves our support, so it is disappointing that it will pass nonetheless.

The Labour Party has given this budget a free pass. It will let this ruinous budget go through, damaging local services, hitting councils and ruining the economy. As for the Lib Dems, this is a preview of what we will get later this year if the SNP ends up as the biggest party, with the Lib Dems selling their souls to put the SNP back into power. Alex Cole-Hamilton has spent the past two years courting Anas Sarwar and now he is suddenly courting John Swinney. He wants to be the Nick Clegg of the current decade. Anybody thinking of voting for the Lib Dems at the election needs to reflect on whether they want to put the SNP back in power. We will not do that—we will stand up against the SNP and oppose this budget.

16:54

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): This Government is proud to bring forward a budget that is underpinned by our priorities of placing families at its centre and delivering a more prosperous future for the people of Scotland.

The decisions that we have made continue to protect this Government's social contract—free prescriptions, free bus travel for 2.4 million people, free tuition for students and more than £6,000 in early learning and childcare support for each eligible child.

The budget goes even further for families, with increased wraparound support, more investment in activity clubs and a universal breakfast offer for all primary school pupils. It will make sports more accessible for children, with £20 million for a summer of sport programme. Taken together, those measures will reduce cost of living pressures, support children to move more and eat healthier food, and enable their parents to get to work.

Other child poverty measures include a new annual £50 million whole family support package contributing to our ambition to eradicate child poverty. There is a £49 million boost to the tackling child poverty fund, taking it to a total of £61.5 million. The budget makes a commitment to begin work towards introducing a new Scottish child payment premium, which, it is estimated, will benefit the families of around 12,000 children. In addition, there is a commitment to provide further funding for the next financial year for the investing in communities fund, which supports the vital work that community groups do across our country. It is clear that the budget, taken in the round, is underpinned by the Government's top priority of eradicating child poverty.

Craig Hoy: The minister and I do not agree on much of what he has said. Research by the Scottish Government shows that behavioural changes are emerging as a result of the Scottish child payment, including parents turning down pay increases, working less or putting more money into pension salary sacrifice schemes. Is the best way to lift children out of poverty not their parents having good, well-paid jobs rather than turning down work?

Ivan McKee: The member should recognise that that is an in-work benefit. It is very clear that we are starting to get more details from the Conservatives as to which parts of the welfare bill its members would want to cut. I am sure that the people of Scotland will not thank the party for that as its members attempt to take steps to reverse the reduction in child poverty that this Government has delivered.

The budget recognises the vital role that public services play in the day-to-day lives of our citizens and in Scotland's future. It invests more in community justice services and more in health and social care services, delivering a record £15.7 billion to local government. The cabinet secretary has set out how we are going even further to

support local government by allocating a further £20 million, which local authorities can use towards funding the real living wage for adult and child care sectors.

The budget offers a new approach to public services, with new high street GP walk-in centres an example of us thinking differently to ensure that much-needed services are accessible. Work will also be taken forward to develop a new approach to supporting individuals with complex care needs to move out of hospital, and to reduce inappropriate hospital admissions and out-of-area placements by providing tailored, community-based support solutions.

The budget also includes funding to deliver more efficient services across our public sector, with £29.9 million of funding to support the invest to save programme in the year ahead. Alongside our public service reform strategy and portfolio efficiency plans, the budget supports the Government's efforts to deliver better services more efficiently for the people of Scotland.

Economic growth is essential to ensuring the sustainability of strong public services, and the budget supports that by investing £47 million to strengthen local economies and support the regeneration of local communities and town centres. It provides £2.4 billion for post-school learning, to enable everyone to reach their full potential, and £93 million to build critical offshore wind infrastructure and develop the supply chain. It also provides, for the next three years, 25 per cent in additional relief for licensed hospitality and music venues including pubs, restaurants, hotels, nightclubs and licensed clubs that are liable for the basic or intermediate property rate. We are providing more support for those businesses than the UK Government.

The budget takes the total relief for eligible licensed hospitality premises and music venues to 40 per cent over the next three years, capped at £110,000 per business per year, plus the specific relief that has been offered for the self-catering sector.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Ivan McKee: Will I get the time back, Presiding Officer?

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

Paul Sweeney: A case in Glasgow has recently been brought to my attention. A major hotel in the Finnieston area has just had a rates revaluation, which resulted in a 250 per cent increase in its rates. As a result, it is pausing a major investment of £25 million, which would create 100 jobs. Clearly, no one wants to see that investment paused. Will the minister look at that case and see whether the business can have a bit more leeway in the adjustments?

Ivan McKee: Paul Sweeney will know that the process for assessing rates is carried out independently by the assessors, but I have no doubt that the relief package that we are putting in place will be of benefit to that business. I would be very happy for him to write to me about that.

I have news for Daniel Johnson. Scotland's economy is growing faster than the UK's economy is growing under his Labour Government. I am assuming that it is still his Labour Government and that he identifies as a supporter of it. If he does not, he might care to let us know.

The budget includes an investment of £5 billion of climate-positive spend in 2026-27. The First Minister's announcement earlier today that all ScotRail fares will be frozen is just another example of us supporting investment to make our public transport more accessible and to promote sustainable travel choices.

Aside from the support for the priorities of the people of Scotland that the budget delivers, we have shone a light in the budget process on how politicians in the Parliament approach that most important matter—how we raise and allocate the resources that people out there rely on. Jamie Greene put it well when he talked about the "new style of politics" and the contrast between those who work constructively to make a difference and those who carp from the sidelines; the relevant and the irrelevant; and those who choose to tango, as some have put it, and those who choose to sit it out. The people of Scotland will notice that.

This Government looks forward to continuing to have constructive engagement with all parties that choose to engage with us. I have news for the "shy" Mr Marra, as he was described by Jamie Hepburn. The budget process works on the basis of Opposition parties coming forward with proposals, which are then negotiated with the Government. Jamie Greene, Ross Greer and Jeremy Balfour get that, but Michael Marra chooses not to.

A minute of the meeting of 2 December that Michael Marra took part in said that further engagement will take place subject to receiving proposals from the Scottish Labour Party that we can consider in more depth. We are still waiting. Throughout this afternoon's debate, Mr Marra has been asked to provide examples of what he is asking for. All that he asked for was more and more data—he never came forward with any concrete proposals.

I will turn briefly to Mr Hoy. At least he made no pretence of seeking to engage. Mr Balfour got

more out of the budget than all his ex-colleagues put together. Mr Hoy just made more incoherent calls for more spending and a £1 billion cut to benefits.

The budget will strengthen our infrastructure, improve our public services and, ultimately, make life better for Scottish families. I hope that members will recognise the benefits that the budget will bring for the people of Scotland and vote in favour of the bill.

Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill

17:02

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-20719, which is a legislative consent motion on the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation. I invite Neil Gray to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 13 January 2026, relating to clauses 1 to 8, so far as they relate to matters which fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Neil Gray*]

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

Scottish Parliament Salaries Scheme

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-20738, which is a Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body motion on amendments to the Scottish Parliament salaries scheme. I invite Jackson Carlaw to speak to and move the motion.

17:02

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): On behalf of the corporate body, it falls to me to move this thrilling and compelling motion to update the Scottish Parliament salaries scheme.

The amendments to the scheme implement provisions of three Scottish statutory instruments made under the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025 that will prevent an MSP from simultaneously holding office as a member of the House of Commons, a member of the House of Lords or a local councillor. The provisions that are implemented in changes to the scheme will ensure that any member who holds such a dual mandate cannot be remunerated for both roles simultaneously.

In the hope that members are listening to this and will be able to answer questions on it in call and repeat, I move,

That the Parliament, in exercise of the powers conferred by sections 81(1), 81(5)(b) and 83(5) of the Scotland Act 1998 resolves that, with effect from the day of the poll at the first general election for membership of the Parliament following the day on which this Resolution is approved, the Scottish Parliament Salaries Scheme is amended as follows—

(a) for paragraph 2(2) substitute—

"For any period during which a salary is payable to a member of the Parliament pursuant to a resolution of the House of Lords relating to the remuneration of members of that House, the yearly rate of the salary payable by virtue of this Scheme to that member for that period shall be reduced by two-thirds."

(b) after paragraph 2(2) insert—

"(2A) No salary shall be paid to a member of the Parliament in respect of any period in which the member is or was also a member of the House of Commons. This does not apply to any salary payable to a member of the Parliament in their capacity as the First Minister, a Scottish Minister, a junior Scottish Minister, the Lord Advocate, the Solicitor General for Scotland, the Presiding Officer or a Deputy Presiding Officer.

(2B) If remuneration is also payable to a member of the Parliament in respect of the same period under regulations made under section 11(1) of the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 then the amount of salary payable to the member shall be reduced by the amount specified as payable to a councillor (who is not designated the Leader of the Council, the Civic Head or a senior councillor) by those regulations made under section 11(1) of the 2004 Act."

(c) in paragraph 2(1), after "sub-paragraph (2)" add ", (2A) and (2B)".

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Carlaw. That was more riveting than you might have predicted.

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

17:05

Meeting suspended.

17:06

On resuming—

Decision Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-20720, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill, 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.

17:06

Meeting suspended.

17:09

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on motion S6M-20720, in the name of Shona Robison, on the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill at stage 1. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy and Sport (Maree Todd): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I could not vote. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
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, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (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)
Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
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)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (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)
Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
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)
Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)

Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Abstentions

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Ind)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-20720, in the name of Shona Robison, is: For 65, Against 30, Abstentions 24.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Budget (Scotland) (No 5) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-20719, in the name of Neil Gray, on a motion on legislative consent for the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 13 January 2026, relating to clauses 1 to 8, so far as they relate to matters which fall within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament or alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-20738, in the name of Jackson Carlaw, on a Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body motion, on the amendments to the Scottish Parliament salaries scheme, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, in exercise of the powers conferred by sections 81(1), 81(5)(b) and 83(5) of the Scotland Act 1998 resolves that, with effect from the day of the poll at the first general election for membership of the Parliament following the day on which this Resolution is approved, the Scottish Parliament Salaries Scheme is amended as follows—

(a) for paragraph 2(2) substitute—

"For any period during which a salary is payable to a member of the Parliament pursuant to a resolution of the House of Lords relating to the remuneration of members of that House, the yearly rate of the salary payable by virtue of this Scheme to that member for that period shall be reduced by two-thirds."

(b) after paragraph 2(2) insert—

"(2A) No salary shall be paid to a member of the Parliament in respect of any period in which the member is or was also a member of the House of Commons. This does not apply to any salary payable to a member of the Parliament in their capacity as the First Minister, a Scottish Minister, a junior Scottish Minister, the Lord Advocate, the Solicitor General for Scotland, the Presiding Officer or a Deputy Presiding Officer.

(2B) If remuneration is also payable to a member of the Parliament in respect of the same period under regulations made under section 11(1) of the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 then the amount of salary payable to the member shall be reduced by the amount specified as payable to a councillor (who is not designated the Leader of the Council, the Civic Head or a senior councillor) by those regulations made under section 11(1) of the 2004 Act."

(c) in paragraph 2(1), after "sub-paragraph (2)" add ", (2A) and (2B)".

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:11.

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

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

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000
Textphone: 0800 092 7100
Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba