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Wednesday 5 February 2020

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Scottish Parliament

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[The Deputy Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 13:30]

Portfolio Question Time

Finance, Economy and Fair Work

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The first item of business is portfolio questions, and the first set of questions is on finance, economy and fair work.

United Kingdom Budget (Council Tax Rates)

1. **Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what the impact will be on Dumfries and Galloway Council of the UK Government's decision to publish its budget on the same day that local authorities in Scotland must legally set their rates of council tax. (S5O-04087)

The Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy (Kate Forbes): The impact would have been very damaging had it not been for the Scottish Government's decision to bring forward the publication of its own budget. The United Kingdom Government's decision certainly demonstrates its ignorance of the budget process in Scotland. Its lack of engagement is unacceptable to not only the Scottish Government but every local authority here and the citizens who depend on our public services.

Emma Harper: The UK Government's decision to push back publication of its budget until 11 March is causing major uncertainty for both the Scottish Government and local authorities. Does the cabinet secretary—or the minister—agree that such uncertainty could have been avoided altogether if Scotland had had the full fiscal powers of an independent country?

Kate Forbes: The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work and I agree that independence would give us control over our budget planning and provide the necessary economic levers to grow the Scottish economy.

In the face of the uncertainty that I have mentioned, this year, the Scottish Government intends to present its budget at the earliest practical date, which is tomorrow. We will do so in full recognition of the fact that it is vital for us to give local authorities, including Dumfries and Galloway Council, the security and clarity that they need on their own budgets as early as possible—unlike the UK Government.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): In her answer, the minister expressed her concern that the Scottish Government has not received sufficient information from the UK Government. Does the Scottish Government have enough information to enable the cabinet secretary to bring forward a budget and to allow local authorities to set their budgets on the date on which the UK Government sets its own, or should we expect in-year revisions? If there are to be in-year revisions, when will those be announced?

Kate Forbes: In order to give clarity to local government, we are basing our budget on the best available estimates. As the cabinet secretary announced on 31 January, to assist local authorities with their budget preparations, our intention is that the local government settlement will include confirmation that local authorities will again have flexibility to increase their council tax rates by up to 3 per cent in real terms. That demonstrates our willingness to use the best available estimates in our own budget process in order to give clarity to local authorities.

Small Businesses (Coatbridge and Chryston)

2. **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it supports small businesses in Coatbridge and Chryston. (S5O-04088)

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): The Scottish Government supports businesses across Scotland via a range of interventions that are delivered through our enterprise and skills agencies, Business Gateway and other inclusive measures such as business improvement districts and city region deals.

Regeneration has been a key focus in Coatbridge. For example, the regeneration capital fund grant funding of more than £1 million has transformed the former Luggie Glen sewage works site into Drumpellier business park, which is a flagship centre for start-ups, small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprises.

Fulton MacGregor: From his own constituency work, the minister will be aware that, last week, the Labour-run North Lanarkshire Council confirmed that it will impose parking charges on people looking to shop in Coatbridge town centre, as well as in the villages of Stepps and Chryston in my constituency. I am all for having a phased environmental strategy in the local area, but many businesses are already struggling because of their close proximity to Glasgow Fort shopping centre, which has free parking, and the increase in online shopping. Does the minister agree that that is a wrong decision that could bring further detriment to small and local businesses in my constituency?

Jamie Hepburn: As Mr MacGregor alluded to, I represent the constituency adjacent to his, so I am well aware of the issue. In my capacity as a Scottish Government minister, I should say that it is a matter for North Lanarkshire Council to deal with, but in my capacity as a constituency representative, I am of course exploring it in the interests of my own constituents.

Glasgow City Council (Funding)

3. **Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what representations it has had from Glasgow City Council regarding local government funding. (S5O-04089)

The Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy (Kate Forbes): Ministers and officials regularly meet representatives of all Scottish local authorities, including Glasgow City Council, to discuss a range of issues as part of our commitment to working in partnership with local government to improve outcomes for the people of Scotland.

Johann Lamont: The minister may be aware that, last month, Glasgow Scottish National Party councillors sought and failed to defeat a Labour motion demanding that the council leader, Susan Aitken, make direct and public representation seeking fair funding for the city. Will the minister confirm whether she has received those representations?

While trying to avoid standing up for Glasgow, the SNP is at the same time bringing forward proposals for severe cuts to services that will make Glasgow's funding crisis real. Closing community centres and libraries and getting rid of golf courses are only part of that dereliction of duty to Glasgow's citizens. Will the minister listen to the grave concerns of charities, unions, communities and all those who want to stand up for Glasgow, and produce a budget that understands the needs of Glasgow and the severe consequences for all too many families if the current plans go ahead?

Kate Forbes: Susan Aitken is a great champion for Glasgow, and the member knows full well that the biggest budget pressures faced by Glasgow City Council at the moment are a result of the equal pay settlement, which is an issue entirely of her party's making. The SNP councillors in Glasgow City Council and the SNP members in this Government will continue to stand up for Glasgow, as they have demonstrated in the past few months.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can I have short supplementary questions, please?

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Along with Glasgow City Council, authorities across Scotland have seen savage real-terms cuts to their core funding under the SNP Government.

With the block grant from Westminster for the coming year increasing by at least £1.1 billion in real terms—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can I have a quick supplementary, please?

Murdo Fraser: Does the minister agree that there could be no case for any further cuts to local government funding?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not really relevant to the question, but if the minister would like to respond, she is very welcome to.

Kate Forbes: All I will say is that I look forward to the day when the United Kingdom Government reverses the whole decade of austerity that Scottish public services have suffered under the Conservatives.

Shona Robison (Dundee City East) (SNP): The Chancellor of the Exchequer's decision to increase the rate of borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board by 1 per cent will be detrimental to Scotland's councils' ability to carry out essential infrastructure projects. Does the minister agree that the UK Government should urgently rethink that decision and engage with the Scottish Government and local authorities on the matter?

Kate Forbes: I fully agree with Shona Robison and have written twice to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on the matter. The decision on loan funding was taken in the light of decisions about English local authorities, not Scottish local authorities, and it will have a direct impact on infrastructure spend in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members should note that supplementary questions should be relevant to the original question.

Scotland and United Kingdom Economic Divergence

4. **Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what the cumulative percentage divergence has been between total gross domestic product growth in the Scottish and UK economies since May 2007. (S5O-04090)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work (Derek Mackay): Since the second quarter of 2007, Scotland's GDP has grown by a total of 10.3 per cent, while GDP for the United Kingdom as a whole has increased by 15.2 per cent.

However, the majority of that divergence can be explained by the fact that Scotland's population has grown more slowly than the UK's since 2007: Scotland's population has grown by 5 per cent and

the UK's has grown by 8 per cent. That demonstrates why we have called for immigration powers to be devolved. The introduction of a Scottish visa would allow Scotland to attract and retain people who have the skills and qualities that are needed for our communities and economy to flourish.

Our refreshed economic action plan sets out how we will tackle the climate emergency, grow an inclusive economy and face up to the challenges of Brexit, changing demographics and shifting global circumstances.

Dean Lockhart: Derek Mackay has just confirmed that the Scottish economy is 5 per cent smaller—that is £7 billion—than it should be after 13 years of SNP Government. That is £7 billion of economic growth that could have generated thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of pounds in extra tax for public spending in Scotland.

We have listened to the SNP blame Brexit for that economic stagnation, but it has been going on for 13 years, and last year, the Scottish economy grew at less than half the UK's rate. When will the cabinet secretary start to listen to leading business organisations across Scotland and change the direction of his economic policy?

Derek Mackay: When it comes to listening to the business community, the Tories have absolutely ignored it in relation to Brexit, which is about to destroy the economic credentials of the Tories, if they had any to start with.

As far as the past 13 years are concerned, I made the point that the divergence in GDP is largely down to population. Who controls population? Who controls migration? As with other macroeconomic matters, it is the UK Government that does so, and that is the primary reason for the divergence in GDP.

When it comes to areas on which the Scottish Government plays a lead, we have been outperforming the rest of the UK. On attractiveness, Scotland is second only to London and the south-east of England and, on exports, we are outperforming the rest of the UK. For many quarters, unemployment in Scotland has been lower than, and it is currently the same as, unemployment in the rest of the UK. On GDP growth, whereas the Tories predicted recession, we have been delivering growth for our economy.

The greatest threat to Scotland's economy right now is Brexit, which has been delivered at the hands of the chaotic, incompetent and inept Tory Government.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Everybody is getting a bit nippy today. [Laughter.] Could we tone it down for the rest of the session, please?

Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland Figures

5. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I will do my best, Presiding Officer.

To ask the Scottish Government how much time and money it plans to spend producing an alternative to the GERS figures. (S5O-04091)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work (Derek Mackay): I am sure that this answer will tone things down, Presiding Officer.

The GERS publication explicitly states that it shows Scotland's position within the UK and not as an independent nation. As the United Kingdom Government increasingly disregards the democratic wishes of the people of Scotland, it is more important than ever that we complete the necessary steps to hold a referendum on independence.

The Scottish Government produced a comprehensive plan for an independent Scotland in 2014. As we set out in our programme for government, we will undertake the necessary work to update that plan and ensure that the people of Scotland have the information that they need to make an informed choice about the future of their country.

Jamie Greene: Never mind the relevance of supplementary questions—I am afraid that even that answer was not relevant to the question. I asked how much time and money civil servants will spend on producing an alternative to the GERS figures.

Last month, the cabinet secretary said that he wanted to produce alternative GERS figures because he feels

“frustrated when the GERS figures are published every year.”

Why is he so frustrated with those independent figures? Which impartial economic authority will independently verify his figures when he produces them?

Derek Mackay: I will always expect the civil service to act in the professional and impartial fashion in which it acts. I dare say that our work will be of much greater value than the UK Government spending £5 million on propaganda telling us how great the union is at this point in time, which we have heard the speculation about. That is very interesting, coming from the Conservatives in Westminster. [Interruption.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: This is getting overruled and I am really not appreciating it. It is just not funny.

Derek Mackay: I simply make the point that we want to have an informed debate on the future of our country. I have never challenged the impartiality of our statisticians. What I have found frustrating is the misrepresentation of the figures as they relate to Scotland that occurs when people misrepresent the GERS figures by trying to suggest that they reflect the potential of an independent Scotland when they do not do so. The GERS figures do not reflect the potential of an independent Scotland; they reflect the estimated notional position within the current constitutional arrangement.

I think that it is right and fair that we have an informed debate about the options for our country and that that debate should be based on fact and the wonderful potential that Scotland has.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will preserve the calm with a short supplementary question from Kenneth Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I bring peace and love. [*Laughter.*]

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is sheer hypocrisy for Tory members to criticise the Scottish Government for trying to improve the accuracy of the GERS figures when the UK Government that they so slavishly support will spend £5 million of taxpayers' money on a campaign to highlight the alleged benefits of the union to the people of Scotland?

Derek Mackay: I agree that the spending of £5 million in that way would indeed be a waste of taxpayers' money. We have been working on a fully informed, rational debate about the future of our nation, which should be based on facts. That debate will be much better than the likes of the leave campaign that we saw in relation to Brexit. In Scotland, we should have a mature, responsible and decent debate about the future of our country that is based on the facts and on how rich our country is. With the powers of independence, it could be even fairer.

Economic Growth (West Lothian)

6. Angela Constance (Almond Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports jobs, business and economic growth in West Lothian. (S5O-04092)

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): West Lothian has benefited from a range of projects that are designed to promote investment and create jobs, including £2 million of investment in Livingston trade park from the building Scotland fund and £1.8 million from the town centre fund, which is supporting 112 projects.

In addition, during 2018-19, more than 1,400 West Lothian companies were helped through Business Gateway, about 1,000 modern apprenticeships were supported and Scottish Enterprise provided £2.3 million in research and development and in innovation grants.

Angela Constance: The minister is well aware that API Foils Ltd, in Livingston, has gone into administration, leaving more than 100 workers with an uncertain future. How will the Scottish Government help to secure the site and jobs for the future and ensure that API Foils workers get full support, including their full redundancy and pension entitlements?

Jamie Hepburn: Yesterday, I had the opportunity to meet Angela Constance to discuss some of those matters, and I would be happy to meet her again should she require to discuss them further.

Right now, our priority is to ensure that the workforce is supported in the immediate term. Our partnership action for continuing employment team attended the announcement of administration on Monday, and a PACE support event is taking place today in West Lothian College, which Unite the union is attending. I have offered to intervene in cases of delays in individuals' receiving payments from the redundancy payment service. I hope that that will not be necessary, but I will readily intervene if it is.

Our immediate priority is to support the workforce. Thereafter, our other priority will be to support the acquisition of API Foils as a going concern. I assure Angela Constance and the rest of the chamber that my and Scottish Enterprise's attention is turned to that matter.

Inclusive Growth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes)

7. Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports inclusive growth in the Mid Fife and Glenrothes constituency. (S5O-04093)

The Minister for Trade, Investment and Innovation (Ivan McKee): In addition to the reopening of the Levenmouth rail link, Mid Fife and Glenrothes will benefit from our £450 million investment in two city region deals: the Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city region deal and the Tay cities deal.

The Edinburgh deal is already delivering benefits. Construction will start soon on nine new business units in Glenrothes as part of the £35 million of Scottish Government investment in the deal's i3 programme, which supports industrial innovation. We continue to press the United Kingdom Government to sign the Tay cities deal as a matter of urgency.

Jenny Gilruth: DPS Group, which is based in Glenrothes, is one of the UK's only integrated electrical, instrumentation and control system providers. It supports businesses globally and closer to home, including by providing the bespoke lighting and electrical systems that are used for the royal Edinburgh military tattoo. Given the importance of that local employer in my constituency, would the minister like to join me in Glenrothes to visit DPS Group and to learn more about its valuable work?

Ivan McKee: As the member might be aware, I spend a considerable amount of time travelling round the country and visiting innovative businesses in order to understand the great technology that Scotland has to offer and how the Scottish Government can support businesses to internationalise that technology. I would be delighted to join the member in her constituency to visit DPS Group and to understand what it contributes to Scotland's strong economy.

Large Business Supplement

8. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how much revenue has been raised by the large business supplement since 2016. (S5O-04094)

The Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy (Kate Forbes): Since 2016-17, the large business supplement has raised £510 million. The Scottish Government has committed to reviewing the level of the large business supplement at each future budget, in the light of its affordability.

Alexander Stewart: Businesses in my region and across Scotland are still being put at a competitive disadvantage thanks to the large business supplement. With the budget just round the corner, will the Government now commit to ensuring that Scottish businesses are not held back?

Kate Forbes: Frankly, that is not true. In fact, Scotland offers a very competitive tax environment, with support provided through the business growth accelerator, nursery relief, renewables relief and a number of other reliefs. I am delighted that, after yesterday's vote, we will still be able to provide such reliefs. The budget is tomorrow, and I look forward to the Tories' continued engagement in that process.

Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that questions 5 and 7 are grouped together. Any member who wishes to ask a supplementary question on either of those

questions should press their request-to-speak button in the usual way.

COP26 (Global South)

1. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to encourage representation from countries in the global south when Scotland hosts COP26 in November. (S5O-04095)

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): It is important that COP26 is inclusive and includes representatives from the global south, whose countries are among those that are least responsible for the global climate emergency but are being affected first and most severely by it. The Scottish Government will seek to develop a programme of opportunities whereby all voices can be heard in a respectful and collaborative way. We will also encourage the United Kingdom Government to ensure that the process of securing visas is as easy as possible and that delegates from around the world are able to attend COP26.

Bill Kidd: I am sure that we all welcome the First Minister's tweet yesterday in which she made clear her intention to make COP26 a success. Nonetheless, does the cabinet secretary agree that Boris Johnson's reported hostility to the role of the Scottish Government in co-hosting this global event is counterproductive, particularly when tackling climate change requires the collaboration of all communities, whether it be Scotland or vulnerable peoples in areas such as the Pacific islands?

Roseanna Cunningham: The world is facing a climate emergency and we must now move to a net zero future in a way that is fair and just. COP26 can set us on that course, but it has to be a shared endeavour and we are determined that political differences will not play any part in it. The Scottish Government has continually demonstrated our commitment to delivering a successful COP26 in partnership and collaboration with the UK Government, Glasgow City Council, Police Scotland and others, and the First Minister wrote to the Prime Minister yesterday to reiterate that commitment.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): I am heartened by the cabinet secretary's response to Bill Kidd's question. Does she agree that, as the UK moves rapidly towards hosting COP26, the Prime Minister would do well to take a lesson from the effective way in which the Scottish Government and Parliament developed the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019 across parties and beyond? If we cannot co-operate across the UK as hosts, what hope is there for the global south?

Roseanna Cunningham: COP26 in Glasgow has the potential to be a very significant moment in our global efforts to tackle the climate crisis. I assure people that, globally, folk are looking forward very much to the event. It is really important that it does not end up being about political differences, because on climate change there is a huge degree of cross-party collaboration, not just here. In fairness, the UK Government is also prepared to commit to a net zero target date; many countries are not. We should be in the business of celebrating the progress that we are making, not getting ourselves into a wrangle that will do the opposite.

Climate Emergency Challenges

2. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what the greatest challenges are in Scotland in tackling the climate emergency. (S5O-04096)

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): We have responded to the global climate change emergency by committing to world-leading emissions reduction targets. Our challenge now is to adopt policies that make achieving those targets a reality. Work is under way to produce an update of our climate change plan in April. The Committee on Climate Change has been clear that achieving Scotland's net zero target is a collective endeavour—that goes back to the previous question—and it is contingent not least on the United Kingdom Government, which the committee challenged to

“step up and match Scottish policy ambition in areas where key powers are reserved”.

Willie Coffey: In evidence at yesterday's Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee, Scottish Renewables told us that Scotland leads the way in low-carbon electricity charging for electric vehicles, at only 50g of CO₂ emissions per kWh compared with 200g in the United Kingdom, and that, with a little more support, Scotland's electric vehicle drivers could soon be almost totally carbon free. What more can the cabinet secretary do to push that forward and make a huge contribution to tackling climate change in Scotland?

Roseanna Cunningham: Since 2012, we have invested over £30 million of funding in developing the publicly available charging network in Scotland and we now have over 1,200 charge points, including 275 rapid chargers.

We are committed to continuing to expand the network until 2022. In June last year, we announced £20 million of funding through our switched on towns and cities and local authority support programmes to install a further 500 charge

points across Scotland. We will continue to offer further funding opportunities to local authorities, households and businesses to assist the growth of the charging network.

I will make sure that my colleague Michael Matheson's attention is drawn to the question.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): The Scottish National Party is set to miss a range of climate change targets this year. It will fall short on one in six biodiversity targets, progress on active travel has declined and all public sector vehicles were supposed to be using alternative fuel by now. Does the cabinet secretary intend to meet any of the targets that were missed this year? If so, when?

Roseanna Cunningham: The Scottish Government continues to be as ambitious as it possibly can be in respect of a range of issues in the climate change portfolio, as the member knows particularly well. We are progressing. We are doing better than a vast number of countries; we are one of the global leaders. I should also say that we are well in advance of our colleagues in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Plastic Packaging (Food and Drink)

3. Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it is having with food and drink manufacturers regarding their use of plastic packaging. (S5O-04097)

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): For Scotland to become a net zero society will require long-term and sustainable changes to consumer and producer behaviour. We have engaged with food and drink manufacturers on a number of policy initiatives, most recently our circular economy bill proposals and the deposit return scheme for drinks containers.

We are co-operating with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, along with other nations in the United Kingdom, on a new approach to extended producer responsibility for all packaging. Our aim is to provide stronger incentives to reduce waste and use more sustainable packaging across a wide range of products.

Richard Lyle: The cabinet secretary might be aware of Tesco's recent and welcome announcement that it is taking a major step to remove multipack plastic packaging. I would be grateful to hear from the cabinet secretary what discussions could take place with other large retailers and grocery stores on reducing their use of plastic.

Roseanna Cunningham: I welcome all steps that are being taken by big stores, particularly the giant supermarkets, because they could make a big impact in this area. We are engaging with the grocery supply chain, including retailers, through the UK plastics pact. That is a voluntary commitment, setting ambitious targets for signatories to reduce the amount of plastic packaging that they use and to work to improve their environmental impact. That work is on-going and will continue until we achieve what we want to see.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Although there is widespread support for a DRS, including on these benches, there are still significant concerns about the timescale for its introduction if it is not part of a UK-wide scheme. In 2015, Northern Ireland concluded that, although desirable, it would not be feasible to introduce the scheme on a Northern Ireland-only basis. In 2017, the Welsh Government also concluded that it would be preferable to establish a UK-wide scheme. Given that, why is the cabinet secretary so determined to introduce the scheme on a Scotland-only basis when it will mean additional costs and disruption for business, especially when DEFRA has consulted on a scheme that will cover England, Wales and Northern Ireland that will commence in 2023?

Roseanna Cunningham: It might have been advisable for Finlay Carson to put the word “allegedly” before the word “commence” because, at the moment, there is no certainty about when that scheme will proceed.

We have devolved responsibility in this area. We can do these things in Scotland. I am therefore surprised that the Conservatives, who are constantly asking us to get on with doing things in the devolved arena, somehow object to that when it happens in practice.

Mossmorran

4. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government when the environment secretary last met communities living near the natural gas and ethylene plants at Mossmorran. (S5O-04098)

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): I receive regular updates on developments at Mossmorran and officials are in very regular contact with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and others that have statutory responsibilities in relation to the plant.

I appreciate the concerns of local communities following repeated unplanned flaring events during the past few years and have been clear that the situation needs to improve. However, I have been

equally clear that regulatory and enforcement actions are for SEPA to consider in its role as an independent regulator.

Mark Ruskell: I recognise the plans and the regulatory action that SEPA has taken to ensure that the plant operates in the law and ends the misery of communities in the surrounding area, but none of those actions addresses the climate emergency and Mossmorran remains the second-largest emitter of carbon in Scotland.

Given that there will be a climate camp near Mossmorran this summer, bringing together protesters in the local community ahead of the 26th conference of the parties—COP 26—is the cabinet secretary prepared to convene a round-table event to enable the plant operators, the community and others to plot ahead about how the plant can decarbonise?

Roseanna Cunningham: I am always prepared to consider what might be helpful interventions. I should, of course, point out that Mossmorran is a cross-portfolio issue, so any consideration would have to be given on that basis.

I am aware of the climate camp. In my view, there is no doubt about this Government’s commitment to tackling climate change. We want to make sure that that is done in a just way. I am sure that the member accepts and understands that there are just transition issues with a plant as important to the local economy for employment and that the direct and indirect benefits need to be taken into consideration.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): On the important issue of local engagement, would it not be appropriate for SEPA now to engage directly with each of the affected community councils in my constituency—Crossgates and Mossgreen, Hill of Beath, Cowdenbeath, Lumphinnans, Lochgelly, Kelty, Benarty and Cardenden, and, as far as Braefoot Bay is concerned, Aberdour, and Dalgety Bay and Hillend? In doing so, perhaps SEPA could be encouraged by the cabinet secretary to let us all know when it will finally complete its investigation into the hugely disruptive, unplanned flaring incident at Mossmorran in April 2019.

Roseanna Cunningham: I need to repeat what I said in my initial response: SEPA is an independent environmental regulator.

I understand that SEPA is in the final stages of concluding its investigation into flaring in April 2019. The current focus is on completing a safe restart of the plant while minimising the impact on the neighbouring communities. SEPA will be in a position to conclude its investigation once the restart of the plant is concluded.

I hope that the member is not asking me to interfere with SEPA's independence—I am sure that she is not. I understand the frustration while we wait for the outcome of the investigation.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary recognise that, while there are investigations into the flaring last April, the safe restart has included a long period of elevated flaring that has caused a lot of light pollution, noise pollution and distress to the local communities? Would she be prepared to engage with ExxonMobil and SEPA to look at how the restart has been done? I accept that there are safety issues that need to be given consideration.

Roseanna Cunningham: I am assured that SEPA and, in fact, the Health and Safety Executive are monitoring developments very closely during the plant restart.

Regulatory investigations must be allowed to take their course. As I understand it, the company is taking steps to reduce the size of the flare and to provide updates for the local community. As I said earlier, I appreciate the concerns and the anxiety of the local communities about flaring at Mossmorran. In my view, it is important that the company takes all reasonable steps to minimise the impact of that on them.

Deer Management

5. Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how rural communities can be supported socially, economically and environmentally by a more robust deer management system designed in the public interest. (S5O-04099)

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): Robust deer management systems can benefit rural communities by reducing the damage that is caused by deer, such as overgrazing, trampling vulnerable habitats, preventing young trees from growing and damaging crops. Wild deer also cause a significant number of road accidents each year, and effective deer management systems can help to reduce the risk of deer vehicle collisions.

The deer working group report, which is entitled "The Management of Wild Deer in Scotland" and which we published on 29 January this year, sets out a number of recommendations to improve deer management in Scotland. We will consider all those recommendations, alongside other evidence, and publish our response in due course.

Claudia Beamish: Does the minister agree that many of the rural land management issues that we face are made more difficult by knowledge gaps? Will the Scottish Government require a publicly accessible national deer cull database, as

proposed in the Werritty report's recommendations?

Mairi Gougeon: That point has been identified in some of the reports that have been produced. The Werritty report and the deer working group report have both been published recently. We need to take a deep and careful look at all the recommendations in those reports and establish where the gaps might be and whether we need to fill them, as well as considering the other recommendations. We will give full consideration to that.

Deer Management

7. Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to regulate deer numbers. (S5O-04101)

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon): In 2017, we commissioned an independent review by the deer working group. The group's remit was to recommend changes to ensure that we have an effective deer management system in Scotland that safeguards public interest and promotes the sustainable management of wild deer. The group's report, which we published on 29 January, contains recommendations on the regulation of deer numbers. We will carefully consider all those recommendations alongside all other evidence before publishing our formal response.

Mike Rumbles: Will the minister ensure that she engages with the professionals who are involved in the practical control of deer numbers—that is, the Scottish Gamekeepers Association—to ensure that they have a major input into any new system that is designed to better regulate deer numbers?

Mairi Gougeon: It is absolutely our responsibility to engage with all relevant stakeholders. I mentioned the publication of a report, but a lot of other reports on deer have been published in recent times. We have to consider all the evidence as well as engaging with people as we go forward. That is very much part of our plans.

Fly Tipping

6. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports local authorities in tackling fly tipping. (S5O-04100)

The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Roseanna Cunningham): Fly tipping is criminal, dangerous and unnecessary. Valuable resources that could be recycled are wasted, and local authorities and landowners bear the cost of clear-up. Local authorities are primarily responsible for dealing

with fly tipping, and we provided them with updated guidance on doing so in the revised code of practice on litter and refuse, which was published in 2018. Zero Waste Scotland and the Scottish partnership against rural crime provide strategic national support and regional partnerships to assist in tackling fly tipping.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am sure that the cabinet secretary will agree that fly tipping remains a considerable problem for rural communities in my region. It is irresponsible, harmful to the environment and, in some cases, dangerous. Although prevention is of course important, the reality is that very few of these crimes, when detected, make it to court, even in cases where clean-up costs are considerable. With local council budgets under increasing pressure, what can the cabinet secretary do to ensure that local authorities have sufficient resources to deal with fly tipping and the pursuit of those who are responsible for it? What can the cabinet secretary do to ensure that, where an offender is identified, it is more straightforward for local authorities and landowners to recover the costs of cleaning up the mess that is left behind?

Roseanna Cunningham: That question was in two parts. The first was to do with the overall issue of local authority funding. As I am sure the member will expect me to say, that is part and parcel of the budget negotiation. The money that goes to local authorities is negotiated with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and thereafter there is a decision on individual local authority funding. It is then for individual local authorities to make decisions about what they prioritise or otherwise in their budgets.

More broadly, in my opening answer, I referred to the Scottish partnership against rural crime, which last year published its "Rural Crime Strategy 2019-2022", which includes commitments to tackling fly tipping. The partnership involves Police Scotland, Zero Waste Scotland, NFU Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates and Forestry and Land Scotland among others. Since the strategy was launched, a number of regional partnerships against rural crime have been set up. I do not know whether Jamie Halcro Johnston has managed to engage with a regional partnership in his area. That might be an interesting first point of contact for him.

He rightly mentions that there is a difficulty with detection and enforcement, as there always is with crimes that take place far away from the public eye and the possibility of detection. I am sure that advice and support will be there for local authorities in thinking about how they press forward with prosecution, and I hope that they are all accessing that advice.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the environment, climate change and land reform portfolio. I apologise to Lewis Macdonald for not being able to take his question.

Transport Strategy

14:10

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a statement by Michael Matheson on the new transport strategy for Scotland, “Protecting our climate and improving lives”. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson): The national transport strategy is fundamental in setting out the strategic direction of transport policy for the years ahead, shaping the future provision of transport in Scotland around a shared vision that will protect our climate and improve our lives. Since the 2006 strategy, there has been significant change in our society, including in our economy, in our environment and in technology, which the new strategy recognises. The strategy sets out the challenges that are associated with the pace of change and how those challenges will be addressed.

We have followed a collaborative approach throughout the process of developing the strategy. More than 60 transport partners have participated in the development of the strategic framework, helping to shape the vision and consider the challenges and opportunities that relate to the transport system. In parallel, our stakeholder engagement programme saw 6,500 people attending more than 100 events in rural, island and urban communities around Scotland. In summer 2019, we held a consultation on the draft strategy that resulted in more than 1,220 responses. We have updated the draft strategy to take account of the views that were expressed in the consultation and the strategy provisions in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.

Through our collaborative approach, we have crafted a compelling vision for the future of transport in Scotland over the next 20 years. It is a vision that will protect our climate and improve our lives. The vision is:

“We will have a sustainable, inclusive, safe and accessible transport system, helping deliver a healthier, fairer and more prosperous Scotland for communities, businesses and visitors.”

The vision is underpinned by four key priority areas for transport, which are that it reduces inequality, takes climate action, helps to deliver inclusive economic growth and improves health and wellbeing. The vision and priorities are at the heart of the strategy and will form the basis on which we take decisions and evaluate Scotland’s transport policies in the future.

Another important element of the strategy is our embedding of the sustainable travel hierarchy in decision making by promoting sustainable and active transport and shared transport options in preference to single-occupancy private cars. At the national level, the sustainable investment hierarchy will be used to inform future investment decisions and ensure transport options that prioritise reducing the need to travel unsustainably and maintaining our existing assets.

These frameworks place sustainability foremost in transport decision making, and their implementation into all areas of transport planning and investment decisions will help to deliver the transport system of the future for Scotland.

For transport to play its important part in delivering the fully inclusive society that we want to live in, we must address the challenges across our transport system. The strategy identifies those challenges as they relate to the four priorities.

The strategy’s first priority—reduces inequalities—is outcome focused and reflects the breadth of our ambition. Although not a right in itself, transport plays a key role in enabling people to realise their human rights by facilitating access to employment and public services such as healthcare and education. The strategy supports a rights-based approach to transport. It also highlights a range of inequalities that transport can help to tackle, including child poverty and gender inequalities, and the need to ensure that there is accessible transport for disabled people, to allow everyone in Scotland to share in the benefits of a modern and accessible transport system.

Regional inequalities and spatial differences are also recognised in the strategy and the transport system must play its part in connecting people and communities to employment, services and social life events.

Under the second priority—takes climate action—the strategy recognises the biggest moral endeavour of our times: addressing the global climate emergency. We all have a responsibility to act, but it is important that the Government leads from the front and by example.

Transport is responsible for 37 per cent of Scotland’s greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, the move to low and zero-carbon transport is essential to our future wellbeing. In response, the Scottish Government has made one of the most ambitious climate commitments in the world: to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045. Over the 20-year period of the strategy, the role of transport in achieving that target will be crucial. It will require not only the use of low-carbon technology but significant societal changes, including encouraging people to move towards space-saving and sustainable travel

choices and reducing the demand for unsustainable transport.

The measures in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019 support emissions reduction in transport by encouraging modal shift. As an example of our commitment to this ambition, we are bringing forward significant and transformational long term funding of over half a billion pounds for buses, which will remove congestion impacts from our bus routes, reduce journey times and improve journey-time reliability.

As well as encouraging sustainable travel and reducing emissions, the transport system must also adapt to climate change impacts that are already being experienced.

Under the third priority, the strategy recognises the fundamental role of transport in the delivery of inclusive economic growth. The transport system plays a crucial role in the successful performance of Scotland's economy and regional cohesion. It enables people to get to work and firms to get their goods and services to markets in Scotland and beyond.

We are witnessing dramatic changes for transport: in how we access information and pay for journeys, and in the switch from internal combustion engines to electric alternatives. If Scotland's economic potential is to be realised, our transport system must also adapt to those changes by improving our network resilience, integrating with new technologies and preparing our workforce. We have one of the world's most successful skills systems, which we must build on in order to address the challenges that we face in Scotland, including an ageing workforce, the depopulation of rural areas, digitalisation and the global climate emergency.

We must also support innovation to stimulate markets so that consumers, business, industry and our economy at large can harness the opportunities from zero emission mobility in local and international markets.

The fourth interlinked priority that the strategy addresses is improving our health and wellbeing. Our transport system needs to be safe and secure, giving users confidence that they will reach their destinations without threat, thereby encouraging active travel and sustainable public transport choices while also benefiting public health.

The transport system and the future transport needs of people will be at the heart of decision making as we deliver healthier and more sustainable places. The transport system must reduce its negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of the people of Scotland. Thankfully, we can take actions that can simultaneously tackle multiple challenges.

For example, by taking climate action and reducing inequalities, we can, in parallel, benefit public health by encouraging healthier active travel and reducing the associated harmful emissions. Poor air quality has a negative impact on the health of all of us—particularly the health of the most vulnerable, including the very young, the elderly and people with pre-existing health conditions. In Scotland, particulate air pollution is shortening everyone's lifespan by approximately three to four months.

The national transport strategy presents the strategic framework for our transport system over the next 20 years. We all have a responsibility for delivering the strategy and making it a success—from local government and central Government implementing policies to businesses and individuals taking account of their actions when making travel choices.

Work has already begun on increasing the accountability of the transport sector and strengthening our evidence base. Working with partners, we will publish a delivery plan that will set out how the strategy will be delivered. That will be regularly updated and will provide detail on how the priorities will be realised through a range of actions, with key interventions flowing from the climate change plan update and the second strategic transport projects review.

The 20-year strategy is for all of Scotland. It is far reaching in its impact and its ambition. I am confident about its vision, and am happy to commit this document to Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will allow around 20 minutes for the cabinet secretary to take questions on his statement.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement and for giving us a copy of the strategy document. Of course, we have not had a huge amount of time to go through it in great detail, but I assure the cabinet secretary that the Conservatives will approach the strategy in a positive and constructive way, and in a spirit of recognising that these ambitions must transcend the electoral cycles and political boundaries. I also thank the many stakeholders who participated in the process. I know that it has been a far-reaching piece of work.

It is hard to disagree that, at the heart of a 20-year strategy must lie four vital things: improving access to public transport; tackling climate change; delivering economic growth; and improving public health. In relation to all of those, we agree whole-heartedly with the premise of the statement that we have just heard.

However, now for the "but". This is a good document, at first, cursory, glance. It is an

excellent piece of research, and I am sure that there are lots of interesting points in it. However, it is noticeable that it is alarmingly bereft of detail. If the detail will lie in the delivery plan, I would like to have heard more about it in the statement. What are the policies that will help the Government meet the objectives? That is my first question to the cabinet secretary. That concerns the what; my next question concerns the who. Who are the partners that he said he will be working with on the delivery plan, and how will he work with them? My next question concerns the when. When will the delivery plan be laid before the Parliament, and how will we be able to adequately scrutinise it? The most important question concerns the how. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that he agrees that the ambitions that he has set out must be matched by investment and funding? Is he confident that the national transport strategy's delivery plan will not simply become a wish list but will be backed up by adequate funding and a bold investment in infrastructure?

Michael Matheson: I thank Jamie Greene for his comments about engaging with the process constructively and for welcoming the provisions that are set out in the strategy.

The member will realise that the strategy is there to set the strategic national framework for policies that will be taken forward.

I recognise that time is limited and that Jamie Greene has been busy in committee this morning. Chapter 4, starting at page 42, sets out a range of measures and policies that will be taken forward in meeting the challenge. We will take forward those policies to develop the delivery plan. The delivery plan process will be very similar to the process for developing the strategy. The partners who have been involved in helping to shape the strategy will be responsible for setting out the detail of the delivery plan.

For a strategy to be in place for 20 years, it will have to adapt to changes as we make progress. It is also critical that we have proper, full accountability of the progress that we make against the strategy. The delivery plan will be updated annually, so that we can see the rate and level of progress, and where further action is needed.

I recognise the need to make sure that tangible, very specific measures are taken forward. That is the reason why there will be a delivery plan and, alongside it, a delivery board that will be responsible for its overall management. That is to make sure that we are taking forward the right types of policy initiatives in order to deliver the objectives that are set out in the strategy.

I want to reassure Jamie Greene that that will be a key part of how the framework will be delivered

over the coming years. There will be the delivery plan, the framework, and the annual update that will demonstrate the rate of progress that we are making in taking forward the provisions in the strategy.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance notice of his statement.

Few will have any dispute with a vision of a more sustainable and inclusive transport system, or with the four priorities set out in the strategy, which Labour very much welcomes. The problem is with delivery under the Government.

The previous transport strategy was introduced in 2006 and has since been refreshed by the Government. However, transport emissions are now higher than they were in 1990; the Government is ending its Abellio ScotRail franchise because it has failed dismally to hit its performance targets; satisfaction with public transport is at its lowest level for 13 years; bus and rail fares are rocketing; growth in active travel has flatlined; bus passenger numbers have collapsed by more than 20 per cent since 2007—and I have not even mentioned ferry procurement.

Does the cabinet secretary accept that, if the Government is going to turn the strategy's warm words into action, it will need transformational change? One such change would be to build on the success of the bus pass for older people, which was introduced by Labour, and extend it to cover young people. Such a policy would help to deliver all four key priorities of the strategy. Will the cabinet secretary commit to that policy, work with Labour, and help deliver free bus travel for Scotland's young people?

Michael Matheson: I welcome Colin Smyth's initial comments in welcoming the priorities that are set out in the strategy. As I have just said to Jamie Greene, the next piece of work to be taken forward is the delivery plan. Colin Smyth will also recognise that we have made the biggest commitment to investing in bus travel in Scotland of the past 30 years, with half a billion pounds being invested in bus prioritisation, for the very reasons that we previously set out and which were referred to in my statement.

In relation to Colin Smyth's very specific request, I am always prepared to look at fully-costed, detailed proposals that can help to improve our transport system. I am more than happy to hear from Colin Smyth on the details of the costs that are associated with extending the bus pass to the level that he has stated, as long as those costings are undertaken in a detailed way and include an identification of the budget in the transport sector that he wishes to see cut in order to meet that additional cost. The member will be

well aware of the financial constraints within which we operate. Therefore, if there is to be an increase in expenditure on one aspect of transport, it will have to come from another aspect of the transport portfolio. I am more than happy to have that engagement with Colin Smyth, if he has suggestions as to where he wants to see cuts and where he wants to see investment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Both the statement and the front bench questions and answers have gone well over time, so I ask everyone else to be as succinct as possible, please.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for early sight of his document.

The document is neither a vision nor a strategy that is going to tackle the climate emergency. Does the cabinet secretary agree that we need integration of policies, particularly in connection with planning, if we are to see significant movement on what is required, which is carriage of goods by rail, rather than on roads?

There is a lot of information in the report about poor air quality. There has to be greater take-up of freight carriage by rail, instead of the answer that I always get from the Scottish Government, which is simply that such things are commercial matters. It is a matter that the Scottish Government must lead on.

Michael Matheson: There is a need to make sure that we have a collective vision on such matters. John Finnie might want to consider the detail that is set out in the infrastructure commission report that I commissioned, which highlights the need to consider how the existing regulatory framework can support us to create the just transition that is necessary in order to meet the net zero carbon emissions target that we have set for 2045.

I recognise that we need to take a joined-up approach, which is the approach that we have taken in shaping the national transport strategy. I have absolutely no doubt that as we move forward with the climate change plans, the infrastructure and investment plans and the capital spending review, they will all demonstrate the leadership that this Government is prepared to show to make sure that we achieve our climate change ambitions. Members should be in no doubt about our determination to ensure that we meet the targets. The measures that we will take forward over the coming months will assist us in delivering them.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): The Scottish Government still has a contract to support Heathrow airport expansion, despite Heathrow's being the single biggest source of

carbon emissions in the United Kingdom. The cabinet secretary has just said that the Scottish Government must lead "from the front" in tackling the climate emergency. That could be put to the test tonight. At Westminster, Liberal Democrats have tabled an amendment for a vote to cancel Heathrow's third runway. Will the Scottish Government change its mind on support for Heathrow expansion, and ask its Westminster colleagues to join the Liberal Democrats down there in tonight's vote?

Michael Matheson: Mike Rumbles will be well aware of the critical importance of good air connectivity to the Scottish economy and to Scotland as a whole, and of the need to ensure that we protect and improve it, at the same time as we take forward the ambitious proposals for Scotland to become a zero emission aviation region by 2040, using new technology to reduce aviation emissions over the coming years.

We are already demonstrating that in our ambition to use new technologies—for example, the work in Orkney on alternative fuel types for aircraft—that have roles to play in the aviation sector. We will play our part: we will support development in relation to the ambition to be a zero emission aviation region, at the same time as we help to ensure that Scotland remains well connected to key parts of the world in order to support and sustain our economy.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Rural areas do not, in access to public transport, have equity with our urban counterparts. For many rural residents, life without access to a car is currently not feasible. How does the strategy acknowledge that rural areas that want to play their part in reducing emissions must have particular and tailored interventions to help us to achieve our climate change ambitions?

Michael Matheson: The report and the strategy recognise the particular challenge in Scotland's rural areas. A range of measures can be taken forward, including supporting and sustaining public transport where possible in rural areas, and helping to connect communities. That includes investment in north-east Scotland in new railway stations and rail infrastructure, which is a £300 million project to improve connectivity in rural areas. That is an example of our helping to ensure that our rural communities remain as well connected as possible.

We should also recognise that there will be a need for good road connectivity for our rural communities. We need to make sure that we have good-quality roads—for example, through the investment in the A9, which will be critical to sustaining the Highlands' economy in the years ahead—while also supporting the transition to low-emissions vehicles by assisting people in our rural

communities who have to make use of a car to move to electric and low-emissions vehicles, and by ensuring that we have a spread of charging infrastructure to support people to make that decision. A variety of measures have to be taken forward, but the particular needs of rural communities are critical. The strategy recognises that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I repeat the need for succinct questions and answers, please. I call Maurice Golden, to be followed by Alasdair Allan.

Maurice Golden (West Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary is right that the Government should lead on climate change. However, active travel is declining and transport emissions have barely changed in 30 years. Therefore, will the cabinet secretary take this opportunity to back Scottish Conservative calls to make electric vehicles the default public procurement option, where possible?

Michael Matheson: I very much hope that when it comes to considering whether he supports our budget, the member will support the approach that we are taking to active travel, because we have doubled the active travel budget over the past two budgets and we will seek to ensure that we build on that in the years ahead.

On making more use of electric vehicles, we have an extensive programme of fleet renewal, which we are supporting across the public sector. That is to allow it to move to ultra-low emission vehicles—in particular, electric vehicles. The programme to support that transition—be it in the national health service or the police service—is the most extensive in the whole of the UK, and I am keen to ensure that we build on it.

There is a range of further measures that we can put in place to support that transition, and we are open to looking at doing that, whether that is through procurement or other means. It is important that we support the public sector in that transition, and that it undertakes it in a managed way that allows it to continue to provide essential public services.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am sure that the national transport strategy recognises that the very welcome growth in tourism can have an impact on the transport system, whether that be roads or ferries. Can the cabinet secretary set out any of the measures that he or ferry companies will be undertaking this summer and beyond in order to cope with what will likely be a record number of visitors?

Michael Matheson: The member is correct to point out the growing level of tourism to our island communities, and the significant pressure that that has placed on our ferry services.

One of the benefits that our ferry services and island communities have had in recent years has been the introduction of the road equivalent tariff, which has helped to make it more affordable for people to make ferry journeys.

Part of our work on ferries is to look at maximising the existing assets that we have in the fleet and to ensure that timetabling optimises their use, particularly during key periods of the year. Work is being undertaken to look at this summer's timetabling to ensure that we maximise the use of those assets during the summer months, in order to support the tourism sector in Alasdair Allan's constituency and other island areas.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): What is the message in the statement for poorer families, who will not be able to afford electric vehicles? In Glasgow, it is not possible to get a bus from the Queen Elizabeth hospital to Darnley, in the south side, after 6 o'clock at night. That is how bad it is. Will the minister tell me which of the four priorities will ensure that poorer people will not be left behind in the transport strategy?

Michael Matheson: It is critical that we tackle the types of financial inequality that people can experience as a result of not being able to access the right type of transport and that we create the type of inclusive economic growth that we want to see.

The member asked a specific question about what we are doing on electric vehicles. She may be aware that, because of the costs that are associated with purchasing an electric vehicle, we have a comprehensive programme to support people who want to do that, which we run through the Energy Saving Trust in Scotland. It supports people with an interest-free loan for a six-year period, and it has recently been changed to allow it to be used for second-hand vehicles. Scotland is the only part of the UK in which that is allowed.

Pauline McNeill: You are kidding yourself.

Michael Matheson: If the member would listen to what I am saying, she might find it helpful.

We are also taking forward a range of work on electric car clubs, which provide social housing providers with a pool of electric vehicles that their residents can make use of regularly. That programme, which I launched in Bridgeton as part of our just transition towards low-carbon technology, was started more than a year ago.

The member can be assured by the measures that we have already put in place. As we have highlighted in the strategy, tackling inequality is critical, which is why it is a key element of the strategy and will be part of our policies—as it is at present—for years to come.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish National Party Government's ambition to phase out new petrol and diesel cars and vans in Scotland by 2032—ahead of the UK—and its commitment to phase out all petrol and diesel vehicles from public sector fleets by 2030.

As the cabinet secretary just said, enabling their replacement with electric vehicles and rolling out charging infrastructure are key to that. What plans does the Government have to put in place that infrastructure to allow us to meet those targets?

Michael Matheson: Willie Coffey raised an important point, because supporting and assisting people to make the transition to ultra-low emission and electric vehicles is about making sure that they have confidence in the charging infrastructure.

That is why, as has been recognised, Scotland has the most extensive public charging network of any part of the UK, with the exception of the centre of London. The extensive public network that we have created to support people in that transition will be critical in giving them the confidence to move to ultra-low emission and electric vehicles. Over the past couple of years, we have invested more than £30 million in providing that type of technology and access to charging points. We will continue that level of investment, because it will be critical in supporting the transition to low-emission vehicles.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The consultation indicated that there must be a specific focus on rural and remote communities in the strategy, the aims of which I very much welcome. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that strengthens the business case to extend the likes of the Borders railway, and does he concur that linking the south of Scotland to the west coast main line would address regional inequalities, level up spending, and improve the lives of people who live far from the cities, such as those who live in Newcastleton?

Michael Matheson: The member will be aware that we have already completed and published the Borders transport corridors study, which highlighted the options of extending the line in the Borders. I welcome the fact that the UK Government has now matched us in providing £5 million towards carrying out more detailed appraisal work on the prospects of extending the Borders railway line. That work is presently being taken forward. Once it has been completed, the options will be considered, as part of the strategic transport projects review 2 process, in order to identify a project for future investment. That work is already being taken forward, and it will be considered in due course—as all projects are—as part of the STPR2 process.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the statement on the new transport strategy for Scotland. I am sorry that I was unable to call Claudia Beamish, Emma Harper, Lewis Macdonald and Stewart Stevenson. I suggest that all groups have a think—and, perhaps, a discussion—about how they can best use statements and questions so that their colleagues are not disadvantaged.

Independent Care Review

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon on the independent care review. The First Minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:42

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): This morning, the independent care review published one of the most significant reports that we will consider in this session of Parliament. Indeed, I consider this to be one of the most important moments so far in my tenure as First Minister. I am making today's statement to underline my political and personal commitment to turning the report's vision of how we must care for our most vulnerable young people into reality as quickly as possible.

I do not mind saying that I felt very emotional when I read the report's main volume, "The Promise". There is a really powerful simplicity to what it says that we and, most important, the young people who experience it, should expect from a good care system. It should have love and nurture at its heart. Wherever possible, families must be supported to stay together. When that is not possible, the relationships that matter to young people—particularly those with brothers and sisters—must be protected. When a child needs our care, the priority must be the provision not of a series of placements or arrangements that are driven by the needs of bureaucracy but of stable, safe, secure, loving homes that allow them to experience the joys and the normal challenges of growing up and to fulfil their potential in life.

None of that should be at all controversial. However, it distresses me—as, I am sure, it distresses all of us—that that is not the experience of all young people who are in, or who have passed through, our care. To be blunt, we let too many of them down, and they pay the price of that for the rest of their lives. In too many instances, the price can be a life cut short.

The statistics have always told us that, but in the report we hear it directly from the young people for whom we have responsibility. Further, it is not just true here in Scotland; there is possibly no country in the world in which the care review's vision of care is yet a living reality. As a result of the report's publication there is, therefore, an opportunity for Scotland to become the first country that makes it so—and I am determined that we should do so.

I place on record my sincere thanks to Fiona Duncan and all the review group members for all

the work that they put into the report. They have done a truly outstanding job. I also pay tribute to Who Cares? Scotland, which has been the driving force behind the review's creation.

Perhaps the most important achievement of the review—and the reason for its conclusions being so powerful—is that it has the voices of people in care at its heart. People with experience of care made up half of the review's co-chairs and working group members. The review listened to more than 5,500 people, more than half of whom were children, young people, adults and families with direct experience of care; the others were paid and unpaid carers. All their stories have shaped everything in the report. I take this opportunity to thank each and every one of those 5,500 people. I know that sharing stories about painful and traumatic personal experiences is not easy. However, by doing so, they have all helped to make things better for children and young people in the future.

I know that the care-experienced voice in the report is real. Since 2016, I have met just over 1,000 young people who have experienced care, and I will carry our conversations in my heart for the rest of my life. Indeed, some of the early ones led directly to the creation of the review. As I read the report, from every page I heard the voices and the stories of the people I have met. Let me be very clear: I have met many young people with good experience of care who are doing brilliantly, but I have also met many who are doing so even though their care experience was not good and whose achievement is entirely down to their own talents and resilience. I have also seen at first hand the dedication, commitment and passion of those who work in the care sector, and I thank them for that.

However, I have also heard far too many heartbreaking stories. Despite the best efforts and intentions of everyone involved, the actual experience of too many people in care is not what they have a right to expect. The world that is described in today's report—of a care system that feels "fractured, bureaucratic, unfeeling", stigmatising and mired in the use of impersonal language such as "placements", "contact" and "respite" to describe what should be loving relationships—is one that I have had recounted to me many times. That must change.

It is also why the vision and blueprint for transformational change that are set out in "The Promise" are so vital. At their heart are five foundations of care. The first is voice: children must be heard and listened to in all decisions about their care. The second is family: whenever possible, families should be supported to stay together with their children. Our first priority should be to do all that we can to keep children out of

care and with their own families. The third foundation is care: when living with their own families is not possible, children must stay with their brothers and sisters when it is safe for them to do so, and they must belong to a stable, loving home. The fourth foundation is people: those in the workforce and wider community who look after children must be well supported so that they, in turn, can provide compassionate care and decision making. The fifth is scaffolding: the system of help, decision making, support and, crucially, accountability that surrounds all of that must be more supportive and responsive.

The report also makes an important but challenging point about risk. Of course, we must always consider the immediate risk of harm to a child when decisions are made about their care. However, we must also consider the risk that is created when we remove a child from their family or overburden their childhood with bureaucracy. The risk then is that we compound their trauma and make it harder for them to enjoy stable, loving, long-term relationships. Protecting family relationships and, above all, allowing children to enjoy the kind of childhood that others take for granted is often the best way of protecting them from harm.

The report sets out very clearly the direct costs of supporting children in care and also the hidden costs of the failures of care—the long-term human and financial costs that are borne not just by society but, more important, by the individuals whose experience of being let down by care impacts negatively on their life chances.

I hope that all members will take the time to read the report in full. I have tried to summarise its principles and key conclusions as best I can, but, in the short time that I have available, I cannot possibly do justice to the detail of the 80 specific changes that it recommends. What I can and will say unequivocally is that I am determined to get on with implementing it at pace. That will involve practical change at every level but, more fundamentally, it will require a transformation in the culture of care.

The Scottish Government has already made some changes while the review has been doing its work—for example, by introducing the care-experienced bursary—but today's report leaves no room for doubt that we must do more, and we must do it more fundamentally, more systematically and more quickly. A radical overhaul is what the review demands, and that is what we have a duty to deliver.

I want to be clear, though, that we will continue to listen to care-experienced voices who have additional ideas and suggestions to make. There is not and never will, or should, be a closed door.

We will act straight away to implement the plan section of the report. There are two key immediate elements to that. The first is the establishment of a team to quickly turn the report into a detailed delivery plan. Although the report recognises that full implementation of its vision will take time, the process of change must and will start immediately.

The second is the creation of an independent oversight body. I confirm that both groups will include people with experience of care. In fact, half the members of the oversight body—including the chair, who will be from outside the Scottish Government—will have experience of care.

Those groups will ensure that we keep up the momentum that has been established by the review. The Government aims to make progress in a matter of weeks and will update Parliament regularly thereafter.

Throughout the care review process—as I have been speaking to 1,000 voices—I have been struck by the fact that for ministers, in particular, but actually for all parliamentarians, the responsibility that we owe to young people in care is a very special one. In fact, ensuring that they have an equal chance to succeed and that they benefit from the stable, loving relationships that so many of us took for granted when we were growing up is one of the most important duties that any of us has in public life. It is a duty that I take very seriously and very personally.

Today's report makes the need for action overwhelmingly clear. It sets out the extent of our obligations. However, it also gives us an opportunity: the opportunity to change thousands of young people's futures for the better. The Scottish Government is determined to take that opportunity. We will work with local authorities, care providers and all other relevant partners to make the necessary changes to care. We will deliver that change as quickly and as safely as possible—starting now—and we will ensure that people with care experience remain at the heart of the process.

That is the promise that I make today to all those—past, present and future—who need our care. In keeping that promise, as I am determined to do, I look forward to robust challenge but also, I hope, to the cross-party support, interest and engagement of the Parliament.

I commend this statement to the Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The First Minister will now take questions on the issues raised. We have around 20 minutes for questions; I am talking through the applause so that we do not waste any time. I call Alison Harris, to be followed by Iain Gray.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Presiding Officer, I will take this—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Oh, it is not Alison Harris—you have changed! It is Liam Kerr.

Liam Kerr: Many have said that to me, Presiding Officer.

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): Not for the better.

Liam Kerr: Not for the better, indeed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Well, there is a first.

Liam Kerr: I thank the First Minister for advance sight of her statement. I associate myself and the whole Scottish Conservative Party with the tenor of her remarks. Although we will always offer robust challenge, the First Minister can be assured of our support in delivering the recommendations of this ambitious and vital report. Above all, I, too, extend our thanks to the more than 5,500 people who contributed—it cannot have been easy.

It is clear that what has emerged can change things positively for children and young people. For that to happen, I agree with Children 1st, which said that the report

“must not be ‘welcomed’ and then put on a shelf.”

Young people in the care system need a great deal more than simply the best wishes of this chamber. They need concrete action to transform their lives for the better and to live up to the promise that I expect and hope that every party here will rightly make today.

When does the First Minister expect the team that will take the report and turn it into a detailed delivery plan to have completed that work? How soon after that process has finished will the much-needed changes begin?

The First Minister: I thank Liam Kerr for his expression of support—it is very much appreciated—although, as I said in my statement, part of the process of making sure that we take forward the recommendations will be the robust challenge that Parliament and people outside Parliament bring to the process.

I, too, agree with Children 1st and the others who have said that we must not put the report on the shelf. Believe me—while I am First Minister, there is no shelf that the report will be going on. When we first established the review, we made it clear that we did not want to wait until it reported and do nothing in the interim. While the review has been doing its work, we have taken a number of steps, including the care-experienced bursary, which I mentioned, the council tax exemption and the creation of the presumption that siblings will stay together, and I hope that that is seen as a

down payment on our intention to deliver what is in the report.

As I said in my statement, we intend to make progress within weeks on getting in place the team that will turn the report into a delivery plan. My view is that that team will start work immediately. In “The Plan”, the review sets out that the change will take place over a number of years. We are talking about not only a series of practical changes, important though those will be, but a transformation and a culture of change. That process must start to happen now and must continue. When we get the team in place, I undertake to ensure that Parliament is regularly updated so that challenge and support can be provided.

One of the greatest privileges of my life has been meeting the thousand and more care-experienced young people over the past few years. They have told me directly—some of them did so this morning—that they will hold us to account on the progress that we make, and I absolutely welcome and embrace that, because the report is for them.

Some of the people who have told their stories as part of the review process have made the point that although it is too late to change the reality for them, they are motivated by the desire to bring about change for others. I am clear about the fact that the time for young people to have to tell their stories over and over again is over. They have told us their stories, and it is now for us to act and change the reality for children in the future.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I thank the First Minister for providing early sight of the statement.

The First Minister was right to say that, over generations, we have let down far too many of the young people in our care. We can hear that in the report in the authentic voice of those care-experienced young Scots, and I think that that is why it carries such power, so I say well done to the review chair, Fiona Duncan, all her co-chairs and everyone involved. It is a remarkable effort. I say well done, too, to the First Minister, whose personal investment in the issue is very clear and very much to her credit.

I welcome the creation of the delivery plan team and the agreement to the creation of an independent oversight body but, to reflect what the First Minister said in her answer to Liam Kerr, it is not the process of change, but change itself, that must start immediately.

We should listen to Who Cares? Scotland, which said today:

“The evidence shows that what the Scottish Government chooses to do next is literally a matter of life and death. We expect to see urgent action, in the next few weeks, that

makes a tangible difference to young people's lives. Any further delay would be unacceptable."

What action can we expect in the next few weeks that will make a tangible difference? Specifically, what can we expect to see tomorrow in the budget to ensure that we invest in keeping the promise?

The First Minister: I agree very strongly that the issue is about not simply the process of change but the actual change. I have said to many care-experienced young people that when I was asked by Who Cares? Scotland and others to establish the review, I took a little bit of convincing, because I did not want the review to be seen to be kicking something into the long grass; we could not simply set up a review and then do nothing.

We have taken a range of steps, and we will continue to do so. It is right and proper that, in acting on the recommendations of the report, we get the process right not just in relation to the series of continuing changes but by bringing together a process that will facilitate and support overall cultural change.

We asked for this, but when I read the report, I was struck by how different it is from the reports that Parliament usually considers. It is not just about a series of individual practical and transactional changes, although those will be important; it is about how we take the whole system, and everyone who plays a part in it, and change our approach to the care of young people who are our responsibility. I do not underestimate the challenge of doing that, but I am absolutely determined that we will meet that challenge. Each and every one of us has the responsibility to do that. As we have done over the past few years, we will continue to make the changes as we go.

I will not pre-empt the budget, but delivering what is needed over a number of years will undoubtedly have financial implications and require investment. The report is very clear about that. It is also very clear about the relationship between children who go into care and poverty. One of the key things in tomorrow's budget will be progress on the new Scottish child payment, which is part of what we are doing to help lift families out of poverty.

One of the most powerful things is "The Money" and "Follow the Money" reports, which outline not only the amount of money that we currently invest to support young people in care but the hidden costs relating to the failures of care. Yes, the issue is about up-front investment but, over time, it is also about ensuring that the money that we already spend and which is already in the system is spent on keeping young people in their own families and on preventing them from going into care. However, when that cannot be avoided, we need to ensure that young people have the

support that they need. That will be a feature not only of tomorrow's budget but of budgets for years to come, while we ensure that we provide the care that young people deserve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thirteen members want to ask questions and we have 12 minutes—you can do the arithmetic. I need succinct questions and answers. I appreciate that the matter is of huge concern, quite rightly, but let us please try to be succinct.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The report is an incredibly moving piece of work, and I join the First Minister in thanking all those who took part. Does she agree that it is now critical that we see a pace of change, systematically and culturally, so that we can all come together to support our most vulnerable children and give them the childhood that they deserve?

The First Minister: Yes. Pace, here, is everything. Based on a lot of evidence, the report sets out a period of 10 years for systematic cultural change. As I have said, change needs to happen on a continuous basis. I want to prove that we can do that on a quicker timescale than the report sets out, and all of us have a role to play in that. That makes it all the more important that we get early momentum behind what we are trying to do. That is partly about getting the right process in place, but it is also about ensuring that we continue to make the practical changes that add up to the systematic change that the report calls for.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am sure that the First Minister will agree that success will depend largely on strong collaboration between national Government, local authorities and care providers. Will she ensure that clarity on the roles that each has will be set out when the independent review oversees the work?

The First Minister: Yes, I give that assurance. That is a valid and important point. Even today, I have been heartened by the response to the report from those in the system—I have come to dislike using the word "system" when describing care, but I often slip into using it for shorthand.

The Government has a leadership role to play, but those who deliver care have a role, too. Most of the carers whom I have met do an absolutely fantastic job but, overall, the system is failing too many people, so we need to understand the roles. We also need to understand how some of those roles will change. If we are successful in preventing more young people from going into care in the first place, the nature of the support that is provided in the system will be different in the future. It is really important that everyone

understands their role and that everyone pulls together in the same direction.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):

As the First Minister acknowledged, the statistics are harrowing: care-experienced people are six times more likely to be excluded from school and 15 times more likely to end up in prison. What measures will the First Minister use to track progress, and how will she report that back to Parliament?

The First Minister: As I said, we will aim to come back to Parliament in a matter of weeks to set out more detail on how, through the group that will be responsible for the delivery plan and the oversight group, we will set milestones, measure them and report to Parliament. That is an important point that we have to get right at the outset.

As Daniel Johnson rightly says, and as I referred to in my statement, the statistics have been telling us those things for a long time. It was statistics that drove me to set up the review, but I no longer think about the issue in terms of statistics because I have met too many of those statistics—they are real human beings. They are our children and young people—human beings—who deserve more from us, and we all need to think of them in those terms and not as the statistics that, rightly, we often point to as providing the reason for change.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): The First Minister's statement is notable for its humanity, compassion and desire to put love and nurture at the heart of how we look after young people in care in Scotland. The Scottish Green Party welcomes the report and thanks all who were involved.

What action will the First Minister urge to ensure that caring relationships and important and essential bonds can be formed without fear of chastisement? "The Promise" tells us that where caring and committed staff are afraid to cross professional boundaries, that can result in children growing up in an environment that can feel cold and comfortless.

The First Minister: That is both one of the most important messages in the report and, to be frank and candid, one of the most difficult challenges to address and meet. I have lost count of the number of young people who have told me about the burden of bureaucracy in their lives and what that means for their ability to be normal children and young people—the need to have a risk assessment and get permission before they can spend time at a friend's house at the weekend, for example. One young girl told me about being at a party where she could not go on the trampoline in the garden because it had not been risk assessed.

We must allow children to be children, but that also means having a supportive environment for the people whom we trust to care for children, so that they feel able to provide that compassionate and loving care within boundaries that they understand and feel comfortable with. We need to change the balance of risk. Of course, when a child is in a risky or potentially harmful situation, the instinct is to get them out of it; we all understand that. However, sometimes that may not be the best solution. Putting in the support to keep a child in that situation and allow them to stay may be better. That will have challenging implications as we work our way through the issue, which is why I come back to the point that the report is much more fundamental and cultural than is normal for reports that we receive. They also make it more important, and most important, that we get this right.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western)

(LD): I am grateful to Fiona Duncan for the inclusive way in which she has conducted the review. Right now in Scotland, when people leave care a trap-door shuts and they have no right to return. We all know that when people start out as young adults, things sometimes fall apart and they have to move back in with mum and dad. That option is not currently available to Scotland's tens of thousands of care leavers. Does the First Minister agree with the insistence on page 92 of the report that:

"Young adults for whom Scotland has taken on a parenting responsibility must have a right to return to care"?

The First Minister: One of the things that I have heard loudly and clearly as I have listened to young people is about the arbitrary nature of some of the age limits that we apply in the system and how they have no meaning in the real-life experiences of young people. Again, to demonstrate that we have listened as the work has been under way, we have not only introduced the care-experienced bursary but, from listening to what people have said, we have raised and removed the age limit on that.

Age will have different application in different aspects of what we are talking about. I am not going to talk about my age because it is too sensitive a subject, particularly this year, but every one of us knows that, no matter how old we get, the ability to look to our parents and families for support at difficult times in our lives is really important. Care-experienced young people are no different. I dislike the term, but, for "corporate parents", that same lifelong responsibility must be present. That is one of the key issues that we have to grapple with as we create a system that is right for people, at whatever age or stage of their life they may be.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I, too, fully and whole-heartedly welcome the report. The review made it clear that children must be enabled to build stable and lasting loving relationships. Does the First Minister agree that it is crucial to ensure that, in cases where staying with family is not possible, children and young people are able to build the supportive and loving relationships that everyone needs to grow and thrive?

The First Minister: Yes, I do. We need to stop thinking about placements for young people. For young people who cannot stay with their family, we need to create stable and loving homes where they are treated the same as other children. If we start the discussion from that premise, we are more likely to head in the right direction, which is crucially important. That is one of the strongest messages that has come through the whole exercise, and I guess that that is what we mean when we talk about putting love into the system.

However, although putting love into the system is important, making sure that we do not take it out unnecessarily is equally important. That is why keeping families together when we can and, crucially, not allowing the bonds between brothers and sisters to be broken, are such vital things, and we must do them much better than we have done in the past.

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): The review's findings include that there is an overworked and stressed workforce. Clearly, those people perform an exceptionally challenging and complex task, and they must be properly trained, supported, and protected. What steps will the First Minister take to support them?

The First Minister: I agree with that point, and not just in theory. I have seen at first hand so many times the fantastic job that social workers, foster carers, people working in our residential homes, and those who work with children more informally do.

The one thing that I want to say to them directly is that our talking about overhauling the system is not a reflection on their commitment and dedication—it is important for them to hear that. We must give practical support to those who work in the care sector by making sure that they are properly resourced and funded, which is why the approach of tomorrow's budget to public services is so important. We must make sure that more of the resources that we already spend is allowing them to support children in the right way.

Also, to go back to an earlier question, one of the most important things that we must do is change the culture within which those workers operate so that they can do what they desperately want to do, which is to give young people the

compassionate care that they need. That will be the harder part of all this, but it is the most important part.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): As the First Minister has highlighted, the voices of care-experienced young people have been absolutely key in informing the care review. Does she share my view that the input of care-experienced young people must remain at the heart of designing the next important steps?

The First Minister: Yes, absolutely. We would fail in this if we did not continue to have the voice of care-experienced young people at the heart of where we go from here. There is no doubt that the report would not have ended up where it did without that.

I would go further, actually. By demonstrating the power of the care-experienced voice in this review, we have shown that we should make sure that the lived-experience voice is at the heart of everything we do. That is certainly true of the care review, but I am sure that it has much wider application across all areas of our responsibility.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Many Scots and children in Dundee find themselves in the care system because of a parent dying because of drugs. Indeed, I heard of one such case just before Christmas. Is the national drugs task force looking specifically at what can be done to prevent drugs deaths among parents? What can be done to increase the number of supportive care places in areas with high numbers of drugs deaths?

The First Minister: That should absolutely be a key focus of the drugs task force, although it has to decide its priority areas. More importantly, we must make sure that there is a proper link between the work that we are doing here and in other areas of work, such as the work that is being done around drugs deaths.

Jenny Marra is right to point to the number of young people who will end up in care because a parent has died from drugs, so the connections between those vital pieces of work are important. One of the key priorities of the work that will be done over the next few weeks in getting the process right is to make sure that those connections are properly understood and happen as we want them to.

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind): One of the most distressing stories that I heard at the outset of the care review was of a public meeting at which the members of the community were up in arms at the possibility of a residential children's home opening in their area. Does the First Minister agree that, as well as the legislative changes that are being made, politicians must lead attitudinal change across society to ensure

that the stigma that still exists in too many quarters relating to children in care is tackled and eradicated once and for all?

The First Minister: Yes, and I will be direct here: we all have a leadership role to play. We are all constituency or regional representatives and we have a duty to represent the views of our constituents, but we also have a role to play in changing attitudes and combating stigma.

I have had conversations with constituents in which I had to take a different view from theirs on their understanding of what a care home in a residential area meant and why the children were in that care home. I think that we all have a responsibility to do that.

Having the places where our most vulnerable young people are cared for in the heart of communities is not something that we should oppose, but something that we should welcome, because that is part of making sure that our young people are part of an overall stable, loving environment.

I have been forced to think about a lot of things very differently as part of this process, and I think that we all have to do that in all respects as we move forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is no pressure, Ms Gilruth, but, if you are brief, I can get in your colleague Stuart McMillan, too.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): The care review has highlighted the importance of schools in helping children to build relationships that will encourage them to learn and to thrive. Does the First Minister agree that stability and support is vital in improving the educational outcomes of care-experienced young people?

The First Minister: I agree 100 per cent with that. Many young people have told me that the teacher in their class was the only person who they felt able to turn to and talk to. However, I have to be frank: I have, equally, heard young people say that they felt that they were treated differently at school as a result of their being in care—because people did not have the necessary knowledge, their behaviour was perhaps misunderstood.

A young person spends a great deal of their time in school and it is a key part of the stability that they have in their lives. That is even more true for young people who are in care. In recent weeks, I have heard great examples of schools doing really good work, including setting up groups for care-experienced people, to help other young people understand what they experience. We should see schools as a key part of the solution, not a part of the problem.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): Will the First Minister join me in welcoming the care review's finding that mental health support must be accessible for vulnerable children and young people and that it should be delivered in their communities?

The First Minister: Yes. Again, I think that the report is clear and explicit on mental health. A lot of our general work on mental health for young people is important in that regard. For example, establishing the new wellbeing service and getting more counsellors into schools have general benefits, but can bring particular benefits to care-experienced young people.

I mentioned Fiona Duncan in my opening statement. As we have reached the end of questions on this topic, I reiterate my thanks to her—she has absolutely repaid the trust that we put in her as chair of the review by bringing together all the different voices and issues. We have been given a platform for change. On mental health, poverty and all the other issues that are brought to bear, we have a golden opportunity to do something special, so that future generations can look back and not have to constantly talk about the failures of the care system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes questions on the statement. I will move on with very little pause. [*Interruption.*] There should be no applause, please. I understand why some people in the gallery may wish to applaud, but it is not permitted.

Tax and Public Spending

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-20716, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on there being no case for tax increases or further cuts to public spending. We have time in hand for interventions.

15:18

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Tomorrow, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work will set out his budget for the coming financial year. I think that we are all looking forward to that occasion; it is the highlight of my year, Presiding Officer. We think that this afternoon is good opportunity to set out what we believe his budget priorities should be, and to allow members of other parties to set out their thoughts.

I am not so naive as to think that what is said in the debate will necessarily influence the finance secretary's thinking ahead of tomorrow; indeed, I fully expect his budget documents, if they have not already been printed, to be on their way to the printers.

However, tomorrow is just the start of the budget process. Over the next four weeks, there will be discussion, scrutiny and negotiation. Today, we are setting out our stall. I hope that the debate will be positive and constructive. Who knows? We might be able to find a degree of consensus about our collective priorities for the budget for the coming year.

I start by setting out a little of the background to this year's budget. I appreciate that with the United Kingdom budget not being delivered until 11 March, we do not yet have precise figures to inform our budget settlement. Nevertheless, a great deal of information is already in the public domain, which enables the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work to go ahead and put proposals to Parliament. That is what the Welsh Government has done; indeed, it presented its budget proposals to the National Assembly for Wales back in December.

Therefore, let no one pretend that the timing of the UK budget has made it impossible for the finance secretary to bring forward his budget plans. Indeed, historically, Scottish budgets have been presented in September, well ahead of UK budgets in March of the following year. The current fiscal framework was negotiated and agreed by the Scottish Government against precisely that backdrop. I therefore hope that we will hear no more faux outrage from the Scottish National Party about budget timings.

We know from spending decisions that have already been made that the block grant from Westminster will grow by at least £1.1 billion from this year to next year. According to the Fraser of Allander institute, that amounts to a 2.1 per cent real-terms increase. That Boris bonus gives the finance secretary considerable extra money to spend.

However, that is not the entire picture, because the block grant has to be adjusted in two respects. First, we know that we are carrying forward a negative reconciliation of approximately £200 million that is due to overestimation of tax revenues by the Scottish Government three years ago.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work (Derek Mackay): That is not true.

Murdo Fraser: If the finance secretary wants to intervene and explain to me why that is not true, I will give way.

Derek Mackay: Does Murdo Fraser not understand—or, indeed, know—that the tax forecasts are made by the Scottish Fiscal Commission and not by the Scottish Government?

Murdo Fraser: I regret to tell the finance secretary that he is wrong, because the overestimate that I referred to was an estimate that was made by the Scottish Government before the Scottish Fiscal Commission took on that responsibility. He does not even understand his own brief.

On top of that £200 million reconciliation, there is likely to be a negative impact because Scottish income tax receipts are expected not to grow as much as those in the rest of the UK. That is according to the most recent Fiscal Commission set of forecasts. Of course, we will get updates on those tomorrow.

According to the Fraser of Allander institute, those factors combined take block-grant growth down from 2.1 per cent in real terms to just 1 per cent. In other words—and to put it bluntly—more than half the benefit of the Boris bonus that is coming to Scotland from Westminster is being lost because of the Scottish Government's inability to grow income tax revenues by at least the UK average rate. Our ability to fund public services is being damaged because our economy is not growing fast enough.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Does Murdo Fraser accept that it was not entirely the Government that was responsible for that estimate, and that Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs did not know how many Scottish taxpayers there were, who Scottish taxpayers were and how much tax they were paying?

Murdo Fraser: John Mason makes a reasonable point in relation to the original forecast of tax revenues, but my point is that we now have much better information for the forecasts. We cannot blame the relative drop in income tax receipts on a forecasting error when the problem is the inability of our economy to grow fast enough or, at least, in line with the UK average.

In our discussions on the issue, we should never forget that Scotland benefits from a union dividend that is now worth nearly £2,000 for every man, woman and child in Scotland. That is the value of the fiscal transfer from the rest of the United Kingdom to support higher public spending in Scotland than is possible elsewhere. That payment is not primarily because the Scottish economy is performing worse than the UK average, although that is a factor; it arises substantially because of the much higher public spending levels here than exist elsewhere in the UK.

SNP members who want to draw a comparison between public spending rates in Scotland and those south of the border—as they often do—need to be honest and tell people that if we were to go down the route of independence that they propose, all that benefit would be lost, and that they have absolutely no idea how they would make up the difference or how that fiscal transfer of more than £10 billion would be replaced.

Ahead of the budget tomorrow, we have set out our position on what the finance secretary's priorities should be. I will spell them out again for members.

With the Boris bonus and increases in the block grant, there can be no justification for any additional tax rises or further cuts to public spending. We have put forward a set of measured proposals that we have costed fully.

The Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy (Kate Forbes): Will Murdo Fraser give way?

Murdo Fraser: No. Let me make some progress.

Our proposals are costed at £777 million. I was therefore rather surprised to see that the Government's amendment to our motion claims that our proposals would cost more than double that, at £1.5 billion. That is fake news from the people who brought us the 2014 independence white paper, promised an oil price of \$110 a barrel and said that we could set up a whole new country for the sum of £200 million. We cannot trust a word that they say. Financial illiteracy seems to be a qualification for being in the Scottish Government.

Talking of financial illiteracy, I give way to the Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy.

Kate Forbes: Would Murdo Fraser be willing to publish his costings and associated lines?

Murdo Fraser: I would be absolutely delighted to do that. I will pass them across the chamber to the finance minister right now.

The two areas that we view as priorities for the budget are measures to grow the Scottish economy and support for vital public services. We will assess any budget proposals from the SNP Government against those priorities.

Let me deal first with the question of income tax. Over the past two years, as a consequence of the finance secretary's nefarious deals with the Green Party, Scotland has become the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom, with everyone who earns more than £27,000 per annum paying more income tax in Scotland than they would in the rest of the UK. To put that in simple terms, it means that public servants including police sergeants, senior nurse managers and principal teachers now pay more tax than their counterparts south of the border—in some cases, more than £1,500 a year more.

The SNP will argue that the tax increases are justified because they are supporting better public services. However, the reality is somewhat different. That was confirmed in the evidence that Mairi Spowage, who is the deputy director of the Fraser of Allander institute, gave to the Finance and Constitution Committee just last week. She confirmed that the additional tax that has been raised by the changes to rates and bands has been offset by reductions in income tax more generally, because of slower overall income-tax growth in Scotland than in rest of the UK. She said:

"Looking ahead, the effect of the higher tax rates in Scotland is broadly cancelled out by the fact that the outlook for wage growth in Scotland is slower than in the rest of the UK."—[*Official Report, Finance and Constitution Committee*, 29 January 2020; c 12.]

In other words, if we were to grow the Scottish economy at just the same rate as the UK average and if we were to grow income tax receipts at the same rate as the rest of the UK, there would be no need whatever for the income tax differentials, and we would raise the same amount of money.

The evidence from the respected Fraser of Allander institute gives the lie to the notion that better public services in Scotland can be supported only by higher tax rates. In reality, the same outcome can be achieved by growth in the economy and tax take.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD) *rose*—

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green) *rose*—

Murdo Fraser: Mr Rennie caught my eye first, so I will give way to him.

Willie Rennie: I hear what Murdo Fraser is saying, which is why I am confused that his motion and budget proposals implicitly support the tax rise by refusing to reverse it. Why is that? Will he clear that mess up?

Murdo Fraser: I am grateful for Willie Rennie's intervention, because I was just going to make precisely that point. He has given me a cue to do that.

I would dearly love the finance secretary to reverse his tax increases in the forthcoming budget, but I am realistic enough to know that that is unlikely. At the very least, we want no further divergence between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

At this point, we do not know what the Chancellor of the Exchequer has in mind for income tax south of the border, and we will not know that until 11 March. However, it is reasonable to expect that the thresholds will be uprated in line with inflation, which is the least that we expect from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work. We do not want to see the benefit of any tax cut following on from an increase in the threshold for paying national insurance—which would benefit workers in Scotland as in the rest of the UK—being clawed back by higher tax rates from the finance secretary in Scotland.

Income tax is not the only tax lever that is under the finance secretary's control. Yesterday, we had a long debate on the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill—we will return to it later this afternoon. We believe that the business rates system is in need of comprehensive reform. In the short term, we suggest a minimum of two measures. First, there should be a reduction, at least to the same level as is paid in the rest of the UK, in the large business supplement, which penalises Scotland by being set at a rate that is double that for the rest of the UK. Secondly, there should be retention of all existing reliefs, including the small business bonus and the reliefs whose removal is included in the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill.

In addition, we are very clear that we would not support the imposition of any new taxes or levies in the forthcoming budget—so we say “No thank you” to any more daft ideas like the car park tax that was put forward by the Greens last year.

Patrick Harvie: Will the member take an intervention?

Murdo Fraser: I need to make some progress.

My colleagues will set out in more detail later in the debate our priorities for public services

spending, but when it comes to the national health service, we want all Barnett consequentials that arise from increased health spending in England to be passed on to the NHS in Scotland. Within that envelope, we want a new hospital parking charges refund scheme, whereby the three hospitals in Scotland that still charge for parking—Glasgow royal infirmary, the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh, and Ninewells hospital—can offer refunds for hospital staff and develop a new scheme for protected groups who most need refunds, including disabled patients and sick children's parents who stay overnight.

We also want an end to underfunding of NHS boards and delivery of NHS Scotland resource allocation committee funding parity.

In order to tackle one of our nation's greatest public policy failures, we also want a dramatic increase in the number of drug-rehabilitation beds, to be funded by a new £15.4 million scheme to replace the 80 per cent cut in bed numbers under the SNP Government.

In recent years, local government has borne the brunt of budget cuts from the SNP Government, with a 7.6 per cent real-terms cut in revenue funding since 2013—the impact of which we see on communities across the country. We cannot have another year of cuts. As a minimum, core funding for local government needs to be increased in line with inflation, and all the additional extra commitments that have been placed on local councils, which total £497 million, should be funded in full, as should any new or additional commitments.

In relation to justice funding, we recently heard from the chief constable of his worries about cuts to Police Scotland's budget. We are therefore asking for, as a minimum, an extra £50 million to protect 750 police officer posts.

We want revenue funding for higher education to be protected, at least in real terms, and we want a 2 per cent real-terms increase in capital funding for the sector.

In housing, we want an additional £10 million for expansion of the ending homelessness together fund. I say that on the day on which we have learned about the dramatic increase in the number of deaths of homeless people.

What I have set out in my speech and in our motion does not represent the totality of what we want from this budget; nor does it represent what a Conservative budget might look like. However, it sets out some of our priority areas, and those that we believe the Scottish Government should address, if it wants to win our support for its budget in the coming weeks.

Our package of proposals is not unrealistic, nor is it unduly radical; it represents a credible and affordable package that can be delivered within the overall financial envelope that is available to the Scottish Government. I hope that the Government will sit down and work with us in the weeks ahead to deliver a budget that prioritises growing the economy, expanding our tax revenues and supporting our vital services.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that there can be no justification for either further tax increases or further cuts to public spending and vital public services in the coming financial year, given analysis by the Fraser of Allander Institute, which shows that the UK block grant to the Scottish Government will increase by 2.1% in real terms from 2019-20 to 2020-21 as a result of increases in spending by the UK Government, and therefore calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward a Budget for the coming year that includes measures to help boost economic growth, with no widening of the tax gap between Scotland and the rest of the UK, a reduction in the Large Business Supplement for non-domestic rates to the same rate payable south of the border and protection of all existing reliefs, an investment of all health Barnett consequentials in the Scottish NHS, a scheme for the refund of hospital parking charges, a £15.4 million national drug rehabilitation bed fund and strategy, the delivery of NRAC funding parity, an increase in core funding for local government at least in line with inflation, a protection of revenue funding for higher education and a 2% real-terms increase in capital funding, an additional £50 million for the police to spend on protecting 750 officer roles, and an additional £10 million for the expansion of the Ending Homelessness Together Fund.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kate Forbes to speak to and move amendment S5M-20716.4.

15:33

The Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy (Kate Forbes): Why have a budget debate once when you can have one three, four or five times? I am delighted to be here again to talk about the budget, which will be published tomorrow in the context of unprecedented uncertainty. The UK Government's decision to defer the UK budget from 6 November to 11 March means that we still do not have the certainty that we would normally have when we publish our budget for the coming year.

We have been forced to publish our budget ahead of the UK Government's budget in order to provide the clarity that local authorities, third sector organisations and ratepayers expect. Without the UK Government's tax and spending decisions and the updated fiscal forecasts, we do not have as much clarity on public services as we would like. As the Scottish Government's budget will come out before the UK Government's budget, I can only assume that the Tories' call for no tax divergence is actually targeted at the UK

Government, which will have the opportunity to replicate the Scottish Government's decisions to reduce any such divergence.

As a responsible Government, we have a duty to balance our budget this year, as we have done every previous year. We are well aware of the challenges that the Fraser of Allander institute has set out. It is worth reflecting on the points that have repeatedly been made by the Conservatives about the so-called Boris bonus, because, since 2010, the Scottish Government's budget—in terms of day-to-day spending—has fallen. That is the reality of UK Government funding over that decade. I do not think that even Murdo Fraser would argue that this year's potential increase in funding reverses the decade of austerity that the Scottish Government has had to operate in.

By contrast, the Scottish Government has taken action to deliver certainty for our public services. That can be seen in relation to, for example, local government funding, with the finance spokesperson for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities saying that councils in Tory-run England and Labour-run Wales are "collapsing", whereas, in Scotland, we see local government working in partnership with the Scottish Government to ensure that the people of Scotland receive the services that they expect.

I will turn to the specifics that have been raised in the amendments and in members' interventions so far. We recognise that tomorrow is an important day. It is important because it will provide clarity and because it will continue the theme that the Government has been developing over the past few years with regard to ensuring that our partners in local authorities are protected from the austerity that we have been at the receiving end of.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work will announce his tax policy proposals in tomorrow's budget. Of course, I will not be drawn on those today, but we continue to ensure that Scotland is subject to the fairest and most progressive taxes in the UK. In fact, since the Fraser of Allander institute has been consistently quoted in every budget debate, it is worth quoting that, last year, it said:

"We estimate that the Scottish income tax policy raises approximately around £550 million in revenue compared to a policy to set the same tax parameters as in the UK."

The question for the Conservatives is, where would they have made cuts in order to meet that £550 million shortfall in the past year?

Murdo Fraser: On that point, would the minister accept the point that was made in evidence to the Finance and Constitution Committee last week by the Fraser of Allander institute, that the tax rate increases that have been introduced by the Scottish Government have had no net beneficial

impact on Scottish income tax receipts? If we had grown income tax receipts in line with growth at the UK average, there would be no need for these tax rises.

Kate Forbes: It is worth reflecting on two points. The first is that, at the beginning of the process of the devolution of tax-raising powers, there will inevitably be questions about reconciliation and forecasting. However, the point remains that, in every budget over the past few years, the Conservatives have consistently taken the stance that they want to prioritise tax cuts for the highest earners. That remains a fact, and it is a fact that Murdo Fraser repeated in his opening speech.

That raises the question, with regard to balancing a budget, of where the money to pay for those tax cuts will come from, because they will inevitably mean a reduction in finance for our public services. At a time when there is economic challenge, which businesses tell us is a result of Brexit and other issues, there is a question of where those cuts would fall.

In contrast to that approach, we have prioritised helping the lowest earners and funding our public services. That is why 55 per cent of Scottish taxpayers are paying less income tax than they would if they lived elsewhere in the UK—that is a result of the policy decisions that this Government has made. In last year's budget, we made choices that raised additional revenue to support our vital public services and our economy, and we will do the same again tomorrow.

The vast majority of businesses, as well as income tax payers, in Scotland already pay less than they would elsewhere in the UK. Therefore, the rhetoric that comes from the Conservatives about Scotland being the highest-taxed part of the UK is more damaging than the reality and the substance of the budget.

I will discuss briefly a number of other points that are related to the budget. This year, the Scottish Government is investing over £14 billion in health and care services. We have passed on every penny of health resource consequential, and we will continue to do that. Ensuring that health spending in every part of Scotland is protected has been a priority of this Government, and that is why health spending is at a record high.

Murdo Fraser mentioned hospital parking. The irony is, of course, that it was this Government that abolished car parking charges at NHS-owned car parks, since when patients, visitors and staff have saved over £39 million. In a number of other areas, too, performance has consistently been at a higher level in Scotland than in the rest of the UK.

I am delighted that the budget that we will discuss tomorrow will be not a Conservative

budget but an SNP Government budget that will ensure that, despite all the challenges and uncertainties that we face, most of which have been caused by the UK Government, we will continue to deliver on our vision of a successful Scotland that has health, prosperity and wellbeing at its heart while tackling some of the big challenges that we face.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Can the minister confirm that we will not see any more of the cuts that we have seen to drug and alcohol budgets from this SNP Government?

Kate Forbes: I look forward to the member participating in tomorrow's budget debate. I am, of course, not going to confirm anything that will be in the budget tomorrow, but he can look at our track record in prioritising money going to the front line.

As I draw to a close, I note that I am more than delighted to hear the other parties participating in the budget process. It makes a nice change from previous years, when they just sat on the fence.

I move amendment S5M-20716.4, to leave out from "believes" to end and insert:

"notes that the Scottish Conservative Party's proposals for additional resource spending and tax cuts would cost almost £1.5 billion; further notes that the UK Government has indicated that the Scottish resource budget will increase by £1.1 billion; recognises that £1.5 billion is greater than £1.1 billion; considers this proposal to lack credibility, and recognises that the Scottish Government will present a balanced budget on 6 February that prioritises wellbeing, tackling climate change, reducing child poverty and boosting sustainable economic growth."

15:41

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Austerity has caused untold harm to our communities. Surely, none of us came into politics to see a world in which families are dependent on food banks, malnutrition is an ever-present danger and our communities are suffering with no safety net. A generation of young people are growing up who will be worse off than their parents. It is surely the aim of every generation to leave a better world for their children, and the Scottish Government must help to deliver on that ambition.

Austerity has a devastating effect on the economy. Poverty is on the rise, with our child poverty targets going unmet. Communities are failing to thrive, high-street shops are dwindling, libraries are closing, class sizes are increasing and social care is reaching crisis point. In addition, the gig economy is on the rise, leaving people with no choice but to accept low-paid, exploitative, unstable jobs. Austerity was a political choice. The poorest in our society have suffered the most, and the division between the haves and the have-nots has grown. We need real change.

We are realistic—we know that one budget will not reverse over a decade’s-worth of cuts—but we need to start putting forward spending plans that will invest in our communities, our economy and our services. We need to put our money where it will make the most impact.

The budget is set against the backdrop of a climate emergency. We ignore that at our peril, but there is a real fear that our response will further widen the divisions in our economy—that those in privileged positions will capitalise on changes while the most vulnerable in our society will be left further behind. We need to ensure that Government spending is carried out through the prism of a just transition. We need to address the emergency, but that should not be at the expense of those who are struggling.

Those who can afford it invest in insulation, heat pumps and photovoltaics while those who cannot afford those measures face rising bills and increasing fuel poverty. Everything that we do must address climate change while protecting the most vulnerable in our communities and capitalising on the economic opportunities.

Patrick Harvie: I am glad that the member agrees that a climate emergency budget is necessary and that public investment must be forthcoming. Is the Labour Party’s position now to support the proposition that there are unsustainable, traffic-inducing projects in the Scottish Government’s programme and that money should be directed away from those and into more sustainable projects?

Rhoda Grant: That question leads me nicely on to an intervention that we have proposed, which is for free bus travel for the under-25s. That not only would increase the use of public transport, which would mean that more buses would be available to benefit us all, but would form patterns of behaviour that young people would carry into adulthood, reducing the number of polluting car journeys that are made.

Free bus travel would, of course, benefit young people by opening up new opportunities, enabling them to attend work and after-school activities. It is a classic invest-to-save policy: we would get young people on to buses and protect our planet, and we would allow them to become more economically active, boosting our economy and our coffers.

Scottish Labour delivered free bus travel for older people, which has been a huge success, keeping people active as they get older, moving people out of their cars and on to buses while they are able to make the change and meaning that they do not become isolated when they are no longer able to drive.

The SNP Government has turbo-charged Tory austerity for councils. Since 2013, local government has faced the brunt of cuts, with its total revenue funding decreasing by 7 per cent while the Scottish Government has shouldered a 2 per cent cut to its revenue budget. When the “Local Government Benchmarking Framework: National Benchmarking Overview Report” for 2018-19 was published, it was stated:

“Scottish local government is now operating in a more challenging setting with greater demand for services against a tightening budget, with improvements achieved in previous years starting to stall ... the data does highlight that with the status quo there is a ... risk to the future delivery of key services. Councils are delving into their reserves raising questions as to how they will cope delivering services and maintain the momentum they have gained without a change in funding.”

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Rhoda Grant: I am quite short of time and I wish to make a number of points.

That approach has had an impact on lifeline services and, in turn, on the most vulnerable people in our communities. Many councils are reduced to providing statutory services instead of being able to bring on front-line services that protect our communities. Since 2007, councils have lost 40,000 jobs—a level of job losses that would have been unacceptable in any other sector. In the budget, they will be expected to deliver additional services to the tune of £497 million, and they must therefore receive a fair settlement to allow them to deliver those additional services and invest in our communities.

Councils must be enabled to deliver care in the community. The failure to tackle the social care crisis and the critical underfunding of local authorities continue to put pressure on the wider healthcare system. People who are fit to go back to the comfort of their own homes to recover are instead stuck in hospitals. It is soul destroying for them to know that they could be at home, where they would be more comfortable, but instead they are stuck in hospital, where visiting hours are restricted and there is a higher risk of infections, so people feel vulnerable.

The Scottish Government set up integration joint boards to deal with that situation. Sadly, all that it appears to have achieved is the creation of an additional layer of bureaucracy without the checks and balances that are faced by health boards and local government. Many of the IJBs are already in deficit, and the situation is not getting better. The latest figures from the Information Services Division show that, in December 2019, 45,404 bed days were spent in hospital by patients who were medically fit to leave, which is a 6 per cent increase on the same month in 2018. Since Jeane Freeman assumed office as the Cabinet Secretary

for Health and Sport, the cost to health boards of delayed discharge has reached a shocking total of £197.8 million.

However, local government and social care are not alone in bearing the brunt of cuts. Tuition fee income, which universities can generate from international students and those living in the rest of the UK, has replaced Scottish funding council grants as the single biggest source of income for Scottish universities. Our colleges have also faced a sustained lack of investment although they are the institutions that provide in-work learning. Our economy is in danger if we do not train people in robotics and digital technologies, which will impact on every aspect of industry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must conclude and move your amendment, please.

Rhoda Grant: I will move to my conclusion, Presiding Officer. Our budget requests are realistic—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No—you will sit down. I have given you time for the intervention.

Rhoda Grant: I move amendment S5M-20716.1, to leave out from “believes” to end and insert:

“acknowledges the human impact that over a decade of austerity has had on communities, jobs, public services and the economy, and therefore calls on the Scottish Government to bring forward a budget that invests in the future, includes fair funding for local government with a focus on improving and expanding social care, includes a fair deal for further and higher education, extends free bus travel for all young people and ensures that the budget looks forward, linking spending to national outcomes, and puts in place transformative funding to benefit the future of communities and the planet.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Patrick Harvie, to be followed by Willie Rennie. We have very little time in hand now for interventions.

15:50

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I have consistently argued that all Opposition parties should engage constructively with the budget process by putting forward positive ideas. That would be good for Parliament and for the country, so I welcome the fact that most parties are now doing so. It is sometimes hard to remember, but that is how our process was meant to work and it is how modern, pluralistic Parliaments that result from fair voting systems operate across most of Europe. We should try to recapture the spirit that was intended when this Parliament was designed.

There is now only one party that is holding out against that constructive agenda. The Liberal Democrats have lodged an amendment in response to a motion on the budget that talks about federalism and a tired, old no-indyref

position. There seems to be no attempt at a solid proposition on changes to the budget. However, the position of most political parties—both Labour and the Conservatives—is now moving toward more positive engagement. Let us look at their positions.

There are some things in the Conservative motion that we can all welcome, such as more spending on drug services and on homelessness, although we acknowledge that those things will be effective only if we also secure a commitment from the UK Government that it will change its failed drugs policy and many of the economic policies that are still pushing people into poverty and making them more vulnerable.

Most of us would welcome spending on drug and homeless services, but does the general Tory position add up? If we assume that the UK Government will grudgingly turn the spending taps on—just a fraction—after 10 years of austerity, there might be more money available overall, and some choices for Scottish Government to make. However, can we commit to following the UK Government’s choices with Barnett consequential; to introducing new spending in our own priority areas; to increasing local government revenues; and to cutting taxes? The Tories want all of that, and it cannot all be delivered at the same time.

Although most of us agree that investment in high-quality public services is a good thing in principle and something that we would like to increase, I cannot accept the implication in the motion that tax, in itself, is a bad thing in principle and that it is something that should always be minimised. Tax is not only about raising revenue that is adequate enough to meet our investment in services; it is also about achieving behaviour change and redistribution of wealth to achieve a fairer and more equal society. There is good evidence that high rates of income tax at the very top act as a disincentive to excessive pay demands by the super-rich. Those are all positive objectives, and tax has a positive role in principle.

As for the previous changes to income tax, Murdo Fraser knows very well that the Fraser of Allander institute rejected the idea that changes in the income tax base are the result of changes in the income tax rate. We would still see a huge revenue gap if we followed his policy, regardless of changes in earnings. If either he or the Liberal Democrats want to reverse the 2018-19 shift to a fairer five-band tax system, it can be done only through tax cuts for the highest earners, which would make inequality and poverty worse.

Murdo Fraser: The member asked Mairi Spowage, who is from the Fraser of Allander institute, a question on changes in the income tax base being the result of changes in the income tax

rate. Her response was that there is no evidence on that either way. It is a fair debating point, but he cannot quote her evidence in support of his position.

Patrick Harvie: There is certainly no evidence to support Murdo Fraser's position. All there is his ludicrous ideological attachment to the Laffer curve, which has been pretty much blown out of the water in the past.

There is some overlap between Labour's position and our arguments on the budget, and I welcome the fact that Labour is adopting something that is closer to the Green Party's approach of offering positive ideas that we know that the Government can deliver. It is, of course, aware that we have advocated free bus travel for young people as a step toward completely fare-free public transport in the longer term.

The final word of the Labour amendment is "planet". Presumably, that is a reference to the need that the Green Party has set out for a climate emergency budget. That means investing in public transport and active travel; it must also mean shifting away from the multibillion-pound road building programme to which the Scottish Government is still committed. I am put in mind of my first years as a member of the Parliament, because, when I was first elected, I argued against all other parties in the chamber, by opposing the M74 extension. That project was a relic of 1960s transport thinking, and it often feels as though we still have not moved away from that approach to transport.

Even the Scottish Government's infrastructure commission for Scotland says that there should be a presumption against new road capacity and in favour of maintaining and repurposing existing infrastructure. That would free up the spending that we need if we are to make serious commitments to getting our homes and buildings off the gas grid and hooked up to renewables and district heating systems.

The Government amendment provides an enjoyable demolition of the Conservative sums but then proposes that the Parliament

"recognises that the Scottish Government will present a balanced budget ... that prioritises wellbeing, tackling climate change, reducing child poverty and boosting sustainable economic growth."

Quite apart from my tediously predictable rejection of the contradiction that is inherent in the phrase, "sustainable economic growth", we simply do not yet know whether the Government will indeed present a budget that prioritises any of those objectives.

That is because, even in this extraordinary year, when the timescale is so constrained because of UK Government choices, the Scottish Government

continues to play its cards close to its chest instead of co-producing the budget with Opposition parties prior to its introduction. If the Government did that, the budget process would be incapable of descending into brinkmanship, as it has done in the past, and would produce a result that is driven by the public interest.

That kind of mature approach to such issues feels unlikely here only because this Parliament has often been so polarised. Many of our European neighbours are better at this. We should take lessons from them.

15:56

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The budget tomorrow is an opportunity to move beyond division. I think that people in this country have had enough. We have had years of division over Brexit and, if Patrick Harvie has his way, we will do that all over again with independence. Members will forgive me for being concerned about the economic impact of independence, which I cannot countenance. I do not believe in independence.

It is therefore important that we look for an opportunity to move beyond that division. Whatever our views on independence—and I know that there are members in this Parliament who support the idea whole-heartedly—it is clear that there will not be another independence referendum in the next financial year. The First Minister admitted that last year. There should therefore be no objection to there being no line in the budget at all on independence. We should be able to move beyond that, because we will not have a referendum. That would remove a massive boulder that stands between those who support independence reaching agreement on the budget with me and other members. If it is that simple, let us remove it from the budget.

Kate Forbes: Will Willie Rennie confirm to the Parliament how much money for independence was in last year's budget?

Willie Rennie: We know from the permanent secretary that a significant sum of money has been devoted to independence. If we can have a guarantee that that will not happen, because there will be no independence referendum this year, we will have created a golden opportunity for members of all parties in the Parliament to work together. However, even though the First Minister has set out that there will be no referendum, the Government refuses to take independence out of the budget. Let us not accuse others of blocking the way to an agreement; the block has been created by the SNP Government.

There is an opportunity to consider what we can do together. We would like to make a constructive

contribution to the budget process. We would like to ensure that local government is given the finance that it deserves, because the Scottish Government has made significant commitments—commitments worth half a billion pounds—on local government's behalf. The Government says that that is partnership; I think that local government's arm was tied behind its back when those commitments were made. That was no partnership.

The Government should follow through on its commitments, and it should account for inflation on top of that. Local government has significant requirements if it is just to stand still and meet its commitments. For example, we support the big expansion in nursery education, and that should be properly funded. We have heard about the state of our police estate—the buildings—and about the mental health of our police officers. The police need support, too.

On mental health, a lot of young people—more than 800—are waiting beyond a year to get mental health treatment, which is meant to be a top priority of the Government.

We need to work together on the massive challenge of the climate emergency, which is why we are pleased to participate in the cross-party effort to find solutions to deal with the issue, live up to our obligations and meet our world-leading targets.

All those things need support from the budget and there is an opportunity for us to provide it, because there is an awful lot of common ground on those issues. I hope that the Scottish Government lives up to that.

It is disappointing that the Conservatives refuse to take responsibility for the rather chaotic way in which we are having to agree the budget this year. We are going right up to the cliff edge of when we need to make decisions and when local authorities need to set their budgets. It is a reckless act that I hope is not repeated next year, because we cannot be forced into a rushed budget process. We need time to consider and deliberate on such important matters. If we had a federal structure in the United Kingdom, in which there was no effort by one part to commit detriment to another part, we might avoid such situations. Those things are important for the long-term stability of the United Kingdom.

I am utterly confused by the Conservatives' position on tax. They still condemn the apparent tax bombshell—the rip-off—of two years ago that made Scotland the highest-taxed part the United Kingdom. If that has been so important ever since, why is it not on the Conservative priority list for this year's budget? I suspect that I know the reason why: it is because the Conservatives are refusing

to set out where the cuts to public services would happen. They will not set them out, because they know that the price is too high. They also know that the detriment to the Scottish economy has not been what they claimed—we have not seen the brain drain that they were claiming would happen in Scotland. They have been caught out and they now realise that it is a price that they cannot afford to pay. Therefore, they are not prepared to spell it out in their budget proposals for this year.

Murdo Fraser: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is concluding.

Willie Rennie: I am sorry, but I am sure that Murdo Fraser and I can have a discussion at a later stage.

Just like yesterday, when the Conservatives made a screeching U-turn on uniform business rates, we have had another screeching U-turn from them today.

I urge the Scottish Government to remove the boulder of independence so that we can all work together to achieve a budget that is sustainable for Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate and speeches of a tight six minutes. There is very little time for interventions, so members will have to absorb them.

16:02

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Today, the Conservative Party is demanding millions in additional funding for public services. It wants millions of pounds of investment while wanting to slash taxes for Scotland's highest earners. Both leadership candidates have outlined their plans, which mirror Boris Johnson's tax regime at Westminster. The Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland argues that those plans would cost Scotland more than £1 billion across four years and the think tank has described the plans as "unaffordable".

There is a growing list of spending demands, despite both candidates for the next Tory leadership vowing to hand top earners tax cuts. Public services need investment and it is fair that higher earners pay their fair share to fund our schools and hospitals. If the Tories want to promise top earners a handout, they have to explain what public service they would cut to fund it.

Tomorrow, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work will set out the Scottish budget—a balanced budget that prioritises wellbeing, tackles climate change, reduces child

poverty and promotes sustainable economic growth. Our public services are vital to the people whom we serve, and there is an onus on every party in our Parliament to act responsibly on budget matters.

It will not be a secret or a surprise that I oppose the Tory approach to taxation and public services, but it is healthy and right that our Parliament has parties with different ideologies and political positions—the communities that we serve all certainly do. Characterising those differences as division is at best unhelpful and at worst pretty irresponsible.

If the Tories want to cut tax for the rich and wish to promise high earners a handout, they must, if they wish to be taken seriously, be clear and honest about where they will take the money from.

The motion asks for a £15.4 million national drug rehabilitation bed fund. We debated the national emergency of drug deaths last week, and I believe that there was consensus that no one Government or organisation and no one single intervention can end that tragedy of preventable and avoidable death.

I welcome the work of the drugs task force, and I reiterate my calls of last week for the Scottish Government to do all that it can to ensure immediate action on the things that we have power over. We have to make sure that a range of services and interventions are available to people and their families, when and where they need them. Of course that includes residential rehabilitation beds, but I am concerned that that is being flagged as the one solution. As good as the intention of those who propose it as such might be, that is a bit simplistic.

Miles Briggs: Will the member give way?

Ruth Maguire: No, thank you. Of course I urge increased investment in services—in harm reduction, in treatment and in recovery. As important as that is, however, transparency and accountability in how money moves through health and social care systems, and responsibility for measuring and assessing outcomes, are a whole other new debate.

The Tory motion also calls for an additional £10 million for the ending homelessness together fund. The fund is already allowing the Scottish Government to deliver the actions that have been recommended by the homelessness and rough sleeping action group. One person without a home is one too many, and additional investment in housing would be very welcome, but it has to be said that the Scottish Government would have not just £10 million but £100 million were it not having to spend that protecting people in Scotland from the worst effects of Tory austerity.

That same austerity—the years of Tory austerity—is putting people at risk of homelessness, squeezing more families into poverty and leaving them struggling to afford food and rent. We cannot stand by and simply allow UK benefit cuts to hit the poorest in Scotland. We must mitigate what we can, but it is simply not feasible to completely mitigate all the impact of UK cuts, and surely we all aspire to more than just mitigating harm that is imposed on us from elsewhere—spending just to stand still or to prevent the worst harm. We can do better.

The Scottish Government has invested £1.4 billion in supporting low-income households. We have demonstrated that, when we have the power, we can do better, with aspirations and action to do more than just mitigate harm. When we are free of Westminster, this Parliament will be able to do even more.

Today, the Tories are demanding millions of pounds of additional funding to be invested in public services, while they want to slash taxes for Scotland's highest earners. The independent Fraser of Allander institute has made it clear that that Tory tax proposals would

“reduce the government's income tax revenues by around £270 million”.

Calling for spending increases while demanding huge tax cuts does not add up. Some of our constituents might feel that that approach is an attempt to mislead them, and I understand why they would feel that way.

If the Conservatives are serious about public services in Scotland, I ask them to join us in calling for a reversal of the cuts to the Scottish budget and an end to the austerity agenda, which has heaped misery and suffering on so many of the people who we are here to represent.

16:08

Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Tomorrow's budget will be one of the most important in recent years, not least because the Scottish Government will benefit from a significant increase in funding from the UK Government.

This year, the resource block grant will increase in real terms by 2.1 per cent, bringing additional funding of more than £1.1 billion to the Scottish budget. That is over and above the £1.2 billion that is being invested by the UK Government in city deals and the hundreds of millions of pounds in financial transactions money that will fund the Scottish national investment bank. The Scottish Government can use all that additional funding to improve public services in Scotland.

The Scottish Government will also be in a position to take direct action to reverse the on-

going decline in the Scottish economy. Despite all the denials from Derek Mackay, economic decline is exactly what we are seeing in Scotland. Just last week, in figures published by the Scottish Government, the size of Scotland's economy was written down by an remarkable 3 per cent, as total gross domestic product declined from £180 billion to £175 billion.

Earlier today in the chamber, Derek Mackay confirmed that, since the SNP came to power, total economic growth in Scotland has been 5 per cent lower than that in the rest of the UK. That means that the Scottish economy is now £7 billion smaller than it should be.

The Fraser of Allander institute has described that as the longest period of low growth in Scotland for 60 years, and it has resulted in Scotland having a record fiscal deficit of 7.2 per cent of GDP, which is the highest in Europe.

It will take more than one budget to reverse that 13-year economic decline, but tomorrow's budget must make a start. First, it must reduce the large business supplement, which is a tax that discourages firms that are looking to expand. Since the supplement was doubled in 2016, more than £250 million has been paid in that tax by more than 20,000 firms across Scotland—money that they could have invested in the creation of higher-paid jobs, in new technology to improve productivity or in expanding their businesses. Instead, that money has been taken away from them and wasted by the SNP in a multitude of bad investments that, according to Audit Scotland, last year alone resulted in investment losses of £140 million for the Scottish Government.

Kate Forbes rose—

Dean Lockhart: I will give way to the minister if she can explain why the SNP has lost all that taxpayers' money.

Kate Forbes: I just want to clarify a point. I assume that the member is aware that the large business supplement is reinvested through the small business bonus, the retention of which is another of the Conservatives' asks in the current budget process.

Dean Lockhart: I am not quite sure how the money that goes into the SNP's black hole is spent. I say to the minister that the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. As I said, Derek Mackay confirmed earlier today that, under the SNP Government, the Scottish economy has grown by 5 per cent less than that in the rest of the UK. That is the number that really counts.

The other economic priority for the budget must be to stop the increasing income tax burden in Scotland. The minister has called the system "fair and progressive", but there is nothing that is either

fair or progressive about the fact that everyone earning more than £27,000 per annum pays more income tax here than they would pay in the rest of the UK. Those people are not rich.

According to the SNP, the higher tax policy set out in last year's budget would lead to higher funding for public services, which we now know is not true. According to the Fraser of Allander institute, when those higher tax policies were introduced, they were forecast to raise additional money. That has not come to pass, and higher tax in Scotland will be cancelled out by lower wage growth. There we have it: hard-working people in Scotland are paying more tax and taking home lower wages—not to raise extra public spending, but to subsidise the SNP's economic failures. The SNP might call that "fair and progressive", but Scottish Conservatives do not share that view. Such taxes are punishing the hard-working people of Scotland. With such tax policies, it is not surprising that, under the SNP, Scotland has become a low-growth, low-wage and low-productivity economy.

I mentioned that the Scottish Government is on track to receive record levels of funding from the UK Government. The budget process is a game of two halves. In the UK Government's half, we will indeed see a 2.1 per cent real-terms increase in block grant resource. However, in the SNP's half, the decline in tax revenues, relative to those in the rest of the UK, means that we will see a downward adjustment of the block grant. According to the Fraser of Allander institute,

"the positivity in the outlook for the resource block grant ... will be ... offset by negative income tax reconciliations",

meaning that

"the block grant will grow by less than 1 per cent overall in real terms".—[*Official Report, Finance and Constitution Committee*, 29 January 2020; c 2.]

In other words, the failure of the SNP to grow our economy means that, in the next two years, we will lose over a billion pounds of funding—

John Mason: Will the member take an intervention?

Dean Lockhart: I am about to enter my last minute.

In the next two years, we will lose a billion pounds of funding that should have been available for public services in Scotland.

The real story of the budget is that, despite falling tax revenues in Scotland and a record fiscal deficit, and even after the downward adjustment in the block grant, the Scottish budget will still increase. That is because the Boris bonus will bail out the billion-pound budget black hole that has been created by the SNP.

I do not expect the SNP to thank the UK Government for bailing it out, but it must recognise the reality of the fiscal position in Scotland. First, the SNP's economic failure is costing billions of pounds that should have come to public services. Secondly, despite that—and despite a record fiscal deficit—the Scottish budget will still increase, because being part of the UK delivers both a union dividend of £2,000 for every person in Scotland and a fiscal transfer of more than £10 billion a year to fund public services. As we all know, that would all disappear immediately in the event of Scottish independence.

I support the motion in Murdo Fraser's name.

16:14

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): The motion in Murdo Fraser's name is incoherent, financially illiterate and intrinsically designed to bolster and increase the inequality for which the Tory UK Government is renowned. A flavour of the incompetence and incoherence of the Tory group could be found in yesterday's farcical admission that they supported the centralisation of rates only to see how that would play out at stage 3. Their contempt for the small business sector and the rates relief that it depends on makes the Tories the anti-business party. If members do not believe me, Boris told businesses where they could go in words that I am not allowed to repeat in the chamber.

Murdo Fraser: Will the member take an intervention?

Keith Brown: If I am given a chance to get into my speech, I will come back to Mr Fraser.

Liam Fox slated businesses in this country as "lazy", and every economist will say that Brexit has hit the economy and will hit businesses even harder in future. Apparently, although it does not really matter whether we get a deal with the EU, we can get one that is like Australia's deal with the EU—except Australia does not have a deal with the EU.

I am happy to take an intervention from Murdo Fraser.

Murdo Fraser: I am grateful to Mr Brown for taking the intervention. Can he tell us what impact it will have on the town of Dollar that its constituency MSP voted yesterday to impose an additional tax burden on the town's largest employer—namely, Dollar academy?

Keith Brown: I do not know whether Murdo Fraser has spoken to Dollar academy, but I have, and it is completely at ease with the decisions taken by the Scottish Government. If he wants to check that for himself, one day he can come to

Dollar—a beautiful town in my constituency, where I live.

Murdo Fraser's motion says that the Conservative Party wants to help local government, even though every council in the land has told it that not having a UK budget by this time is detrimental to local government, the organisations that councils support and the communities that they serve.

We have heard a lot about taxes. Murdo Fraser does not want any more tax, but the Public Works Loans Board has just increased the cost of borrowing for every council in Scotland. It has done that because of extravagant decisions, as it sees them, made by councils in England. There is not one word of protest from the Tories in the chamber about that Tory tax being applied to every council in Scotland. Is that not Tory MSPs' function? Are they not meant to be here to defend Scottish councils, or are they here just to do what Boris Johnson tells them to do?

As we have heard a lot about from Westminster, talks about the block grant are frequent, but people do not really talk about how it is arrived at. Yesterday, the UK Government took a decision on health spending that will determine what the Scottish, Welsh and North Irish Governments will get to spend on health. Of course, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish representatives were specifically excluded from voting on that. Only after the big spending decisions are taken do Scottish representatives get a say.

When the history of how Scotland regained its independence is written, some of the words that will be used will be those uttered by the Deputy Speaker yesterday when she said, "I discern Scottish voices". That is similar to saying, "I spy strangers," or, "There are foreigners in this chamber". Scots do not have the same rights as other people in the Westminster Parliament because of the offensive outcome of a constitutional perversion called EVEL—English votes for English laws.

What else is spent in our name without our consent and represented as a Scottish deficit before any Scottish block grant is agreed? Murdo Fraser asked us how we can reduce the fantastic fiscal transfer that we get, and there are some suggestions as to how we can do that; in fact, according to some proposals, we could eliminate it altogether. Do not spend £200 billion on nuclear weapons—that would be a start. When the decision is made to have the Airwave emergency system, do not go way over budget by £2 billion and have years and years of delay. Do not double the national debt to £1.9 trillion, or £1,900,000,000,000—that is what the national debt has been increased to by the party of fiscal rectitude. Do not go £70 billion to £80 billion over

cost on high-speed rail. Do not go £3 billion over cost on crossrail. The Tory Government's failures due to its financial incompetence are legion.

The Conservatives talked about a 3.4 per cent increase in funding for the health service. Let us look at the increase in the budget of the Scotland Office from 2011 to 2018—it got a 555 per cent increase in its communications budget, and that is before we take into account the cost of Royal Air Force jets to shepherd ministers around the UK. The Conservatives should not talk about budgets increasing, because 3.4 per cent for the NHS is below the long-term average, and everyone knows that inflation in the NHS is greater than general inflation.

For the Tories, this is about inequality. They are maintaining austerity: they told us before the election that austerity was finished, but now all their departments have been told to make a 5 per cent cut. Of course, the public sector pay cap remains, even for service personnel. Why do the Tories never say that Scotland has the lowest tax rate in the whole of the UK? They do not say that because it affects low-paid people, and they do not represent low-paid people. All their tax proposals are designed to help the better-off.

If Tory members do not believe me, they should listen to the Fraser of Allander institute, which they often quote. It says that the Tories' policy, which is framed as supporting middle earners, "predominantly benefits" households at the top of the distribution of household incomes. There we have it—the Tories are supporting the high earners at the expense of low earners.

The Tories' incompetence is evident in the motion in their flagrant inability to account for the £270 million that they want to give to high earners. The Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament and the country as a whole deserve to have a main Opposition party that at least has the ability to put forward a credible alternative budget. The Tories' motion is not that.

16:20

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): Scottish Labour is clear that it is time for a budget that invests in the future and in future generations. We must all be clear that the climate emergency is the greatest threat that faces humanity, and it is down to legislators to take drastic action that delivers a just transition for all.

The upcoming budget process is vitally important in enabling the rapid delivery of the regenerative policy that is required for us to meet our targets. Plans must be set in motion, trajectories must be bold, and transformative funding is necessary to benefit the future of communities and of our planet.

Fair funding for local government is a must if it is to be able to take the lead on many of the areas in which emissions reductions are needed. COSLA has asked for that role not to be undermined. People now understand the climate emergency, public expectation has increased exponentially and councils are determined to deliver.

The funding gap means that there are barriers to local action on climate change. A budget that invests in local government is the only way in which local communities will be justly kept in step with emissions reduction efforts. Scottish Labour is clear that the people of Scotland want councils that enable them to get out of their cars and on to reliable public transport. Scottish Labour's budget ask—which was highlighted at last year's conference—is for free bus travel for the under-25s. That would be a powerful step towards increasing bus usage, cutting transport emissions and reducing the barrier to opportunity that transport costs represent.

The people of Scotland also want councils that can bolster energy efficiency, keep everyone in a warm home and bring new, skilled, local jobs. They want councils that make recycling an easy habit and which keep our local environment beautiful and accessible. Green spaces hold great value—they are positive for physical and mental wellbeing, for community cohesion, for delivering nature-based solutions to climate change and for job creation. All those examples can be tied to the strengthening of local economies and the delivery of job creation and opportunities for manufacturing.

It is vital that Scotland has the skills to seize those opportunities. As we structure the economic and societal shift that is needed to get to net zero and meet our interim targets for 2030, we should not talk about the just transition process without taking great care—care for our communities and care for working people and businesses across all sectors—as Rhoda Grant stressed.

There have been too many missed opportunities, not least in renewables manufacturing. One of the keys to unlocking a fair future in the context of the climate emergency is the strategic development of initial and transferable skills. I and many others have long argued that there should be a robust future skills strategy across all lifelong learning, whether to ensure that oil and gas workers have the opportunity to move into the renewables industry without having to take costly safety training courses—they should be able to do shortened courses—or to support plumbers and roofers to gain the skills to install solar panels and air-source heat pumps. That is fundamentally important.

Scottish Labour argues for a fair future for further and higher education, which means that

fair funding must be provided in the Scottish Government's budget. A focus on colleges is vital, not least because colleges are the most common destination for people from deprived backgrounds. Colleges' funding allocation in the budget must reflect the importance of those institutions to society and help with the green jobs revolution and the rapidly changing jobs market.

Scottish Labour's amendment highlights that the Scottish Government budget needs to look forward,

"linking spending to national outcomes".

For a number of years, I have been part of the cabinet secretary's round-table group on the national performance framework. Its core values include treating all people with "kindness, dignity and compassion" and ensuring that people are able to

"grow up loved, safe and respected"

and

"have thriving and innovative businesses, with quality jobs and fair work for everyone".

Those outcomes are imperative, and it must surely be clear to all members across the chamber that they are of fundamental importance to our future. The outcomes will be analysed by committees during the budget process.

It is disappointing that, in spite of that important living framework, each budget seems to fail to link the national outcomes to spending in a way that can be understood. The Auditor General for Scotland has made it apparent that readers of the budget documents are

"unable to see the links between the money spent by the Scottish Government, what it has achieved, and progress made towards achieving national outcomes."

In her closing remarks, will the minister address how she will ensure that this year's budget is better aligned with the outcomes in the national performance framework, so that we can have a truly prosperous Scotland for us all, including future generations, as we move forward with tackling the climate emergency?

16:26

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Murdo Fraser opened the debate for the Conservatives, and he was clear that there are two areas that we view as priorities for the budget: measures to grow the Scottish economy and support for vital public services. In relation to the second limb, it will come as no surprise to members to learn that my fingerprints are all over the demand for an additional £50 million to be spent on protecting 750 police officer roles. As Murdo Fraser made clear, I would rather go much

further, but I have ensured, as I shall set out later, that our proposal is realistic and affordable. Ideally, we should go much further and, in short course, we must. This distracted Scottish Government has to get some focus back on the police, so let me do that for it.

Police Scotland is in a terrifying financial situation, with an operating deficit for 2019-20 of £25 million. That is in the context of a funding shortfall in the police capital budget of £56 million compared with what Police Scotland was expecting in November 2018. What is the practical impact of that? It means that planned investment in vehicles, the estate and information technology has been slashed. It means that, according to the Scottish Police Federation, many vehicles are held together with duct tape. The Scottish Government might not be aware that half of the fleet currently operates well beyond replacement criteria. It means that the chief constable has to describe IT capability as "poor", due to underinvestment and the lack of funding, which has led to the lack of a national network. He said:

"Younger officers coming in now are taken aback by how backward a lot of our approach is. They live in a digital mobile world and they come to work and they almost have to step back into an analogue world."

It is no news to anyone that police stations are in a desperate state. I say "anyone", but when the First Minister was challenged about revelations of mould, leaks and rat infestations in police buildings across the country, she claimed that critics had a "nerve" to raise the matter and claimed that the SNP's funding of the force was perfectly adequate. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice described the warnings as "hyperbole" shortly before the dining room ceiling in Broughty Ferry police station collapsed, leading to the station being evacuated and abandoned.

However, the minister can fix the issue of officer numbers at the stroke of a pen. Nearly every area of Scotland has fewer divisional officers on the front line since the merger. Such officers are the core local resource who patrol the streets and respond to calls. It is important to note that, of those officers, 300 are paid for by external bodies such as our similarly underfunded local councils, and 400 are paid for by the UK Government. I am sure that the minister will accept that none of us can countenance any further reductions in officer numbers. Perhaps most significantly, the Scottish Police Federation has stated that

"community policing is at risk".

Members will have seen that today's *Scotsman* says:

"Crime in Scotland could soar if the 'systemic underfunding' of the national constabulary is allowed to continue",

according to the chief constable. The SPF says that balancing the budget requires a reduction in officer numbers of 750. Just last month, Audit Scotland warned that, unless an increase in funding of £50 million is made available, up to 750 front-line officers could lose their jobs.

If an extra £50 million is not provided to Police Scotland in this budget, our police force faces cuts of 750 officers. As the chief constable said only yesterday, without it he faces the very real prospect of simply not having the money to investigate crimes. Let us not forget that violent crime is rising under the SNP Government.

This is the reason for my budget demand. We ask our police to put their lives on the line for us day in, day out. The Government has demanded that they work in crumbling buildings, drive cars held together with duct tape, use prehistoric IT systems and multitask to cover a huge number of services that we would not think of as policing. The Government cannot, surely, be prepared to accept a situation in which the police have to do all that, but with 750 fewer officers. It seems, however, that it does.

The minister's amendment makes no mention of the police and yet it specifies what else she thinks should be a priority. She did not mention the police once in her eight-minute speech, but she did talk about money. Officers will not be persuaded, if there is any attempt to suggest that there is no money, because, as today's motion makes clear, the block grant will grow by at least £1.1 billion in real terms, which is a 2.1 per cent real-terms increase, all thanks to the unprecedented investment by the Conservative UK Government and a Barnett formula that pools and shares resources around our United Kingdom—a Boris bonus indeed.

In 2008, former Scottish Conservative leader Annabel Goldie forced the SNP Government to increase police numbers by 1,000. Just imagine the situation that we would be in if she had not. We will continue to follow that example and argue for the respect and resources that our police officers need. The Scottish Conservatives are committed to supporting our police and to providing the extra £50 million that they need to ensure that those 750 police officers continue to keep our communities safe, catch criminals and police our streets. The minister must do likewise.

The minister must be aware that failure to deliver that will represent a failure to support our police, protect our communities and govern Scotland effectively. Our police officers are watching. The people of Scotland are watching. Will she put the needs of the Scottish people first, with a modest investment in our police, or will she continue to prioritise her own narrow political agenda?

16:32

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North)

(SNP): I welcome the fact that the Tories have submitted a wish list, but their motion and what I have heard so far in the chamber omits robust and realistic costings. After having listened to Liam Kerr, I am astonished that none of the Conservatives made any comment over the past decade when their colleagues down south were cutting 20,000 police officers. That tells us what would have happened if they had been in power here in Scotland.

The alleged 2.1 per cent real-terms increase that has so thrilled Murdo Fraser during these past weeks appears to be spread very thinly. Indeed, today he answered that it is only 1 per cent in real terms. Why do the Tories never fully cost their proposals? It is the most basic of tasks, yet they do not seem to be willing or able to be serious about it.

We already know that tax cuts for high earners would cost Scotland £270 million, and the Fraser of Allander institute has identified that people earning more than £100,000 would benefit the most. Therefore, it is good that Murdo Fraser appears to have abandoned that proposal. If we adopted the same policy as the UK Tory Government and increased the higher rate to earners of £50,000-plus, that would mean service cuts of a whopping £1 billion over four years.

How would the Scottish Government pick up such a tab, when we have more in-work poverty and food bank usage than at any time in recent history, thanks to Tory welfare cuts, and where would the money be taken from? Do the Tories want us to stop spending £100 million a year mitigating the effects of the UK Government's welfare cuts? Incidentally, figures published by the National Records Scotland show no signs of the Tory-predicted high earner exodus to England since the devolution of income tax—another scare tactic that has failed to have any impact.

As for non-domestic rates, it was daft to support the Greens amendment 9 at stage 2 of the Non-domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill to begin with, but I commend both Labour and the Tories for belatedly voting to keep the powers and responsibilities to set non-domestic rates where they currently lie. Ultimately, it is about the organisations from shops to nurseries and others that benefit from those reliefs. The Tories know that Scotland has the most substantial package of rates relief across the UK, but if they wish to make it more generous, they should tell us what public service should be cut in order to finance that.

The UK Government's delay in announcing its budget makes it difficult for the SNP Government to allocate its resources as accurately as it must.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work will tomorrow provide a degree of certainty for local government and vital public services, but it will remain extremely challenging for local authorities to set budgets when they do not know exactly how much will be allocated to them.

As a member of the Local Government and Communities Committee, I share the desire for well-funded council services, so I was glad last year when the SNP Government delivered a funding package of £11.2 billion for local authorities. That represented a real-terms increase of more than £310 million, despite the Government having its own budget cut by the UK Tory Government once again.

The irony of Conservatives playing the knight in shining armour for council budgets in Scotland is not lost on this side of the chamber, given the huge cuts that the Tories have imposed in England. Last November, the Trades Union Congress and Unison published an extensive analysis revealing that overall, councils in England have £7.8 billion per year less to spend on key services than they did when the Tories and Lib Dems came into power in 2010. That equates to a cut of £150 million a week. Coincidentally, it also showed that the 20 councils with the biggest funding gaps were overwhelmingly metropolitan boroughs in London and the north of England, with 18 under Labour control. Meanwhile, 16 of the 20 councils that suffered the smallest cuts were Tory led. Fortunately, the SNP has more regard for the fair allocation and distribution of funding to local authorities.

I welcome that, in its amendment, Labour

“acknowledges the human impact that over a decade of austerity has had on communities, jobs, public services and the economy”.

Given that Labour was in power at Westminster until the summer of 2010, I am pleased by its mea culpa in finally acknowledging responsibility for kickstarting austerity—a policy that Labour’s London bosses supported well into 2015.

A majority of members of the Scottish Parliament, and the last three opinion polls, support independence, but Willie Rennie thinks that the majority in the chamber should yield to his wee rump of five MSPs—liberal democrats indeed!

The Green Party’s demands that we stop building new roads, such as the A9, is not one that I agree with. The A9 is being dualled to enhance connectivity, improve safety, and reduce the congestion that increases pollution and driver stress. It is not a new road, and buses will also travel on it. Surely, any abandonment of such projects would not only throw hundreds, if not thousands, of construction workers on the dole,

but would mean a hefty penalty for breach of contract imposed on the Scottish Government, while leaving part of the route looking like a building site. Siren calls to cancel that key infrastructure project should therefore not be heeded.

From an Ayrshire and Renfrewshire perspective, I am keen that the A737 is also upgraded, to help to improve safety and reduce the congestion that has to be endured by many of my constituents. Local Conservative, Labour and independent politicians also support that position. In any case, billions more are raised in fuel taxes—albeit that such revenues accrue to the UK Treasury—than are spent on the roads, allowing for investment in public transport, cycling and walking.

Despite the delay to the UK budget, the SNP Government will confirm individual local authority funding allocations. We already know that flexibility remains for local authorities to raise more revenue by increasing council tax by up to 3 per cent in real terms.

Tomorrow, the SNP Government will propose a budget that focuses on wellbeing, tackles climate change, reduces child poverty and promotes sustainable economic growth. It will be well considered, fair and progressive. I hope that all parties, including the Tories, will contribute in a constructive manner and provide full costings for any amendments that they propose.

16:38

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): It was Naomi Eisenstadt, the Government’s adviser on poverty, who said that the age group that needed most policy attention was the 19 to 24-year-olds—those young people who have left school and are trying to form their plans for the future, and those not going into higher or further education. They get very little return from the state. It is time to focus policy on how we can help young people in that age group, and I would be only too delighted to work with the Greens or any other party on the proposal that we have made in our amendment.

Labour’s budget ask for free bus travel for under-25s is the right thing to do for the times that we live in. We propose to do that using the £1.1 billion Barnett consequential. That would revolutionise the lives of young people, especially those from less well-off families in the 16-to-19 age group.

It is a serious anti-poverty measure as well as being a climate change measure. It would help families with teenagers who are at school or college, or are going to work. I tried to bring a bill to Parliament to extend half fares for young people up to the age of 18 for the same reasons. Young people have not got the best deal out of the

current parliamentary session. It is a costly policy, but I believe that the cost is justified and we are whole-heartedly committed to it.

In the past 10 to 12 years, a great deal of damage has been done to people's lives. I say to Kenny Gibson that it is a matter of historical fact that it was the virtual criminality of some in the banking sector that virtually brought the country to its knees.

Kenneth Gibson: Will the member take an intervention?

Pauline McNeill: No one is blameless in this, but it is childish to say that the Labour Government was responsible for the sub-prime mortgage scam in which people's mortgages and savings were put at risk.

Kenneth Gibson: Will the member take an intervention?

Pauline McNeill: I will take a brief intervention, but please stick to the facts, Mr Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson: The fact is that, seven years after the banking crisis, Labour MPs in the House of Commons voted for a £30 billion budget cut, including a £3 billion cut to Scotland's budget. That is why Labour lost 40 of its 41 MPs in Scotland weeks later.

Pauline McNeill: Thank you very much; that is enough.

I find it quite interesting that Kenny Gibson's analysis does not include the role of George Osborne, the then chancellor. It was he who imposed the greatest level of austerity on this country that we have ever seen. I am sure—at least, I hope—that we agree that the 10 to 12 years of austerity have damaged people's lives. Therefore, it is really important that we take people with us on this budget. We cannot leave people behind, as Rhoda Grant said.

During that period, household incomes shrunk; energy prices are still rising; the cost of living has increased; food banks were not a feature then but are now; and, according to Crisis Scotland, Scotland has, by a long way, the highest rate of homeless deaths in Britain, of which 53 per cent are drug related. No party is blameless.

When we look at how people's lives have been damaged over the past 10 years or so, we see that billions of pounds have been taken out of the welfare budget, creating real poverty. In fact, universal credit, which should definitely come to an end—I think that we agree on that, too—might have had a chance of working if £12 billion had not been taken out of it.

The Parliament must use the powers that it has to improve the lives of Scots. It is becoming crystal clear, if it was not before, to ordinary people that

years of underfunding local authorities is reaching crisis point. Maybe ordinary people did not notice that when we tried to tell them about it five or six years ago, but we have reached the point at which they are beginning to notice.

It is important that local authorities, when using their powers, whether to increase council tax or something else, explain to people why their taxes are increasing and what they will do with them.

Only a few weeks ago, charities in the city of Glasgow, which I represent, expressed concern that they were being ruled out of applying for funding on a technicality. If I was of a cynical view, I would say that that was perhaps done deliberately. Thankfully, the matter has been resolved after pressure was put on this Parliament.

The local government revenue settlement has decreased at a much faster rate than the Scottish Government revenue budget. Scottish Parliament information centre figures show that the former has been reduced by 7 per cent and the latter has been reduced by 2 per cent.

Every local authority service is under noticeable pressure. Last week, the *Evening Times* reported that, for starters, Glasgow City Council may have to sell off the gallery of modern art in order to pay for the services that it is trying to provide.

Councils are increasingly drawing on their reserves. Some 23 councils have reduced their reserves by £45 million. That is a serious concern.

Earlier this afternoon, I put a question to Michael Matheson, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, about the vision for transport. It is vital that, in this budget—Claudia Beamish addressed this point, too—we take poor people and the less well-off with us when making changes in that area, including when dealing with the climate change emergency. I am astonished to learn that the Government thinks that a loan repayable over six years is the answer to those who cannot afford electric vehicles, when only this morning "Good Morning Scotland" reported that electric vehicles are still at a very early stage and that the battery requires replacing after three years. I plead with the Government to think in more detail and more carefully about the policies that will be needed to make sure that every single person is included and not left behind in a budget that is about making people's lives better and about tackling the climate change emergency.

16:44

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): It is fitting to have this debate on the eve of the finance secretary's budget announcement, so I welcome the fact that the Tories have brought the

topic to the chamber. I also welcome the Tories' showing their inability to count yet again. Their demands far outstrip any possible additional finance that is coming to this Parliament—their demands are worth £1.5 billion, but the available resource is £1.1 billion.

Murdo Fraser: Can Mr McMillan do what the finance minister failed to do and explain how he arrived at the figure of £1.5 billion for measures that would cost a maximum of £777 million?

Stuart McMillan: Murdo Fraser needs to do his own research.

Today, the Tories have yet again shown their inability to understand the devolved situation that the Parliament operates in, but that is no surprise because, as we know, the Tories did not want the Parliament in the first place.

The Lib Dems' amendment was not selected for debate, but I was not surprised by it, as it once again proved that the Lib Dems are obsessed with the constitution. They attempt to make every debate a constitutional one, and they refer to federalism. When a Lib Dem member actually speaks later on, perhaps they could provide a coherent explanation of their view of federalism. I would have thought that, after about 100 years, the Lib Dems would by now have managed to produce some sort of proposal. However, the Lib Dem amendment started out well, by highlighting the farcical situation that the Parliament faces annually, and particularly this year.

Returning to the Tories, once again, their true colours have shown through. Yesterday, the Tories fought and failed on the issue of the independent school sector, and today they are arguing for a tax cut for the rich that, according to the Fraser of Allander institute, would remove £270 million from the budget. It is clear that the Tories are focusing their attention on a reducing number of supporters and voters, which is entirely up to them. It tells a story that, in the recent election, they lost seven seats and 3.5 per cent of their vote, or 65,000 votes.

Cutting the tax take would make things harder for many communities. I assure members that not many of the constituents who come to me or contact my office earn more than £100,000 per annum, but I hear from many people who earn a lot less and who are at the lower end of the scale. I am proud to represent my home of Greenock and Inverclyde. My community has always had its challenges, and we have not fully recovered since the reduction in the shipbuilding and heavy engineering industries in the early 1980s, as I have mentioned in the chamber previously. We have lost more than 30,000 people, who got on their bikes because they had to do so.

My community still faces challenges, despite the measures that the Scottish Government has introduced in recent years. However, since 2007, more than 1,300 new social homes have been built, bringing more than £40 million into my constituency, and more than £10 million has been spent on building and refurbishing schools. We have had nearly £5 million from the pupil equity fund over the past two years and more than £770,000 from the welfare fund this year. There has been more than £20 million for the new Greenock health centre and more than £7 million for the new continuing care hospital in Greenock. In addition, the Scottish Government has invested £12 million in helping to bring Diodes to Greenock, saving 300 jobs, and has taken over Ferguson Marine Engineering in Port Glasgow, saving more than 300 jobs.

If the tax cut for the rich that the Tories want went ahead, my community and others would face even more economic challenges. Murdo Fraser jokingly spoke of the Boris bonus, but, for some people, that is just about money coming back to the Parliament after the deep austerity measures and cuts that the Tory party has inflicted on Scotland and the rest of the UK.

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Does the member agree that the real Boris bonus has been the bounce in the opinion polls for independence?

Stuart McMillan: I could not agree more.

We know that Holyrood “doesn't matter one jot” to Boris Johnson, although I am happy to hear from any Tory who wants to stand up now and defend Boris on that. Today, the Tories are lauding Boris Johnson, but I wonder whether they will laud him for his thoughts on the Parliament.

I welcome the fact that 55 per cent of Scottish taxpayers pay less income tax than they would if they lived elsewhere in the UK; that the health budget is more than £14 billion this year; that local authorities received £11.2 billion this year, which is a real-terms increase of £310 million; and that car parking charges in NHS car parks were abolished. Sadly, however, our Government cannot abolish the private finance initiative contracts that were agreed to by the Labour-Liberal Democrat Administration.

Miles Briggs: Will Stuart McMillan take an intervention?

Stuart McMillan: No, I am sorry—time is short.

Rhoda Grant mentioned food banks. Last year, more than 8,000 three-day food parcels were issued in Inverclyde, many of which were issued as a result of the UK austerity agenda and the welfare reforms of the Tories.

While the Tories defend the rich and wealthy and want tax cuts for their pals, I support the income tax proposals that, thus far, have helped my constituents. Today, we heard more of the same from the Tories. I look forward to the budget being delivered tomorrow.

16:50

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I welcome the chance to take part in the debate, which comes a day before Derek Mackay unveils his latest spending proposals to a waiting world.

I apologise to members for the length of the Conservative motion. I could read it out and that would be my speech. The reason for its length is that we have so many good ideas. I will focus my remarks on housing and local government.

Before I get into that, I add that I was interested to read at the weekend that Mr Mackay and Ms Forbes might have ended their friendship with Patrick Harvie and could be cooking up something with Labour and the Lib Dems. They would certainly be right to shun Mr Harvie's advances this year. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps there was a murmur of approval there from Mr Rennie. Mr Mackay and Ms Forbes would be right to shun Mr Harvie, because the economy under Mr Mackay's stewardship is in enough trouble without the help of the Greens.

We have engaged constructively with the budget process. Murdo Fraser, collegiate player that he is, asked us for ideas to share with Mr Mackay, and they are all listed in the motion. I hope that the cabinet secretary will see fit to support some, if not all, of them. We will see tomorrow.

My idea—extra money for councils to fight homelessness—came about because I heard that councils' plans in that area are not quite covered by the generous amount that has been given to them so far by the Scottish Government.

Kate Forbes: The motion refers to

“an increase in core funding for local government at least in line with inflation”.

I will understand it if Graham Simpson does not have the figure to hand, but can he tell me what figure the Tories are using for that specific costing?

Graham Simpson: I was speaking about the extra money that we want for homelessness. I spoke to various stakeholders to come up with the figure—it is based on evidence. We asked for another £10 million for the expansion of the ending homelessness together fund, specifically to allow additional resourcing of councils for their rapid rehousing transition plans. We think that £10 million would do the job.

Figures on homelessness that were published last week show why that money is needed. As at 30 September 2019, there were 11,432 households in temporary accommodation, which is an increase of 477 households compared with the previous year. That is the highest figure since the provisions of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 were commenced, in 2002. Further, there were 3,500 households in temporary accommodation that included children or a pregnant member of the household, which is an increase of 8 per cent on the 2018 figure.

Money does not solve everything, but it is vital when it comes to tackling homelessness. As well as funding the fight against homelessness, there is more that the cabinet secretary could consider.

The target of completing 50,000 affordable homes in this parliamentary session is commendable but, without a guarantee that the programme will continue beyond next year, building is starting to stall. We have serious concerns about the future supply of affordable housing. As yet, local authorities and housing associations have no guarantee of grant funding beyond March 2021. There is a risk that the building of affordable developments will grind to a halt and the progress that has been made to date will be lost, which would be a shame.

The sector can stimulate the economy through the continuation of investment in affordable housing. The Fraser of Allander institute's assessment of the economic contribution of Glasgow Housing Association found that it had contributed approximately £2 billion to the GDP of Scotland and had supported, on average, 2,425 jobs a year through its investment programme since 2003.

Investing in housing can reduce child poverty, as is evidenced in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's "Poverty in Scotland 2019" report. It can also reduce homelessness, as the lack of affordable housing was highlighted by Crisis as one of the main challenges in preventing and alleviating homelessness.

The minister could look beyond producing new homes to the existing stock. She will be aware of the work of the Scottish parliamentary working group on tenement maintenance. Investing in existing stock can help us to meet climate change targets, which should please Mr Harvie. However, the annual public investment made by the Scottish Government in fuel poverty and energy efficiency initiatives has remained at approximately £119 million since 2016-17. Analysis carried out by the Existing Homes Alliance shows that investment must be increased to at least £240 million a year if we are to meet the climate change targets.

To do all that, the cabinet secretary and the Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy have to change their approach to local government and properly fund councils. All the political parties that they are reaching out to are saying that. Let us hope that the cabinet secretary delivers tomorrow and that we get a budget that we can all support.

16:56

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I always enjoy speaking in a Tory debate. They are so much fun.

When I read the Conservative motion, I wondered whether the writer understood basic arithmetic or maths, given his whole list of extra funding demands but no additional taxation. The Conservatives seem very definite about what Westminster will give us and seem to be spending that money several times over, despite the fact that the UK budget is not due for over a month.

I accept that the Opposition may see its role as demanding lots more money for many different sectors, with little thought as to where it will come from. I had expected a little better from the Conservatives but, clearly, I was overly optimistic in thinking that they would come up with a fully funded list of demands.

Dean Lockhart: Will the member take an intervention?

John Mason: I might give way later.

The Fraser of Allander institute, in its autumn budget report, also warns us to expect negative tax reconciliations of £200 million in 2021 and £600 million in 2021-22. Those were not mentioned in the motion, although I accept that Murdo Fraser referred to them in his speech.

It is worth noting that the UK Treasury's interpretation of the 2017-18 reconciliation is described as "somewhat disingenuous" by the Fraser of Allander institute, and I understand that the UK Statistics Authority upheld a complaint from Derek Mackay that the UK Government's interpretation of the reconciliation was "incorrect".

There seems to be a fundamental weakness in the fiscal framework in that we have to match UK economic growth or we lose out. We should aim to match or better UK growth, and we match Wales, Northern Ireland and most English regions, but the problem of London remains. Whether we call London the driver of the UK economy or a black hole that sucks resources out of the rest of the UK, it is difficult to compete with it. It would be helpful to know what will be in the UK shared prosperity fund. We have now left the European Union, yet we still have no details.

We recently debated local government finance, and one of the themes was that more money for local government effectively means less money for the NHS, or vice versa. I therefore struggle to see how all the Barnett consequential that the Tories are asking for could go to health while increasing local government core funding at a time when we also have commitments such as increasing childcare—which I thought the Conservatives supported—that cost money, too.

Dean Lockhart: It is interesting that none of the SNP members who has spoken in the debate has mentioned growing the economy as an option for increasing funding to public services. Is that because the SNP is simply not capable of growing the economy?

John Mason: The point that I was going to make when I tried to make an intervention during a previous speech is that we cannot possibly grow the economy when we have a shortage in our workforce. We do not have enough young people ourselves. If we cannot bring in people from other countries, how can we possibly grow the economy? It does not matter what we want to do if we do not have enough people.

I find the Tories' motion fascinating for some of the things that are in it and for some that are not. They are against widening the tax gap and they want non-domestic rates to be the same as they are in England. They want spending on the health service to be the same as it is in England, with no suggestion that preventative spending in other sectors might take pressure off the health service. That seems to demonstrate a fear on their part of being different from England in any way. However, the point of devolution is that we can and should do things differently in Scotland, even while we stay, for the time being, in the UK. I have to say that that is a pretty sad level of ambition. I presume that, if—hypothetically—England were not there for us to compare ourselves with, the Conservatives would have no policies at all.

If the Tories want to have lower non-domestic rates, they are certainly entitled to argue for that. However, it would be more convincing if they gave a reason for a particular level of NDR and told us what public spending cuts there would be to compensate for that. Further, if the Conservatives want everything to be the same as in England, it might be more honest of them to say that they do not want a Scottish Parliament at all.

Let us consider what the Conservative motion does not say. There is no mention of poverty; no mention of the gap in income and wealth between the wealthiest and the poorest in our society; no mention of the environment; and only a passing reference to drugs and homelessness, which strikes me as window dressing.

Graham Simpson: Will the member take an intervention?

John Mason: I do not think that I have time. Sorry.

The Tory motion also refers to NRAC. I am certainly in favour of having a fair funding formula across Scotland, and we should be moving towards that—I understand that we are doing so. Obviously, the islands and remote areas have particular challenges, but funding according to need must be paramount. As I understand it, only 6 per cent of people in the Grampian health board area are in the poorest 20 per cent of the population, whereas 34 per cent of the people in the Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board area are. Therefore, the question remains whether that formula gives adequate weight to poverty and deprivation. The deep-end GP practices represent about 100—that is, 10 per cent—of Scotland's GP practices and are in the poorest areas. They would argue that a sufficient share of GP funding does not go to the areas experiencing the greatest deprivation.

I look forward to tomorrow's budget. I am sure that there will be some imaginative and progressive measures. However, we must remember that we are unable to affect corporation tax or the basic structure of income tax and national insurance, and that we cannot make VAT more progressive. Therefore, although devolution gives a certain amount of latitude, we are still setting a budget with one arm tied behind our back. Only real freedom for this country will let us achieve our ambitions.

17:03

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, which has turned into the annual pre-budget warm-up match. It has been more constructive than some of the debates that we had last year. There has been more of an exchange of ideas and a willingness on the part of the Conservatives and the Labour Party, and, latterly, from Willie Rennie, to engage constructively. I echo Patrick Harvie in welcoming that approach.

On the public spending calls in the Conservative motion, there is little to disagree with. The only issue that I would raise is that of their affordability. When Derek Mackay challenged him, Murdo Fraser, like Neville Chamberlain, waved a piece of paper in the air. I hope that he will publish that document and, by putting it on the record, allow the Government and members to scrutinise the Conservatives' spending proposals, just as the Government will set out its calculations with regard to them.

I want to pick up on a couple of points from Conservative speeches, one of which concerns the aspiration with regard to income tax receipts in Scotland and how they should measure against those in the rest of the UK. I think that that concept of rUK is quite problematic, because of the fundamental imbalance in the rest of the UK.

Earnings is one of the key drivers behind income tax receipts. The latest statistics, which are from April last year, suggest that a typical annual gross salary in Scotland is £24,486, while the figure for the UK is £24,897. The difference is marginal. However, if we consider how the rest of the UK is structured, we see that there is a huge imbalance. In the south-east, the figure is £26,199 and in London it goes up to £33,750.

When we speak about the rest of the UK, we are speaking about an economy that has more variance in earnings and productivity than exists in the whole of the European Union. Indeed, there are parts of England where productivity is at a lower level than in some of the poorest states of the United States. It is a highly imbalanced economy. The rUK figure is to some extent artificially inflated by the performance of the London economy, which has significant implications for the operation of the fiscal framework.

Dean Lockhart: I agree with Tom Arthur. London does indeed generate great wealth for the UK. However, the last time that I looked, London was not going to join an independent Scotland—or does he know something different?

Tom Arthur: I am sorry, but I missed the last part of the member's comment. Will he repeat it, please?

Dean Lockhart: The point was that London generates huge wealth for the UK budget as a whole, including the Scottish budget, but London will never in any situation join an independent Scotland, so an independent Scotland would lose the wealth that is generated by London.

Tom Arthur: That raises an interesting point. That line of thinking is common among unionist politicians. I see that Johann Lamont is not in the chamber, but when she was leader of the Labour Party, she referred to the "city state of London" as an engine for generating income for redistribution. One of my concerns is that, if we have that model, with an engine room located in one part of the country, it attracts jobs, skills and inward investment, which makes it less desirable for people to live in other parts of the country. It creates a challenge around, for example, outward migration, which is a challenge that we have in Scotland.

I suppose that the Tories' core argument for the union is now that we get what they describe as a

union dividend, but I do not think that we should accept an underperforming Scottish economy that is propped up by subventions from London. That is, in effect, the model, but it is not the one that I want for Scotland. I appreciate that that might be the level of the Tories' ambition for Scotland, but it is not the level of my ambition for Scotland. Our challenge is to go and match the advanced small economies.

There are certainly measures that we can seek to implement within the current devolved framework. For example, the Scottish visa that the Scottish Government has proposed, which would exist within the current constitutional arrangements, would seek to create an opportunity to increase the number of inward migrants to Scotland. That constructive proposal had widespread support across civic Scotland and the business community, which showed an openness and willingness to engage, but the UK Government dismissed it within a matter of hours without seriously considering it. That raises a real issue about how we can grow our economy in Scotland.

If we compare GDP in the rUK and in Scotland, we see that there is a difference in that the rUK performs better. However, if we look at it per capita the difference decreases, and if we look at it per capita for the working-age population, it starts to decrease further. The reason is that we have a demographic challenge in Scotland. I am not saying that that is the only challenge that we have, but it is a key challenge and one that we have to address. If the Conservatives really want to make the union work for Scotland, they must be more open and willing to admit that and to engage constructively with the Scottish Government when it puts forward detailed sets of proposals on how we can address challenges such as our ageing population.

My central disappointment about the speeches that we have heard from Conservative members—I ask them to forgive me if I misheard anyone—is that I did not hear a single reference to climate change or to social security. I hope that the Conservative front-bench member who sums up will address that. Climate change is the biggest challenge that we face and I commend the Scottish Government for putting it front and centre in its budget tomorrow.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): We move to the closing speeches. It is disappointing to note that not everyone who took part in the debate is back in the chamber.

17:09

James Kelly (Glasgow) (Lab): It is always interesting to take part in the annual pre-budget

debate. This time, it has come the day before the budget will be published, so for some members it has been a bit like the night before Christmas; they have been getting a bit giddy and excited in their speeches as we wait to see whether Derek Mackay will appear as Santa Claus or Mr Scrooge the following day. Tomorrow, all will be revealed.

First, I will make a point about the budget process, which Willie Rennie described as “chaotic”. For the UK Government to publish its budget on 11 March, so late in the financial year, shows its scant regard for the devolved Administrations and for local councils, which are right up against the wire not knowing what their settlement will be. Patrick Harvie underlined that, particularly in our new budget process, the Scottish Government could have done more to share information on different scenarios during the year. The process has been far from satisfactory.

A number of members spoke about fair funding for local councils, and Rhoda Grant described the problem very well. In recent years under the SNP, there has been a reduction of 7 per cent in revenue funding for councils since 2013-14 and 40,000 fewer jobs since 2007. Against that, the SNP Government has asked councils to do more, with an additional £497 million of commitments. The climate is very challenging for councils and, against that backdrop, the demand for fair funding is very reasonable indeed.

Pauline McNeill set out very well the case for bus travel for under 25s—not only its legitimacy, but the fact that it would tick various policy boxes. It would help with tackling poverty for low-income households, climate change targets and getting young people to work, college and university, which is vital with regard to making an overall contribution to the economy. The budget should give a fairer settlement to colleges and universities. In recent years, there have been cuts to research and teaching grants in universities; we should remember that the grants fund projects that involve innovation and link to industry and the economy, so cuts in that area undermine economic growth.

A number of members spoke about the importance of climate change. Claudia Beamish put her finger on a key issue when she referred to the linking of spending to outcomes, which has been spoken about in a number of budget debates in recent years. It is all very well to commit to action on climate change, but we have to see the outcomes.

Murdo Fraser and a number of Tory members spoke about a Boris bounce. In reality, it is a Boris brass neck. Yesterday we saw the priorities of Tory MSPs when Parliament debated the very reasonable proposal to cancel relief to private schools. Speaker after speaker rose to their feet

from the Tory benches. Someone said to me, “It looks as if there are a number of selection meetings coming up with the Tory associations”. Perhaps they were playing to the public gallery. Thousands of people in Scotland from different communities rely on food banks, but we do not see Tory MSPs rising to complain about that. Hundreds of thousands of people in Scotland are not being paid the living wage, and some have to do three jobs to make ends meet and support their families, but we never hear complaints about that from the Tory benches.

Graham Simpson: Will the member take an intervention?

James Kelly: No. I am running out of time.

The latest update to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation was published last week. If a Tory MSP was taken to some of the areas that have the highest levels of poverty—such as Springhall in Rutherglen, or Whitlawburn in Cambuslang—they would be strangers. They would be out of their depth and unable to relate to the situation that they would see before their eyes.

A lot of SNP members painted a rosy picture, but the reality is that after 13 years there are public services in crisis, people are waiting more than 12 hours in accident and emergency departments, class sizes are rising and pass rates in key subjects are falling. Pauline McNeill mentioned people dying on the streets because of homelessness; we have the highest rate in the UK—195 people died last year. There is an appalling train service; only this morning I received reports of people who were not able to get on to trains. Police stations are falling down.

The jury is out on the SNP as we consider the budget. Let us have a budget that delivers for people, for communities and for public services.

17:16

Kate Forbes: Despite all the promises that have been made over past years to end austerity, the UK Government has thus far failed to deliver; worse, it has increased uncertainty for Scotland.

In October 2018, the UK Government’s budget failed to deliver on its promises. The UK Government delayed its 2019 budget, and instead delivered a lacklustre spending review. The UK 2019 spending review has been delayed. However, we wait in anticipation for this year’s budget. In sharp contrast, the Scottish Government has taken unprecedented action to deliver certainty for our public services and local authorities. The full details of that will be set out by the cabinet secretary tomorrow.

The Scottish Government is willing to listen to constructive ideas from all round the chamber, so

that the Parliament can pass a Scottish budget that delivers stability for Scotland’s economy and public services.

We heard some very thoughtful speeches—from Tom Arthur, Graham Simpson and John Mason—that offered constructive thoughts. We also heard speeches—from Ruth Maguire, Stuart McMillan, Kenny Gibson, Keith Brown and Patrick Harvie—that highlighted the inherent hypocrisy in the motion.

There were some great lines, particularly from James Kelly, who described budget day as Christmas day; Willie Rennie, who repeated several times that he was confused; and Tom Arthur, who rightly acknowledged the Boris bonus for independence polling.

Clearly, members have different priorities for tomorrow. Some, like Claudia Beamish, focused on climate change. Liam Kerr mentioned police and justice and Dean Lockhart referred to the importance of economic growth.

Costings are important when it comes to budget asks, and I look forward to seeing the Conservatives’ figures. The A4 page of text does not fill me with great confidence, but I will reserve judgment until I have seen the costings that Murdo Fraser agreed to give me.

The Tories might have shifted slightly from slashing taxes for the highest earners to just calling for no divergence in this year’s budget. No doubt they recognise that the Scottish Government’s position on income tax has been far more in line with public opinion than their own ridiculous position over the past few years. The irony is not lost on me that, for the past two months, the Tories have supported the removal of tax reliefs on businesses and nurseries to name just two. The business community will not forget that, for all that the Conservatives claim to champion Scottish business.

Willie Rennie’s position is somewhat ridiculous. The budget is a critically important process every year; it literally keeps the lights on. I get the impression that Willie Rennie is so obsessed with independence that he sees it in the budget document even when it is not there. The only block to the budget is the Lib Dems, who every year have prioritised the union over funding for education, infrastructure and everything else.

Willie Rennie: Can the finance minister guarantee that there will be no spending on independence from the Scottish Government in the next financial year?

Kate Forbes: I asked Willie Rennie a very simple question earlier, which he could not answer. I asked him where the independence line was in last year’s budget.

The irony is that the budget process is entirely designed to give security and certainty to the thousands of people who work in our public services, and to ensure that teachers, doctors and nurses are paid and our children are educated. That is what the budget process is about, and to make it about the constitutional issue is nothing short of irresponsible when it comes to ensuring that our public services get the investment that they need. Tomorrow is an opportunity to deliver certainty and investment for the people of Scotland.

In all the years since 2016, the Tories have voted against Scottish Government budgets. That means that they voted against the revolutionary expansion of early learning and childcare, they voted against investment in raising attainment in schools, they voted against record-high health spend, they voted against mitigating the damaging effects of UK welfare changes and they voted against increased spend on mental health.

Dean Lockhart: We voted against the budget because it made Scotland the highest-taxed part of the UK for people who earn more than £27,000. Does the minister recognise what the Fraser of Allander institute said, which is that the SNP's tax increases have not raised additional finance for public services in Scotland?

Kate Forbes: I was just coming on to say that, as far as I can see, the Tories' biggest concern with those budgets was that they contained no tax cuts for the richest, for the highest earners and for the biggest businesses. Dean Lockhart has summarised, in a nutshell, the Tory position over the past few budgets, which was that unless there were tax cuts for the biggest businesses and the highest earners the Tories would not invest in all the areas in which this Government has been determined to invest.

Dean Lockhart rose—

Kate Forbes: I am more than delighted that this Government has not followed Tory ideology when it has set budgets, and I am delighted that there is a change of heart on the part of the Tories. I will take another intervention, because that is making this more fun.

Dean Lockhart: I clarify that we voted against tax increases because we said that they would damage the economy. Earlier today in the chamber, Derek Mackay said that the Scottish economy has underperformed by 5 per cent, relative to the UK economy, since the SNP came to power. In the past year, the Scottish economy has been growing at half the rate of growth of the rest of the UK. We warned the SNP that that would be the case but it did not listen to us. That is why there is economic decline in Scotland.

Kate Forbes: I will tell the member why there is economic challenge in Scotland. Business is quite clear that the biggest issue that it has faced in the past year has been the uncertainty that the member's party, in the UK Government, has created over Brexit. It is pretty clear from all the business organisations that that has been the reason for the challenge.

I quoted the Fraser of Allander institute, which has been clear in analysing our tax position, and I do so again; it said:

"We estimate that the Scottish income tax policy raises approximately around £550 million in revenue compared to a policy to set the same tax parameters as in the UK."

That is a hard, cold figure, which the Tories would see cut from our public services.

Liam Kerr: Will the minister take an intervention?

Kate Forbes: Well, I have taken a few—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister is closing.

Kate Forbes: The motion that is before us suggests that the Tories have suddenly woken up to the budget process and the need to look like a more competent Opposition than they have appeared to be over the course of the past year. As I said at the beginning of the debate, we are willing to work constructively with all parties and look forward to the parties' welcome of Derek Mackay's draft budget when it is published tomorrow.

17:23

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I am pleased to close today's debate. We have had a largely useful discussion ahead of the finance secretary's imminent budget announcements, and the Scottish Conservatives have presented a positive and pragmatic proposal for investment across our public services.

As Murdo Fraser said, it is important that we understand the financial background to this year's budget. Scotland is set to receive at least £1.1 billion in additional Barnett consequential as a result of extra UK Government spending. The Fraser of Allander institute has said that that will amount to a 2.1 per cent increase in the funding that is available to ministers. We might expect SNP ministers to welcome that. SNP ministers need to accept that this year's budget will provide the biggest increase in the block grant and the resources that are available to them.

I believe that the run-up to the budget is an appropriate time to look at how effective SNP ministers, and their agencies that are responsible for overseeing public spending, have been in

ensuring value for money for Scottish taxpayers in public expenditure. Sadly, the public sector landscape in Scotland is littered with reports and audits that contain damning criticism of financial overspends and mismanagement by SNP ministers and public bodies. We had an IT delivery cost increase of 79 per cent since the original business case was made for the common agricultural policy futures programme, and NHS 24's long-delayed IT system saw a cost increase of 73 per cent on the £75.8 million that was included in the original business case. As Liam Kerr outlined, the weak financial leadership of the Scottish Police Authority has led to warnings that it is facing a deficit of £0.2 billion.

Numerous NHS health boards have had to be bailed out with loans from Scottish Government ministers—in many cases with little indication of how and when the loans will have to be repaid. Let us not forget that, as I stand here, half of mainland NHS boards are in special measures. If not for the record NHS health funding that has come to Scotland over the past decade from the UK Conservative Government, where would SNP ministers have got the resources over that time to write off the debt and to fund the ever-expanding debts that are stacking up?

Perhaps the totemic symbol of SNP ministers' mismanagement of NHS resources is the new sick kids hospital and the construction project around it. It is a £150 million project that is much needed by my constituents and their children and families. The hospital was meant to open in 2012: it is now eight years delayed. An additional £80 million has been spent on enabling works at the site, which go beyond the deal that was reached with the consortium that is building it. A further £11.6m has been given to end a contract dispute and, as things stand today, NHS Lothian has been given an additional £16 million by the Scottish Government to try to refit the hospital, given concerns about building standards and the ventilation system. Taken together, the extra costs mean that a project that was set to cost the Scottish tax payer £150 million will cost £520 million over its lifetime.

No wonder that the *Evening News* today declared that the SNP Government's handling of the project was "worse than the trams". There is growing anger among Edinburgh and Lothians residents whom I represent—I am sure that other Lothian members in the chamber will agree—because we are now paying £1.4 million a month for a hospital that patients and NHS staff cannot use.

Therefore, it is abundantly clear that SNP ministers and their agencies need to look at how robustly they are managing vital taxpayers'

money, so that we deliver value for money for all the taxpayers whom we represent.

Keith Brown: Grayling's failings!

Miles Briggs: My colleagues have talked about some of the extra investment in public services. Maybe the former Minister for Transport and Infrastructure needs to think about the ferries project if he is talking about "failings", but we have been looking at the investments—

Keith Brown: Will the member take an intervention?

Miles Briggs: I do not have time, just as Keith Brown did not have time.

All of us accept that we need investment in our health service. There is no bigger public health emergency than the drugs deaths emergency in Scotland. As I said in the debate last week, we need to be honest and to recognise that SNP cuts to drug budgets have destabilised services across our country. We therefore need resourcing of additional capacity in order to deliver the wraparound care that we all want to be available. Scotland has seen a devastating reduction in vital drug-rehabilitation beds—from 352 in 2007 to just 70 today. We need a rapid reversal of that situation, which is why we are committed to asking ministers to invest £15.4 million for a co-ordinated national drug-rehab bed fund, and a strategy to go with it.

Equity in funding of health services and boards is a key issue that many members have raised. The Health and Sport Committee's budget scrutiny has already demonstrated that a number of boards still do not have NRAC parity. That is a particular issue for my region and for North East Scotland colleagues, who have long advocated for change.

As health secretaries have come and gone, from Nicola Sturgeon, to Alex Neil, to Shona Robison, and now to Jeane Freeman, they have been content to stand by and watch our health boards being underfunded. I hope that the cabinet secretary will use the budget to finally end underfunding of health boards.

Despite my region having the fastest-growing and fastest-ageing population, the lack of parity means that our health board is underfunded. That is one of the key reasons that NHS Lothian chairman Brian Houston outlined this week when he handed the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport his resignation letter. We need parity; I hope that the finance secretary will deliver that tomorrow.

SNP ministers have the resources: we know that the UK Government is providing the single biggest cash injection of funding in the history of our health service. That will give the opportunity for the gaps to be closed.

Kate Forbes touched on hospital parking in her opening speech. We need to see progress being made on that tomorrow, as well. An additional £7.5 million in Barnett consequentials is coming to Scotland because England will scrap parking charges at hospitals. Scottish Conservatives want additional resources to be made available to hospitals across Scotland, and we want a comprehensive review of hospital parking to assess the capacity for development of a free parking scheme for protected groups, including disabled patients and sick children's parents who are staying overnight.

In addition, we know that there are three hospitals in Scotland at which staff still have to pay parking charges. We can do something about that. We are calling for a refund scheme to be adopted, at a cost of £2.7 million of the £7.5 million that is coming to Scottish ministers.

Graham Simpson highlighted important points about the need for resources to go to councils to address homelessness, which I endorse. Specifically, there should be additional resourcing for local authorities to be used for the rapid rehousing transition plan, which was discussed last week.

Before I conclude, I emphasise a concern that all of us should be considering today. Scotland's economy is projected to grow at the lowest rate in the UK over the next four years. That is something that none of us wants, and which Government ministers have an opportunity to change. We believe that higher taxes would just risk decreasing economic growth further. In any case, as Murdo Fraser correctly highlighted, changes to tax rates and bands are not leading to an increase in tax take.

We will support new measures by SNP ministers to incentivise businesses and to bring jobs and growth to Scotland. We will support the vision that is needed to support the development of a business environment that will ensure the jobs of the future.

I hope that when this year's budget is announced tomorrow, it uses the more positive financial outlook to support our key public services, to boost the economy and to avoid increased tax levels for all hard-working Scottish families.

I support the motion in Murdo Fraser's name.

Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill: Stage 3

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a stage 3 debate on motion S5M-20705, in the name of Kate Forbes, on the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill.

Before I invite Kate Forbes to open the debate, I call Derek Mackay to signify Crown consent to the bill.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work (Derek Mackay): For the purposes of rule 9.11 of the standing orders, I advise the Parliament that Her Majesty, having been informed of the purport of the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill, has consented to place her prerogative and interests, in so far as they are affected by the bill, at the disposal of the Parliament for the purposes of the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Mackay.

I call Kate Forbes to speak to and move the motion, for up to seven minutes and no longer, please.

17:33

The Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy (Kate Forbes): I am pleased to open the stage 3 debate on the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill. I start with a number of thank yous, first to the Local Government and Communities Committee and the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee for their detailed scrutiny of the bill. I had the pleasure of meeting Ken Barclay for the first time yesterday, and I thank him, too, for his contribution to the review that led us to the bill.

The Barclay review was established a number of years ago with a very specific remit:

"To make recommendations that seek to enhance and reform the non-domestic rates ... system in Scotland to better support business growth and long term investment and reflect changing marketplaces".

The need for reform was widely recognised across the chamber. Only two weeks ago, Mr Fraser, on behalf of the Conservatives, wrote in a national newspaper:

"It is our view that the current system of rates is ... in need of comprehensive reform."

I will say this only once: wise words indeed. The bill was introduced to support growth, improve the administration of the system and increase fairness for ratepayers. It is fair to say that, after a bumpy few weeks, it now does just that.

The bill has been built on collaboration and consultation. I thank the individuals on the Barclay implementation advisory group and its associated sub-groups who have freely devoted their time to the development of its provisions. I also thank members of the business community, as well as officials in councils and assessors' offices across the country, who have worked to produce a bill that will not only deliver the word and the spirit of the Barclay review but work on the ground operationally.

Finally, I thank the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities for its recognition that non-domestic rates are too important to be considered in isolation from wider fiscal framework arrangements and treated like a plaything or a negotiating tactic. I look forward to working closely with COSLA on the fiscal framework, which will proceed at pace.

The bill, which is the first on non-domestic rates to come before the Scottish Parliament, was introduced to deliver the 30 recommendations of the Barclay review. Derek Mackay is to be commended for the speed with which he moved to implement the recommendations that could be implemented without the need for primary legislation. I have been pleased to progress work on the bill, which seeks to support growth, improve administration of the system and increase fairness. We have just had a debate on the budget and the need for economic growth. I point out that the bill's aims are integrally linked to the economic performance of our businesses.

The Scottish Government has accepted the majority of the review's recommendations and, as I have said, where possible, it has moved quickly to implement them. The best examples are the business growth accelerator, which is the only relief of its kind in the United Kingdom, and nursery relief, which supports our expansion of nursery and childcare provision. Until yesterday's stage 3 proceedings, both of those initiatives were under serious threat of abolition.

The bill delivers on the Barclay review recommendations that required primary legislation. The provision that is probably of most importance involves the move to a three-year revaluation cycle to minimise the risks of the volatility that the adoption of a one-year tone date should reduce. It will ensure that rateable values are more closely aligned with real market rents and has been widely welcomed across the board by the business community.

The bill also gives new powers to assessors, local authorities and ministers to improve the administration of the system and to tackle tax avoidance, which I think that every member in the chamber would support.

Perhaps the most critical reforms that the bill delivers are those to the appeals system, which are intended to reduce reliance on the formal system and speed up access to justice in relation to properties that are involved in appeals. Throughout the bill's progress through the Parliament, I have consistently said that if we did not get the appeals right, the rest of the reforms would be redundant. Our systematic reforms will benefit around 255,000 non-domestic properties in Scotland, 90 per cent of which already benefit from the application of a lower poundage in Scotland than they would attract if situated elsewhere in the UK, and also from the most generous package of reliefs available anywhere on these islands.

As legislators, we have a duty to deliver legislation that improves outcomes for stakeholders. We take that duty seriously. In a Parliament of minorities, no legislation will deliver everything that we want, so it comes down to a question of priorities. I think that we have heard that view being expressed quite starkly, particularly from the Scottish Conservatives. It is unfortunate that avoiding a level playing field between independent schools and local authority schools appears to have become so totemic to them in the bill process that 125 affected properties were considered to be of greater priority than the other 255,000 non-domestic properties.

The decision whether to support the bill comes down to the simple question whether members believe that the rates system needs reform. The Scottish Government's view is that the reforms that the Barclay review proposed struck the right balance between ambition and pragmatism. However, most of them could not be implemented mid-revaluation, and we simply cannot wait until 2027 to do so. The majority of them have been universally welcomed by ratepayers and administrators alike. We need more regular revaluations; we need a reformed appeals process; we need greater powers to tackle rates avoidance; and councils and assessors need the tools to do their jobs more efficiently and effectively. Surely we can all agree on that, and that is the prize that is on offer. The bill delivers on the cross-party agreement on rates system reform and I encourage everyone in the chamber to support these critical reforms.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill be passed.

17:40

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will make some concluding remarks on the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill. The bill will

implement the findings of the Barclay review of non-domestic rates, many of which were welcome.

The move from a five-year to a three-year revaluation cycle has been supported by the business community, as have proposals for a business accelerator, which will create an incentive for businesses to expand and will help to remove the existing disincentive for speculative development by landlords. If it works, it will stimulate growth and investment and assist economic growth. Some of the technical changes in the bill, such as making it easier to collect information from ratepayers and improving transparency, will also be welcome.

The bill does not of course implement all the findings of the Barclay review. It was hamstrung from the start by being told it had to be revenue neutral and therefore had to look for means of raising money to balance out the new reliefs being granted. Ken Barclay and his colleagues found two targets from which to raise extra money—local authority arm's-length external organisations and independent schools.

The recommendation to end the tax relief for ALEOs proved to be highly controversial, with local authorities across the country complaining, rightly, that it would mean a negative impact on their budgets and/or an increase in charges at the likes of local leisure centres and swimming pools. Fortunately, following vigorous opposition from the Scottish Conservatives against the swim tax, the Scottish Government decided to U-turn, and it backed down on the proposal.

Regrettably, the Scottish Government did not back down in relation to the other measure that is intended to raise additional funds—namely a change to the tax treatment of independent schools. Yesterday, we set out some of the arguments why we feel that that is the wrong move. As the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator has made clear, a number of independent schools are in a marginal financial position. For example, I can think of five independent schools in Perth and Kinross that have closed in the past two decades—schools such as Rannoch, Croftinloan and Butterstone, all of which not only provided education but were important parts of local economies.

The money spent on independent schools supports jobs in what are often rural areas, directly in terms of teaching and non-teaching staff in schools but also in terms of the broader spend in local economies. In the local economy of a town such as Crieff, in which there are a number of local independent schools, shops, hospitality businesses and tradespeople's livelihoods depend on the existence of those schools and the spend from the school and the staff who work there.

The same would apply to a town such as Dollar in Clackmannanshire, where the major local employer is Dollar academy. Taxing those schools more will have a negative economic impact. That is not to suggest that a school the size of Dollar academy is necessarily going to close because of the bill, but there are smaller independent schools, including small Christian schools as we heard yesterday, that may find themselves in that category.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Murdo Fraser has now mentioned Dollar for the second time today. Has he spoken to the rector of Dollar academy on this issue?

Murdo Fraser: Liz Smith has engaged with Dollar academy and many of the parents in Dollar on the issue and they share many of our concerns. There is a concern about this.

What we have not heard from the Scottish Government, or from the minister yesterday, is any attempt to defend or justify the policy. I suspect that what really lies behind it is that it is an easy sector to attack. It has few political friends. This all has the unhealthy stench of the politics of envy. That is the reason why, with regret, we cannot support the bill despite agreeing with a lot of what it contains.

There is a broader point in relation to rates. Although the Barclay review recommendations are generally positive, our concern is that they do not go far enough. There is a serious debate to be had about the future of the rating system more generally. What we have seen in recent years are a number of sticking-plaster solutions being introduced to deal with complaints from businesses about rates increases from revaluations, such as the reliefs that have been brought in for the hospitality sector and for offices in the north-east of Scotland. Moving from a five-year to a three-year cycle will improve matters, but it will not eradicate the problem entirely.

There is also a serious question as to whether a property-based tax is still relevant, particularly as it relates to a sector such as retail, in an environment in which retail is increasingly under pressure from online traders. There is simply no level playing field between online retail and the sector that has to support high street premises. Therefore, it is our view that a more fundamental look at the whole rating system is required, as is being proposed by the Government south of the border. I know that that view is widely supported in the business community, and I hope that the Scottish Government will undertake such an exercise in the future.

No discussion on rates would be complete without a mention of the large business

supplement, which in Scotland is currently set at a rate that is nearly double that south of the border. More than 5,000 retail premises in Scotland pay the LBS and, cumulatively, they contribute more than £14 million annually. The higher rate in Scotland puts those businesses at a competitive disadvantage to businesses in the rest of the UK. The LBS is a measure that is long overdue for being dealt with and—who knows?—maybe the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work will have some good news for us on that in tomorrow's budget.

Although there is much in the bill that we support, because of the tax raid on independent schools, which will damage local economies and which seems to be motivated purely by the politics of envy, I regret that we will not be able to support it at decision time.

17:46

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I begin by thanking everyone who has contributed to the debate on the bill, whether in yesterday's proceedings or in any of the discussions that we have had over the past few months, from the stage 1 process to today's stage 3 debate. I thank the national and trade organisations and the local groups and individual constituents who got in touch with us. I also thank the staff in the Scottish Government and our Parliament clerks, who helped members of the Local Government and Communities Committee and other members to ensure that our amendments were crafted in such a way as to deliver what we intended, and that we were able to have informed debates on what is a hugely important issue.

Finally, I thank the minister for her constructive approach to the debate and for being prepared to work with us—even when she did not agree with us, she was prepared to make sure that our amendments were crafted correctly.

The minister and Murdo Fraser have highlighted the changes that the bill will introduce. I will highlight a couple of important issues that were raised and dealt with at stage 2, but which have not yet been mentioned. I was very glad that colleagues supported my amendment to increase the amount of time that businesses have to provide notification of a change in circumstances from 21 to 42 days, reflecting the pressures and challenges that small businesses in particular face in meeting such a tight deadline. It was important to act on that, and the action that we took at stage 2 was followed up by Graham Simpson's stage 3 amendment on the matter.

The second issue that I want to raise is that of phoenixing, which I put on the agenda through a probing amendment. Phoenixing occurs when

companies still operate from a premises or address but reinvent themselves, perhaps through the use of shell companies, to evade their responsibility to pay tax for the local services that they use. The discussion that we had on that subject was very constructive and we secured a commitment from the Scottish Government to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation to create regulations on the issue. It was a difficult subject to address at stage 2 of a bill, but I have received a commitment that work will be done on the matter, which we hope will be finished by the end of the calendar year, and I very much welcome that.

Broadly, yesterday's stage 3 proceedings were constructive, even though we disagree on many issues. It clarified the work that has gone into simplifying a very complex system of taxation and ensuring that there is a greater level of transparency, for which there is support from across the Parliament. I look forward to seeing how the changes that we have made to the bill—and, in particular, the work on the fiscal framework and the wider movement to financially empower and fund our local authorities—will be progressed. We should not forget that our local authorities are at the heart of the bill, because the money that is raised through non-domestic rates goes to them, and the provision of local services is crucial to all our communities, as anyone who listened to the previous debate will know.

One issue that was central to yesterday's debate and that was picked up by me and Graham Simpson was the important role of Opposition parties in testing the boundaries of legislation through our principle discussions at stage 1 and the detailed discussions at stage 2. That was the case in relation to future proofing the bill, as my amendment on low-carbon energy that was agreed to yesterday does; to testing; to debates on key issues being opened up more broadly; and, critically, to how legislation will work in practice.

I will use the example of student accommodation, which was highlighted in the Barclay report but not included in the legislation. As I said yesterday, my stage 2 amendment was concerned with tackling the issue, which is particularly visible in our cities and which crosses ministerial portfolios, including those on finance, housing and education. The amendment was agreed to and included in the bill with cross-party support, and I undertook consultation with key stakeholders. Due to the size of the issue, its cross-cutting nature and the chance of unintended consequences hitting students who already face high rents, I was persuaded, having consulted stakeholders and with support from across the chamber, that including the provision in the bill was not the best way of tackling the issue.

However, we were able to raise concerns about the debt that students—graduates, in particular—face.

Research that has been done by the National Union of Students and Unipol highlights that some university institutions provide good student accommodation and that such models are more cost effective, because there is provision for students with special needs, adaptable accommodation and quiet blocks are provided, students with families are supported and there are annual rent discussions. We need to learn from best practice. The mayor of London has introduced new planning requirements that ensure that universities provide affordable student housing. That issue has been raised in Edinburgh, particularly in the context of our new local plan.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must come to a close, please.

Sarah Boyack: In Ireland, the link has been made between rent pressure zones and affordable student accommodation.

All politicians in this chamber have the job of listening to our constituents; that is not just the job of Opposition parties. We need to test and push legislation at every stage of the process to ensure that it works for everyone. I believe that we have done that collectively and successfully with this bill.

17:52

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): I, too, thank all those who have engaged in the process and who have supported the process in Parliament.

I noted at stage 1—indeed, the minister mentioned this in her opening remarks—that this is the first time that the Scottish Parliament has considered primary legislation on non-domestic rates. That is very telling, because it demonstrates how little interest there has been in Parliament in local tax and how much power the Local Government Finance Act 1992 gave to the Secretary of State for Scotland—now, to the Scottish ministers—in relation to setting the detailed design of the system through secondary legislation.

In September 2013, Derek Mackay—who was here a minute ago—the then Minister for Local Government and Planning, said that the Scottish Government would

“conduct a thorough and comprehensive review of the whole business rates system”

by 2017, which would deliver

“a fairer, simpler and more efficient business rates system.”

That review never took place. Instead, we had the Barclay review, which asked only one question:

“How would you redesign the business rates system to better support business and incentivise investment?”

That was not an inappropriate question to ask, but many other questions should have been asked, too. That narrow focus raises some fundamental points about how we develop policy and legislation.

For example, yesterday, we heard major questions about who sets the tax rate and about the treatment of privately owned student residences. Concerns have been raised about the manner in which section 10 came into being—not as a consequence of any review of charitable relief but as a means by which to raise some revenue to pay for the tax cuts that the Barclay review was focused on.

Too often, the Government, for whatever reason, feels the need to outsource policy development to so-called independent reviews. Instead of reaching out to the public or other politicians with a discussion paper or a consultation in order to gather views on the possible scope of legislation—in this case, we were dealing with primary legislation on non-domestic rates for the first time—it asks others to do the thinking. In the case of the Barclay review, such thinking was framed by an incredibly narrow remit.

We have bills to implement any reforms that are needed, but, not surprisingly, MSPs have their own ideas about the reform of non-domestic rates. We have to work within the confines of the stage 2 process to develop our ideas. The Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill was the first time that any member has had the chance to do something, because there has never been the opportunity up until now.

In her opening remarks, the minister talked about the past few weeks being “bumpy” and about aspects of the process being used as a “plaything”. I call it democracy, and I think that we should improve the system.

Since stage 2, I have had meetings and conference calls with many business groups. Although we disagree on many issues, it was something of a surprise to hear that they agreed with me that the comprehensive review that was promised back in 2013 is still needed. I pointed out that it was bit late for that, but there we are.

I will conclude by saying something about my attempt to repatriate rate setting to councils. That was not agreed to, but I am sure that it will happen. Yesterday, I quoted comments made by the constitutional steering group—which drafted

the standing orders for the Parliament—in its 20th anniversary report:

“The Scottish Constitutional Convention recommended that the Scotland Act should commit the Scottish Parliament to securing and maintaining a strong and effective system of local government, embodying the principle of subsidiarity ... What we have seen instead with successive governments is a tightening of central control over local budgets and spending priorities. Our view is that the benefits of bringing decision-making back to Edinburgh in 1999 should flow through to proper empowerment of local communities through their local representative bodies.”

As I highlighted at stage 1, the removal of that tax base from the control of its historical owners—local government—is, in our view, a violation of international law. Article 9 of the Council of Europe’s European Charter of Local Self-Government provides legal protection. Article 9.3 states:

“Part at least of the financial resources of local authorities shall derive from local taxes and charges of which, within the limits of statute, they have the power to determine the rate.”

Today, they do not. We do not believe that the removal of that tax base from the control of its historical owners can be allowed to persist, because it violates international law. We cannot support the bill, but neither will we stand in its way. The Greens will abstain on the motion at decision time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Willie Rennie for up to four minutes.

17:56

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I get the point.

Andy Wightman’s speech was typical of his approach to the bill, which he has brought to life. I hope not to embarrass him too much with praise, but I genuinely think that he enlightened the debate and challenged us all. He challenged many of us on our localism credentials and the bill is better for that; certainly, the debate was better for it. It was a great disappointment to me that we did not follow through with the localisation of non-domestic rates. That would have empowered local authorities in the way that Andy Wightman described. His speech this afternoon was typical of his contribution to the discussion more generally.

I also praise Kate Forbes for the way in which she has approached the matter. She is always polite and respectful, even when it is clear that she strongly disagrees with every word that we are saying. An example of that was the way in which she adeptly avoided getting into the pit with the Conservatives yesterday over the independent schools debate. I would have preferred it if she had engaged a bit more in the debate, rather than

hiding behind the Barclay review, but it was, nevertheless, an example of her polite and respectful way of dealing with the bill. I also praise the committees, the clerks and the officials for their contributions.

The bill should have gone much further. Substantial reform of local government is desperately needed, and needed now. If anybody is a plaything, local authorities are the plaything of central Government, in that they are given responsibilities but not the freedom to do things in a way that would work in their communities. Local authorities should live up to the responsibilities of the promises that they make, just as the Parliament and the Government should live up to their responsibilities and the decisions that they make. We should give local authorities the power to raise the majority of the money that they spend, just as this Parliament has the powers to do the same.

Keith Brown: Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Rennie: Not just now.

When you control the purse strings, you control your destiny. The sooner that we in Parliament learn that, the stronger our communities will be as a result.

The Liberal Democrats are unable to support the bill. At some point, we have to make a stand over bills that just tinker with the system rather than deliver the radical change that we want. The bill has made a mistake on the principle behind the independent schools issue. Of course there are arguments about the merits of independent schools—I do not wish to get into that—but I worry about us interfering with the operation of OSCAR, which should be able to make the judgment as to whether an organisation is a charity or not. That should be the criterion on which we should view all charities. We are creating two tiers of charities, which is regrettable, and I think that, secretly, the minister probably believes that too.

We need bigger reforms. We are taking part in cross-party local government finance reform discussions on council tax reform, and I hope that the Government will make substantial proposals for that so that we can agree a constructive way forward. We have suggested a land value taxation system, which could be used right across local government finance. That will be our contribution to that debate.

However, a commitment is being made today on the fiscal framework for councils, and I hope that it is not another false dawn. Councils have been promised reforms repeatedly, as Andy Wightman pointed out earlier, and they have not been delivered. I hope, therefore, that something

positive comes out of the bill, but I am not optimistic.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate, in which speeches must be absolutely no more than four minutes long. I warn members that if they go over their time, it will disadvantage members who come nearer the end of the debate.

18:01

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): In my role as convener of the Local Government and Communities Committee, I thank our clerks, the team at the Scottish Parliament information centre, the Government and the many people and organisations that provided us with evidence. I also thank my fellow committee members. I remind members that the committee was working to a pretty strict remit, and what came out was well worth the work that we put in. I enjoyed convening the committee throughout the bill's legislative stages, so I am delighted to be given the opportunity to take part in today's proceedings.

During the committee's scrutiny of and discussion on the bill, there were some inevitable points of disagreement. I will mention them briefly. Relief for private schools was one—Murdo Fraser has just spent an inordinate amount of time discussing that—and Andy Wightman's amendment on the devolution of business rates was another. The arguments on those two areas got a good airing yesterday, so I will not go over them again today.

Those two issues may have been the most contentious, but, lest we forget, in its stage 1 report, the committee unanimously endorsed the general principles of the bill. We welcomed it as an important staging post on the journey to modernisation of the system that began when Kenneth Barclay and his colleagues were appointed in summer 2016 with a wide remit to

“seek to enhance and reform non-domestic rates”.

To have reached the point where, it appears, we are about to pass a bill some of whose provisions will come into force in April is an impressive show of momentum, and credit is due to the Barclay review and the Scottish Government for their work.

I said that it appears that we are going to pass the bill, but the three previous speakers sounded as though they had searched through the bill to see whether they could find something that they disagreed with so that, although they seemed to support a lot of it, they could decide not to vote for it. That is disappointing.

A staging post is not a destination. The committee noted that much of the bill was a framework, with some crucial detail still to be

sorted out. In the two or three minutes that I have left, I will focus on areas where the committee would agree, I think, that the momentum should be kept up.

The bill will speed up the revaluation cycle from five to three years, and everyone has welcomed that. It means more work for assessors at a time when the profession told us that recruitment and retention were becoming a bit of a problem. The Government pointed out that it has already provided welcome additional resources to the tune of £2.5 million this financial year in anticipation of the Barclay reforms. Assessors themselves accept that it is not just about money; in the longer term, the role needs to be made more visible and attractive to graduates and school leavers. Giving assessors more power to carry out their core role, as the bill does, should also help.

Everyone agrees that there are too many appeals against revaluation, and that they clog up the system. The bill puts in place ambitious reforms to the appeal system that will improve decisions and build trust in the system. It is widely accepted that we will have succeeded only if that brings the numbers down and, overall, provides finality on rates bills sooner.

In our stage 1 report, we noted three areas where changes could be made. The first is more digitalisation and a move to a more online system, and I am pleased to note that the Government appears to agree. The second is increased transparency and better communication between assessors and ratepayers. The committee heard from some ratepayers that much of the current process seems to be wrapped in mystery.

The third area is fees for appeals. The aim is not to create a new income stream, but simply to hit a pause button and make ratepayers stop and think about whether an appeal is worth the time and money. The numbers alone indicate that there is a problem, with appeals appearing to be almost an everyday part of the process.

Non-domestic rates might not get many people excited but, with hand on heart, I can say that the bill is one of the most diverse and interesting that the committee has considered during my time as convener. It has led us down interesting by-ways to golf clubs, bandstands and lace factories, among others.

Crucial challenges lie ahead, not least of which is reform of the small business bonus scheme, which the committee hopes will keep the system's better features but eliminate its cliff edges and perverse incentives.

I hope that the bill becomes an act tonight. The committee looks forward to renewing our engagement with the non-domestic rates system in the future.

18:05

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to take part in tonight's stage 3 debate on the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill. As my colleague Murdo Fraser has outlined, the Scottish Conservatives are not able to support it.

As a member of the Local Government and Communities Committee, I thank all those who gave evidence and briefings and who supported the committee during the bill's passage.

For some time, the Scottish Conservatives have been calling for a comprehensive review of the Scottish rates regime. In recent years, rates revaluations have had a negative impact on Scottish businesses, particularly in the north-east, and Derek Mackay announced a package of relief measures worth £40 million to address that issue only after pressure from the Scottish Conservatives. However, the bill does not go far enough in addressing the more fundamental problems with the current rates regime.

One of the Barclay review's main recommendations was to halve the large business supplement to bring it into line with the rate set in England. That will not be immediately implemented through the bill, and the Scottish Government has gone only as far as committing to implement it when it is affordable. That means that larger Scottish businesses will remain at a competitive disadvantage to their counterparts south of the border.

Although we supported a stage 2 amendment to allow localism to be debated, local authorities—through COSLA—and the business community raised concerns about the proposed approach. As a party, we are committed to devolving more powers to local authorities, and more flexibility and control over businesses rates. However, it is clear that we need to take a holistic approach to considering such devolved decision making, rather than the piecemeal approach that would have resulted from what was proposed.

One of the most concerning measures in the bill is the removal of charitable rates relief from independent schools, which is currently afforded to the private education sector. I pay tribute to my colleague Liz Smith MSP, who worked tirelessly on that issue with the sector.

Private schools teach about 4 per cent of all pupils in Scotland. Many of them struggle to meet their day-to-day running costs, and the bill could necessitate fee increases, cuts to bursaries or even closures. In turn, that will mean that more pupils will need to be educated in the state sector, leading to a burden on the taxpayer that will be greater than any increase in income from business rates.

As I mentioned yesterday, my region of Mid Scotland and Fife has many schools that fall into that category, including Dollar academy in Clackmannanshire, and Glenalmond college, Kilgraston school, Strathallan school and Morrison's academy in Perthshire. All those schools could be jeopardised by the change in policy. The schools not only benefit the pupils who attend, but have a positive impact on their communities. They all have close links with state schools in their local areas and provide them with encouragement and support, and indirect and direct employment by the schools has an impact on the business community.

Education is a public good that benefits everyone, not just those who are in receipt of it, regardless of whether it is delivered by the state or by the independent sector, or whether parents pay fees directly to schools or indirectly through their taxes.

Time is moving on, so I will conclude. It is important to put on the record that the bill contains several changes to the rates system that we fully endorse and support. Unfortunately, the bill, both as introduced and in its amended form, will not deliver the wholesale review of business rates that we need and want, and it will harm our education sector. It is therefore regrettable and disappointing that we cannot support it at decision time.

18:09

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a member of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and the Federation of Small Businesses. I am also a director of a company with retail interests—and I say that not just because it is my duty to do so as a parliamentarian, but because I rise to speak as a disgruntled shopkeeper.

I will tell members of my history with the non-domestic rates regime. In 2010, when I was running my business, the rateable value of one of my units went from £12,000 to more than £45,000 following revaluation. The appeal, which I had to take to the Lands Tribunal for Scotland, took 18 months. The assessor's explanation and rationale for the change was that I was no longer using an entrance to the shop and therefore the RV was being applied to another portion. To my mind, there was a flaw in that logic: access between the two parts of the shop had been blocked up in 1972, yet, 30 years later, that was used as the rationale for the increase in my RV.

I tell that story to make the point that, for many small business owners, including small retailers, the non-domestic rates regime is opaque and unintuitive; the increases have been sporadic; and

it has been extremely difficult to appeal. The bill is welcome, but it really only addresses those last two points. The three-yearly revaluations will provide consistency and remove the sporadic and large increases that some businesses have experienced. Likewise, the alteration to the appeals system is welcome, as anything that streamlines that process is welcome. However, for many business owners, the system will continue to feel largely arbitrary and unfathomable.

There are three things that still need to be done. First, we need increased transparency, because the methodology by which rateable values are calculated is extremely difficult to understand. I know from looking at my rates bill and the calculations that were made when I was taking forward my appeal that there were plug figures—literally arbitrary numbers—that inflated the value of certain areas. I do not see anything in the bill that will change that.

In my local area, after the most recent revaluation, I surveyed shopkeepers and found that, on average, they had experienced a 10 per cent rise in their rateable values, whereas rents had been largely flat in the same period, which takes me on to the second thing that needs to be done. Fundamentally, the bill fails to examine and reform the assessor system. It is a legacy that largely reflects the regional tier of government, which we no longer have. Much greater oversight and scrutiny is needed of assessors so that their calculations and the work that they do are transparent.

Thirdly, we need the process to be much more streamlined and intuitive and more in line with modern business practice. Unless the bill is backed up with real reform of the processes and technology that are used, businesses will continue to have issues in dealing with the non-domestic rates regime.

The most important point in the debate is that we need a comprehensive review of local government finance and taxation. The points that Andy Wightman and Willie Rennie have made on that today and previously are absolutely right. We must have full fiscal devolution and fiscal responsibility for local government. That cannot happen if we have piecemeal reform of the taxation powers that local authorities have at their disposal. Until we have that comprehensive review, we will continue to have issues with the non-domestic rates regime.

18:13

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I, too, thank the Local Government and Communities Committee clerks for all their hard work and sound advice as we took forward the bill.

In looking at the bill, one finds it difficult to construe how someone with as keen a mind as my good friend Graham Simpson could be seduced into backing amendment 9 at stage 2. Perhaps he fell victim to the roguish charm of Alexander Stewart or the persuasive arguments of Andy Wightman. Alternatively, perhaps it was to do with Mr Simpson's get out of jail free card: his point that amendments are sometimes supported at stage 2 to "test the waters", as he said yesterday. Bless. The band played "Believe it if you like". Graham Simpson was not swimming yesterday; he was drowning. Like Pinocchio, his nose was growing with every word he spoke.

It was good to see the Tories—no doubt chastened by the barrage of 27 business organisations telling them that, with regard to removal of uniform business rates, they should not be so daft—reverse their position from that at stage 2. I welcome their road-to-Damascus conversion to common sense, which was something that we did not see from the Greens, who I understand did not even publish the results of their consultation from last September. Labour members, too, U-turned on the issue, after taking representations from USDAW. I welcome the fact that they listened.

Mr Wightman's amendments 23 and 23A at stage 3 seemed to be a clever manoeuvre, but he looked like a rabbit in the headlights as his erstwhile Tory and Labour allies deserted him. He even suggested that Sarah Boyack was sidling up to Derek Mackay, which Mr Wightman happily did in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

On amendment 25, Andy Wightman argued, Grinch-like, that charity shops should, in effect, have to pay rates, regardless of whether a local authority had decided to waive its rights to impose 20 per cent. That seems to be a reversal of the localism that he purports to champion. The Lib Dems supported the Greens, passing over the eight years of a Lib Dem-Labour Scottish Executive that was notorious for ring fencing 60 different local authority budget lines. The entire episode shows how important it is that colleagues examine the impact of amendments before deciding whether to support them.

As for all the nonsense about private schools, one would think that a drastic change was being imposed. In fact, the payment of rates is the equivalent of about 1.3 per cent of fee income. I must apologise to members, because yesterday I said that that percentage was 1.8 per cent. That is of course a lot less than the 6 per cent impact of the teacher pay rises and pension changes last year, and significantly less than the 4 per cent average rise in fees in recent years.

The Tories are clearly obsessed with that relatively minor part of the bill and, by not

supporting it, they are throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is not that the Tories are obsessed with the issue; it is a genuine concern of many parents who have children at independent schools.

Kenneth Gibson: No one wants to pay more, but it is only a 1.3 per cent increase, when they are paying, on average, a 4 per cent increase in fees. Let us be honest—most of the people who go to those schools are, shall we say, better off than the majority.

The reason for the Tories being so concerned is no doubt because many of them attended such schools or send their children to them, yet not one of them declared an interest, as Neil Findlay pointed out yesterday. An unseemly dozen Tories felt the need to suck up to their constituency associations, with those who attended comprehensives being particularly keen to speak and those who attended Eton and Harrow being surprisingly sedate. I hope that when Michelle Ballantyne takes over, she will impose a better balance in her array of speakers.

As for not consulting, the committee took plenty of evidence, including through a visit to and meeting at George Watson's college, which is Liz Smith's alma mater—the school that she attended, taught at and even wrote a book about.

What about bursaries? All they do is enable private schools to Hoover up talented young folk from the state sector to help the schools' grades and allow them to charge yet more fees.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Come to a close, please.

Kenneth Gibson: State schools pay rates. Private schools should pay rates, too, and I am delighted that the Parliament overwhelmingly agrees with that.

18:17

Sarah Boyack: It makes me wonder how we get through our committee meetings. We have gone from James Dornan to Kenneth Gibson, who was as gracious as ever.

The bill is not perfect—I am clear about that. The Barclay review did not cover everything and we had some tight discussions in committee. However, the bill moves the situation forward and it picks up on some of the key issues in the Barclay review.

The challenge for us in Parliament will be post-legislative scrutiny. After the bill is passed, detailed discussions about many concerns will be required, including those picked up in Alexander Stewart's amendments on having affirmative

rather than negative instruments and the need for more consultation, as well as on additional things that we managed to get the minister to agree to move on. It is about what happens next. What political parties want to do is up to them. Some members might disagree with aspects of the bill, but we think that enough progress has been made in the bill to have made the process worth while.

The review was tightly constrained and it could have covered more, but we have dealt with what was in front of us. In relation to the devolution of non-domestic rates, there was a key issue about not just hearing from but listening to colleagues in local government. The strong view that came through was that, at the moment, devolving non-domestic rates without reviewing the fiscal settlements and, more generally, without the powers would entrench inequalities between some of our local authorities. Equalisation was a key concern, particularly at a time when local authority budgets are stretched to breaking point. We have demonstrated that we listened, even though there was much debate.

The fiscal framework is absolutely critical. I very much agree with Willie Rennie's comments about the need to reform the existing council tax, which is regressive, a failure and not up to date. There is a lot of work to do on that. The Conservatives could come and join the rest of us on what is clearly a difficult issue.

I want to comment on the debate on private schools, which is the reason for the Conservatives not voting for the bill. Today, Murdo Fraser said that it was about the politics of envy, but it is not. It is about the politics of fairness.

The comment from the Barclay review was that independent and private schools are charities that benefit

"from reduced or zero rates bills, whereas council (state) schools do not qualify and generally will pay rates. This is unfair and that inequality should end by removing eligibility for charity relief from all independent schools."

That is the right place for us to be.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): Will the member take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: I will not.

The minister will have the flexibility to look at individual schools that make a case to her, which was the point raised by Andy Wightman yesterday. There is scope for ministers to act, but as a general principle, we support this provision in the bill.

We will support the bill this afternoon. The points made by Daniel Johnson on the need for a reality check on what it is like to run a small business were spot on. I hope that we have made some progress in this bill, but there will be more to

follow, and increased transparency, oversight and parliamentary accountability are crucial going into the future. I hope that passing the bill today will not be the end of the story on the issues that colleagues have raised.

18:20

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con):

This has been an interesting journey. It is fair to say that what looked like a fairly uncontroversial bill has proved to be anything but. However, I want to start my closing remarks by expressing disappointment. The Scottish Conservatives should have been able to support this bill, which is largely sensible. Any issues that we had could have been ironed out.

Our big concern, the politically motivated assault on the independent schools sector, could have been smoothed over. We offered compromise, but we were talking to a brick wall. Kate Forbes got her own way on the matter, but she should not be happy, because treating one part of the charitable sector differently from the rest has been attacked by the charity regulator and I can imagine the prospect of a legal challenge.

My party should have been able to back this bill, but Ms Forbes was not for moving. I suspect that that position comes not from her but from higher up; it could maybe even come from the First Minister.

The upshot of hitting charities with bigger bills is that some will close. I am convinced that some smaller schools will not survive because of what Parliament is about to do. I hope that Hamilton college in my region will. Perhaps the minister can advise what should happen to the pupils and the building that they are in should it not survive. I could see it becoming a top-class hotel or private leisure centre, and “elitist”—how ironic.

Today, the Scottish Council of Independent Schools told me that

“The 30,000 families, more than 3,000 teachers and more than 3,000 non-teaching staff in the independent sector will yesterday have been left in no doubt over the support or otherwise forthcoming from the Chamber. ... Any cursory post-legislative scrutiny would have shown the Parliament the genuine success of the 2005 Charity Act and unique public benefit test.”

The letter goes on to say:

“The independent sector will keep doing what it does best—for pupils from across Scotland, from all backgrounds, from all political persuasion and none. That is Scotland’s highest attainment, keeping subject choice as wide as possible, exporting Scottish education to the wider world, bringing pupils from over 50 countries to this country, and making real change to lives in their extra-curricular offer and wellbeing agendas.”

Until we got to stage 2 of the bill, the independent schools issue had attracted the most comment, then all hell broke loose when Andy Wightman unleashed his amendment 9 on the world. What a hoo-hah there was; what should have been an opportunity to debate the issue of devolving rate setting to local government got completely out of hand.

Sarah Boyack said earlier—and she was right—that stage 2 should have been an opportunity to properly test issues such as her amendment on student accommodation. At least we have a commitment to look at the issue of local government funding, and that is to be welcomed. Some good has come of the process.

We have ended up with a bill that does not have widespread support. Businesses have concerns. They think that they are being penalised and that the system here will put them at a disadvantage to businesses in other parts of the UK. Dr Liz Cameron, the chief executive of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, said:

“The Scottish Chambers of Commerce is deeply concerned about the impact of Section 8B of the Bill which has the effect of completely removing Scottish ratepayers’ appeal rights when there is a change in economic circumstances.”

I mentioned that issue yesterday. Dr Cameron also said:

“The Conservative party tabled a Stage 3 amendment to seek such a consultation but all other parties voted against this sensible amendment to what we believe is a part of the Bill that will be damaging to all ratepayers.”

That is not something that the minister should be proud of.

The bill could have been a lot better. Business is happy only because something that was not in the bill originally is still not in it, but it is not happy about what is in the bill. The charity sector does not like it. It could all have been so different. We could—and should—have been able to support it, but we cannot.

18:25

Kate Forbes: Before I respond to some of the specific points that have been made, I commend Andy Wightman on his efforts to raise the profile of non-domestic rates and the bill more generally through his amendments. I understand that this might be cold comfort, but I respect the fact that he is standing up for something that he passionately believes in. On that basis, I understand his decision not to support the bill. However, I thank him for his challenge, which has pushed me harder and made me rethink issues on a number of occasions. It has also caused my officials to think and think again. Although a faster review of the fiscal framework might be poor

consolation compared with changing the law altogether, I do not think that the debate has been in vain. It might have been a frustrating experience in part, but he has done more than anybody else to raise awareness of the issue.

I understand their reasons, but I am disappointed that, although the Conservatives support 27 substantial sections of the bill, they will not support the bill because they do not support one substantive section.

On Labour's position, Sarah Boyack is quite right to say that this is just the beginning for a lot of the issues that we have been airing for the first time during this process. Daniel Johnson brought to life the impact of the non-domestic rates system on real ratepayers up and down the country who are contending with the non-domestic rates system.

The bill progresses the issues quite significantly. Daniel Johnson, Sarah Boyack and James Dornan all talked about the next steps and the need for post-legislative scrutiny. The bill is clearly not coming to the end of the road tonight, although there will be a vote. It has opened up a number of conversations on issues such as phoenix companies, and we have agreed a timetable with Labour colleagues, which we are happy to share with other colleagues, for exploring that issue further and considering potential solutions. We are committed to working on a fiscal framework with local authorities, and we will progress that at pace. We are also committed to maintaining momentum on this issue. As an example of that, the appeals sub-group is being reconvened tomorrow to consider some of the issues that have been flagged.

I am delighted that the bill does a lot and delivers what ratepayers are looking for. Failure to support the bill tonight would deprive councils of policy responsibility for empty property relief, powers to prevent ratepayers from running up large debts and powers to tackle tax avoidance, including through phoenixing and the abuse of the small business bonus scheme and charity relief. The bill allows assessors to collect information that is necessary to set accurate rateable values and to allow them to resolve appeals more efficiently and effectively. It will support ratepayers and help them to be less exposed to the risks of volatility, inconsistency and a cumbersome and unresponsive appeals system.

The bill delivers the outcomes of the Barclay review of non-domestic rates. It supports growth, it improves the administration of the system and it increases fairness for ratepayers. For those reasons, it has the support not only of the Scottish Government but, more important, of the business community and local government. It has the support of Ken Barclay, and, at decision time

tonight, I hope that it will also have the support of the Scottish Parliament.

Points of Order

18:29

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross)

(SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Rhoda Grant made a point of order in the chamber last week, maintaining that an intervention that I had made on her speech in the previous week was incorrect. She had said that air traffic controllers at Wick John o’Groats and Benbecula airports had not been consulted on the changes to the centralised air traffic control system, and I challenged that assertion. In her point of order, Rhoda Grant said:

“Perhaps Gail Ross would like to take the opportunity to amend the record, apologise for misrepresenting her constituents and join me in attempting to save these vital jobs.”—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2020; c 80.]

Perhaps Rhoda Grant would like to do some research before her next point of order, because I have here a list of all the engagements that the air traffic management strategy—ATMS—programme has had with the staff at both Wick and Benbecula airports. They include engagements in 2018, on 1 November, 7 November and 5 December; in 2019, on 4 February, 17 April, 23 April, 1 May, 3 May, 30 May, 26 June and 11 November; and, most recently, in 2020, on 16 January.

Will she now admit that my point was correct and that there has been engagement with staff, with 16 meetings with both airports and opportunities for one-to-one phone calls? I look forward to her apology for the insinuation that I do anything but my absolute best for the people of my home town of Wick.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I thank Ms Ross for advance notice of that point of order. I highlight that it is not actually a point of order. In fact, I am going to repeat almost precisely what I said to Ms Grant last week. There is a procedure for making corrections to the *Official Report* if a member believes that a correction is needed. I encourage the members to write to each other, and then a member can correct the *Official Report* if necessary. These are not matters for me to adjudicate on in the chamber.

Having said that, as I said to Ms Grant, the point that Ms Ross has made is now on the record. I suggest to both members that they have made their points and that they do not raise the matter any further in the chamber. Thank you.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Giving evidence to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee this morning, Jim McColl, the chairman of Ferguson Marine Engineering Ltd, said that the

Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work, Derek Mackay, told him that the board of Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd, which is a company wholly owned by the Scottish Government, had written a legal letter to the cabinet secretary, saying that they would all resign if he intervened in the Ferguson dispute.

On 3 September 2019, in response to questions from Willie Rennie and me, in which we both asked the finance secretary directly whether it was true that the CMAL board had threatened to resign if the Government intervened, he told the Parliament this—I quote directly from the *Official Report*:

“I am not aware of the position that members have expressed to me.”—[*Official Report*, 3 September 2019; c 59.]

Presiding Officer, I am sure that it would be of concern to all members if the finance secretary had misled Parliament on 3 September as to the existence of that letter. Has he approached you with a request to make a statement to Parliament in order to correct the record?

The Presiding Officer: I also thank Mr Fraser for advance notice of the point of order. Clearly, accuracy in the chamber is a matter of great importance. However, that is a matter of contention among members. It is a matter that is being pursued by the committee, and it is my understanding that the committee will provide a forum in which members can pursue the matter further. In fact, I understand that the cabinet secretary will appear before members at the committee at a future date. Thank you.

I was expecting another point of order, but it is good to hear that there is not going to be one.

Business Motion

18:34

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I call the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, Graeme Dey, on behalf the Parliamentary Bureau, to move business motion S5M-20732, which sets out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 18 February 2020

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Health and Sport Committee Debate: Social Prescribing: physical activity is an investment, not a cost

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 19 February 2020

1.15 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

1.15 pm Members' Business

followed by Portfolio Questions: Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity; Justice and the Law Officers

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 20 February 2020

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Government Business and Constitutional Relations

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Scottish Elections (Franchise and Representation) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 25 February 2020

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Standards, Procedures and Public Appointment Committee Proposal for a Committee Bill: Assistance for Political Parties

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 26 February 2020

1.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

1.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Culture, Tourism and External Affairs; Education and Skills

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 27 February 2020

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Health and Sport

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Scottish Budget for 2020-21

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 17 February 2020, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted;

(c) that Rule 5.8.1(a) be suspended for the purposes of consideration of a Budget Bill setting out a budget for the financial year 2020-21.—[Graeme Dey]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

18:34

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of five Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move motions S5M-20733, on the designation of a lead committee; S5M-20734, on substitution on a committee; S5M-20735 and S5M-20736, on the approval of Scottish statutory instruments; and S5M-20737, on committee membership.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health and Sport Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum in relation to the Birmingham Commonwealth Games Bill (UK Legislation).

That the Parliament agrees that Sarah Boyack be appointed to replace Rhoda Grant as the Scottish Labour Party substitute on the Finance and Constitution Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Relevant Adjustments to Common Parts (Disabled Persons) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that Beatrice Wishart be appointed to replace Mike Rumbles as a member of the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee.—[*Graeme Dey*]

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

Decision Time

18:34

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I remind members that if the amendment in the name of Kate Forbes is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Rhoda Grant will fall.

The first question is, that motion S5M-20716.4, in the name of Kate Forbes, which seeks to amend motion S5M-20716, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on no case for tax increases or further cuts to public spending, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (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)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 58, Against 57, Abstentions 1.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The amendment in the name of Rhoda Grant therefore falls. The next question is, that motion S5M-20716, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on no case for tax increases or further cuts to public spending, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (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)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caitness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)

Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 58, Against 38, Abstentions 20.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes that the Scottish Conservative Party's proposals for additional resource spending and tax cuts would cost almost £1.5 billion; further notes that the UK Government has indicated that the Scottish resource budget will increase by £1.1 billion; recognises that £1.5 billion is greater than £1.1 billion; considers this proposal to lack credibility, and recognises that the Scottish Government will present a balanced budget on 6 February that prioritises wellbeing, tackling climate change, reducing child poverty and boosting sustainable economic growth.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-20705, in the name of Kate Forbes, on the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill at stage 3, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Edinburgh Central) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)

Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Abstentions

Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 78, Against 32, Abstentions 6.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Non-Domestic Rates (Scotland) Bill be passed.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on the five Parliamentary Bureau motions. If any member objects, please say so now. No member objects, therefore the question is, that motions S5M-20733 to S5M-20737, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Health and Sport Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the legislative consent memorandum in relation to the Birmingham Commonwealth Games Bill (UK Legislation).

That the Parliament agrees that Sarah Boyack be appointed to replace Rhoda Grant as the Scottish Labour Party substitute on the Finance and Constitution Committee.

That the Parliament agrees that the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Relevant Adjustments to Common Parts (Disabled Persons) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that Beatrice Wishart be appointed to replace Mike Rumbles as a member of the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Cheyne Gang Singing Group

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-19941, in the name of Gordon MacDonald, on the Cheyne Gang singing group. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

There may be some singing. Will there be singing? I do not know. We will find out.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament commends the Cheyne Gang, a community singing group and Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO), for its work with people living with long-term respiratory conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, and bronchiectasis; understands that the Cheyne Gang, so named because its first meeting venue was in Cheyne Street, Edinburgh, was started by three general practice nurses in 2013 as a research project, and now comprises over 100 members in groups in the Oxgangs, Stockbridge, Pleasance and Leith areas of Edinburgh, Innerleithen, Helensburgh and Forfar, as well as in the Dennistoun and Bridgeton areas of Glasgow, with a new group due to be established in Coldstream; appreciates that the singing sessions are facilitated by trained song group leaders and that 11 singing teachers completed a training course in 2017 developed by the Cheyne Gang; recognises that singing is an inexpensive form of pulmonary rehabilitation and is a considered a logical approach to managing breathlessness; notes that the Cheyne Gang has the support of the respiratory physiotherapy and pulmonary rehabilitation leads in NHS Lothian and NHS Borders and that the group actively tries to inform as many GPs as possible, and believes that the associated breathing techniques help improve the quality of life of the participants and is a living example of how singing can positively affect health outcomes.

18:40

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): If you want to hear singing, I suggest that you attend the next Cheyne Gang concert, which is next month, I believe.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Give us a song.

Gordon MacDonald: No, thank you.

I am pleased to be able to bring this debate to Parliament, and I welcome several members of the Cheyne Gang community singing group, who are in the public gallery.

I visited their rehearsals at Oxgangs library in December, when they were getting ready for their Christmas concert. The short time that I spent with them gave me the opportunity to hear at first hand from members how singing was helping to improve their health and provide an enjoyable social occasion. So much so that—on that occasion—they even persuaded me to sing along with the choir.

Members: Ooh!

Gordon MacDonald: You will not hear it again.

The Cheyne Gang was founded in 2013, to work with people living with long-term respiratory conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma and bronchiectasis. Originally, three general practice nurses—Pauline Waugh, Anne Ritchie and Sarah Marshall—started the group as a research project. They met in Cheyne Street, in Edinburgh, which gave rise to the group's name. The aim of their research was to look at the impact that singing in a group had on the quality of life of the participants. That is summed up by their motto,

“breathe to sing, sing to breathe”.

The Queen's Nursing Institute Scotland was the first organisation to recognise the potential in the work that Pauline, Anne and Sarah proposed, and it provided the grant for the initial research project.

In November 2019, Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland revealed that a record 139,000 people in Scotland had been diagnosed with COPD. That is an increase of 26 per cent since 2011. Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland has also highlighted that many lung conditions, such as COPD, are incurable and leave people having to cope with symptoms like breathlessness and fatigue, which can affect every aspect of someone's life from work to family and social life. It is evident that the treatment of lung diseases represents a significant issue for the national health service, and the management of lung disease is often an on-going struggle for the patient.

The research findings from the Cheyne Gang show that the majority of members have experienced measurable improvements in their quality of life and that there have been noted reductions in chest infections, inhaler use and hospital admissions. The measurable success of the group has led to its receiving endorsements from the respiratory physiotherapy and pulmonary rehabilitation leads in both NHS Lothian and NHS Borders.

In a joint briefing that was sent to me by Asthma UK and the British Lung Foundation, they explained how the group's work helps people who are living with long-term respiratory conditions. They said:

“In some lung conditions, like COPD, your airways are narrowed or obstructed. This can make it difficult to empty air out of your lungs when you breathe out, and air gets trapped in your lungs. If you don't empty your lungs effectively, you'll only be able to 'top up' your breath—using the top of your chest to breathe, instead of your whole lungs. This uses muscles in your neck and shoulders, which can get tired quickly. Singing long phrases helps you lengthen your out-breath to empty your lungs. This helps to reduce the amount that you use muscles in your neck and

shoulders when you take your next breath in. This saves energy and makes breathing more comfortable”.

I am pleased to say that, although it started as a small research project, the group now comprises over 120 members. There are groups in many areas across Edinburgh, including Stockbridge, the Pleasance, Leith and, of course, Oxfgangs, in my constituency. There are also groups in the Dennistoun and Bridgeton areas of Glasgow and in Innerleithen and Coldstream. On top of that, the Cheyne Gang supports groups in Forfar and Helensburgh. Trained singing group leaders, all of whom have qualified through an in-house training course—the only such course available in Scotland—facilitate each singing session.

Although the original research project has been completed, the Cheyne Gang, which became a charity in 2017, continues to contribute to research. It is working with the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council on the our health project at the University of Edinburgh, in partnership with the institute for bioengineering, to develop a medical device to measure airways resistance in a community setting. It is also working with Pharmatics, a company that specialises in artificial intelligence and machine learning for health, to develop a self-management app for respiratory conditions, which will provide advice and feature the breathing exercises that are taught in the group.

The Cheyne Gang has taken the opportunity to contribute its significant knowledge and understanding of the benefits of singing to the Scottish Government’s consultation on a draft respiratory care action plan for Scotland.

As well as promoting the benefits of singing, the group’s work helps to tackle social isolation. Its regular sessions provide a meeting place where people with similar health conditions can share their experience and give peer support. Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland recognises that the group is a fantastic example of the different ways in which people can be supported to self-manage their lung conditions, beyond medical treatment from the national health service.

As well as focusing on health benefits, the group will perform at the Usher Hall in March, alongside four other choirs, as part of Edinburgh sings! I take this opportunity to wish everyone the very best for the concert and to give members the chance to get a ticket, so that they can hear the group sing.

As the research—and my visit to the Cheyne Gang—shows, it is clear that singing is an inexpensive form of pulmonary rehabilitation. It is an effective approach to managing breathlessness. Many of the guests who are in the Parliament today are a living example of how singing can improve health outcomes.

We need this fantastic initiative to be given support, so that it can be rolled out across Scotland and other people with breathing problems can benefit from a song, a cup of tea and a blether.

18:47

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the debate and congratulate Gordon MacDonald on bringing it to the Parliament.

As the deputy convener of the Health and Sport Committee, a registered nurse and co-convener of the Parliament’s cross-party group on lung health, I have a huge interest in respiratory health. That is, in part, due to my older sister, Phyllis Murphy, who is a respiratory nurse consultant with NHS Dumfries and Galloway. Phyllis has played a huge part in informing me about on-the-ground issues and was the catalyst for my starting the lung health cross-party group at the beginning of this parliamentary session.

Over recent years, there has been a change in attitude towards lung health. There is much more emphasis on healthy lungs, more people are accessing treatment and support, and there is greater public understanding of the risks to lung health and the fact that smoking is the number 1 cause of COPD and lung cancer. That is all very welcome.

Many lung conditions, such as COPD, bronchiectasis and idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, are chronic, progressive conditions that leave people with symptoms such as breathlessness and fatigue. In November 2019, a report by Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland showed that 139,187 people in Scotland had been diagnosed with COPD alone—an increase of 26 per cent since 2011, as Gordon MacDonald said and as it says in our briefing, for which I thank Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland and BLF.

Because of that increase, more people than ever need support and treatment to be able to get to a stage at which they can self-manage their condition, and one of the most effective treatments for a chronic lung condition is pulmonary rehabilitation. Fitness groups and community-led initiatives are promoting breathing exercises, mindfulness and activities such as tai chi, which I know from experience is great fun. Participation is fun and the activities benefit lung health and mental health.

The Cheyne Gang choir is a perfect example of that. I had the pleasure of hosting a choir in the Parliament in 2018, and I thoroughly enjoyed myself when I joined in. The choir helps people to achieve better breathing and provides an opportunity for social engagement, thereby helping

to tackle social isolation and loneliness while improving lung function.

Singing is good for people, and it is well documented that singing improves people's moods. It releases the same feel-good brain chemicals as sex and chocolate, it may be very effective as a stress reliever and it improves sleep. Singing releases pain-relieving endorphins that help people to forget a painful tooth, knee or whatever. It improves posture, increases lung capacity, clears sinuses and respiratory tubes and improves mental alertness. Singing also tones facial and stomach muscles. There are many benefits of singing, so I support anyone who joins in, whether or not they have lung ill health.

In Dumfries and Galloway, we have a couple of groups, the Moffat Huffin Puffins and the Dumfries puffin group, and several NHS Dumfries and Galloway pulmonary rehabilitation clinics have been established across the region. I have visited and spoken to many of the people who regularly attend those groups, and the positive effects of engaging with pulmonary rehabilitation, including singing, were apparent. The people who engage have a great time and, as Gordon MacDonald said, they also have a cup of tea. I support the Cheyne Gang groups, which are fabulous.

I also highlight the respiratory care action plan, which has been developed by Dr Tom Fardon, who will be present at the next cross-party group meeting on the progress of the plan, which is under consultation.

Once again, I thank Gordon MacDonald for bringing the debate to the chamber today, and I look forward to more Cheyne Gang participation in the future.

18:51

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I, too, congratulate Gordon MacDonald on securing the debate and on raising awareness of the Cheyne Gang choir and the work that it does to support people with long-term respiratory conditions. I also welcome the members of the choir who are in the gallery this evening.

When I sing, I think that I sound like Freddie Mercury or, on a good day, Frank Sinatra. Sadly, the reality is very different. Indeed, as a child, I was asked to leave the choir by my music teacher, who suggested that my talents lay elsewhere. Despite not being able to hold a note and being completely tone deaf, I recognise that singing can be life affirming, especially as part of a large group.

As we heard from Gordon MacDonald, back in 2013, a group of general practice nurses here in Edinburgh set up the original Cheyne Gang choir

as a research project. The findings confirmed that bringing together a group of people with a shared medical condition to sing in a choir had physical, social and mental health benefits. Singing provided rehabilitation and resulted in improvements in the quality of life for the majority of its members.

A number of studies have looked at the benefits of group singing for people who are diagnosed with COPD and have revealed encouraging results in relation to improved lung function and quality of life. People with COPD who join singing groups say that singing regularly reduces their feelings of being short of breath, helps them to feel more in control of their breathing and helps them to manage their symptoms better.

COPD is the collective name for a number of lung conditions that cause breathing difficulties, such as chronic bronchitis and chronic obstructive airways disease. It is the second most common lung disease in the United Kingdom, behind asthma. It mostly affects middle-aged and older adults who smoke, with the symptoms getting worse over time, which can result in sufferers being limited in carrying out their normal activities.

As of 2019, there were more than 139,000 people in Scotland living with the condition. That figure represents an increase of a quarter over the past decade in the number of people diagnosed with an incurable lung condition. It has led Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland to call on the Scottish Government to commit to all patients having the right to access the appropriate services at the appropriate time.

I understand that the Tweed Valley Cheyne Gang celebrated its first birthday by singing in the Scottish Parliament at a reception that was held by Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland to launch its report on the need for more rehabilitation services across Scotland. The report highlights how rehabilitation benefits the NHS by helping people stay well and self-manage their condition, thereby reducing the number of hospital admissions, halving the time that patients spend in hospital and reducing the rate of death. Yet, despite the benefits of rehab, access to pulmonary rehabilitation remains patchy. It will be a challenge for all of us as we go forward.

The Scottish Government launched its respiratory care action plan consultation in December. I encourage anyone with an interest in enabling greater access to those services to respond to the consultation, which closes in early April.

From small beginnings, the Cheyne Gang choir has grown. There are now four groups in Edinburgh, one in Innerleithen and one in Coldstream in the Borders, as well as two in

Glasgow. It also supports one group in Helensburgh and one in Forfar.

Clearly, the Cheyne Gang choir and others like it provide an important service for people living with COPD. As well as improving physical strength, breathing and energy levels, singing in a choir helps to increase confidence, improve mental health and prevent loneliness. In short, it helps you feel better in health and mind.

I am sure that all of us want to get behind the Cheyne Gang and support it in any way we can. Although I suspect that I will not be allowed to join the choir even with my asthma, I am certainly happy to come along some time and put the kettle on.

18:56

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Gordon MacDonald on securing this important debate. As someone who suffers from asthma and respiratory difficulties, which are exacerbated by toxic fumes, I have great empathy with this issue and the work that the Cheyne Gang has done with people who, like me, live with long-term respiratory conditions.

The Cheyne Gang is a wonderful example of how communal singing can change lives for the better—something that the general practice nurses who created the group were aware of. I congratulate them on their work and the success of the group. I must say that I especially enjoyed reading on the Cheyne Gang website that

“Singing in a choir is cheaper than therapy, healthier than drinking, and more fun than working out”.

I am tempted to look for a choir to join, although sadly, like others, my attempts at “Paper Roses” can clear a room—you do not want to hear it.

I understand that choir singing in the United Kingdom is at an all-time high, with more than 2 million people singing regularly in choirs, and not just in traditional singing choirs. My friend Mary McDevitt, who is a British Sign Language interpreter, has led a signing choir that has performed at the Scottish Parliament’s annual carol concert for the past few years.

The church that I attend—St Patrick’s, Coatbridge—has an adult and a children’s choir that sing every Sunday and at special events. Choir members benefit from company and friendship at their meetings and their practices, and they have gained from other experiences, such as singing at Bellahouston park for the Pope. The children’s choir offers inclusion and confidence building to the children, and their parents and grandparents get bragging rights. Parishioners gain from the lovely voices leading

the hymns, and that is about the only time that I do any singing—when it is disguised by other people.

Most choirs are self-funding. We must surely consider the multiple benefits of being part of a choir when we look at further funding for them and, indeed, for participation in all musical activities. Money should not be a barrier to finding a place to sing or to learning to play a musical instrument.

Scotland has a proud tradition of music and song. I am sure that, as youngsters, we all had particular music that became part of our family life. I am also sure that many members have experienced the joy of singing together at a young age at family get-togethers, especially at Christmas and New Year. That is usually when each family member in turn would perform their party piece—a favourite song rehearsed over the years, which remains forever associated with that family member. Whenever we hear or sing that song, we feel connected to those family members, even many years after they have gone. In our family, it was at wee Granny Meg’s house in Chryston on the first, with Uncle Tom singing “I Left My Heart in San Francisco”, Aunt Joanne singing “Mississippi” and Aunt Winnie singing “Amazing Grace”. None of us has ever forgotten the time that Winnie’s teeth came out mid-song, only to be quickly replaced without a pause.

Turning to more serious issues, I note that, in a paper that was published by the Royal Society in 2015, researchers at the University of Oxford examined the phenomenon of choir singing and its benefits. They found that group singing not only helps to forge social bonds but acts as an excellent ice breaker and helps to improve our broader social networks. That is invaluable in today’s society, in which loneliness and social isolation have become major issues. When the Scottish Government sets its budget tomorrow, we should remember that projects that fight loneliness and bring people together—many of which are preventative health projects in our most deprived communities—often rely on grants and facilities that are provided by local government.

Medical research has shown that a good social network can have significant health benefits, so we should not underestimate the positive benefits of the social bonding that choirs encourage. As we have already heard, singing is particularly beneficial for improving breathing, posture and muscle tension. Listening to and participating in music have also been shown to be effective in pain relief, possibly due to the release of neurochemicals that are similar to those that are released after intense exercise. I know that I would probably choose a good singalong rather than an hour on an exercise bike.

Singing clearly provides an inclusive means of bettering our mental and physical health, so I hope that the Cheyne Gang will be able to continue to grow across Scotland. I again thank Gordon MacDonald for providing members with the opportunity to debate this important issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Stewart Stevenson, who is the last speaker in the open debate.

19:01

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I, too, thank Gordon MacDonald for providing us with the opportunity to recognise the Cheyne Gang singing group.

Let me say that, as other members have said of themselves, I am usually paid to remain silent when singing is taking place. However, I suggest that I could do a bit of whistling and humming as background to the singing, because that is equally good for the lungs. Perhaps a *puirt à beul* session, with me humming in the background, might be the answer.

As Elaine Smith mentioned, singing is a very inexpensive way of helping people with pulmonary rehabilitation, so I expect the national health service to sign up for it with great enthusiasm. However, there are practical issues around its use. In the 1940s I was diagnosed as suffering from what was then described as “broncho spasm”. I was treated with a horrible little M & B tablet, which was delivered to me, wrapped in tomato jam, on a spoon. To this day, I am a little averse to having tomato jam. It was not clear whether the condition that I was suffering from was bronchitis, asthma or something else. It continued into my adult life, but I no longer suffer from it. My father, who was a GP, taught me a form of hypnotism, which we might now call mindfulness, so that I am able to use my psychological skills to prevent an attack from happening. The doctors at my medical practice think that I should have an inhaler with me at all times. I have not had one for 30 years, so that is too bad.

The bottom line is that singing helps us to avoid the rapid breath-stacking pattern of breathing—a dynamic hyperventilation of the lungs that reduces inspiration of air. When sufferers have an attack they think that they cannot breathe in, whereas the reality is that they cannot breathe out properly. Our lungs can hold 3 litres of air, but our breathing uses about 500 millilitres each time. Because of my lifetime condition I am usually down at the 380ml mark. However, I know that since I have stopped using the lifts to reach the fifth floor of the Parliament my lung capacity has gone up by 15 per cent—I have a device for measuring it.

There are many ways of doing things cheaply, but the bottom line is that asthma, and lung conditions in general, prevent people from being active and cut them off from social occasions. They also have psychological negatives such as anxiety, depression and hospitalisation. Therefore, communities such as the Cheyne Gang have wider effects that are beyond the purely medical: they also have social benefits, which we should encourage.

In the UK, 8 million people have been diagnosed with asthma, which I find slightly puzzling. I went to what was probably the biggest secondary school in Scotland. In my year, which consisted of more than 400 pupils, only three of us—Roger, Teddy and me—had asthma, whereas now the statistic is one person in 17. Therefore, something about the modern world means that asthma is a more pressing concern than it formerly was.

Elaine Smith: Will the member take an intervention?

Stewart Stevenson: If the Presiding Officer will allow it.

Elaine Smith: On that issue, last week it was discovered that although more boys might have asthma, more women than men die of asthma; that point needs to be looked at, and I have lodged some questions on it.

Stewart Stevenson: That is a very interesting point, which I was not aware of. I thank Elaine Smith for raising it.

In the previous session of Parliament, one of our colleagues suffered from COPD. I will not name him, because it was not generally known, but the suffering that he experienced was apparent from time to time. Fortunately, he continues to experience good health in life after Parliament.

The reduction in tobacco use has improved things. It has always been a trigger for lung conditions, although one of the ironies of tobacco is that it freezes the cilia in the bronchial tubes, which initially makes one feel better, not worse—a very curious and unhelpful thing.

Pulmonary rehabilitation as an education programme and a part of physical exercise is a good way to go about things. We have moved on terrifically. In the 1940s, when I was first diagnosed with asthma, the treatment was an M & B tablet and going out in the street when there was a tar wagon around, because it was thought that the tar fumes were helpful. It is rather doubtful whether that was actually the case. There were many myths, some of which endure to the present day. The Scottish Government’s plan to improve pulmonary rehabilitation through its respiratory care plan is to be welcomed.

The Cheyne Gang and community groups across Scotland are on the front line and I recognise their value to their communities in leading the way. They are to be utterly commended and, as somebody who I should now describe as a former asthmatic, I am astonished and delighted to hear about their work.

19:07

The Minister for Mental Health (Clare Haughey): I am delighted to respond to the debate on behalf of the Government and I add my thanks to Gordon MacDonald for lodging this important motion. What a pity that we did not get to hear him sing—perhaps another time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you just pause there, minister? If, at the end of the meeting when I have closed proceedings, those in the gallery wish to give us a little turn, they can. I do not think that they want to, but I have given them the offer.

Clare Haughey: Thank you—so long as I do not have to join in. Like some of my colleagues here, I could easily clear a room when I sing.

There is increasing research that shows that singing in a choir can benefit people in a number of ways. As well as being enjoyable, it brings people together and supports physical and mental wellbeing. In particular, a growing body of research suggests that group singing is especially good for people who are living with a long-term lung condition such as COPD.

We have heard from people that singing reduces their feelings of being short of breath, helps them to feel more in control of their breathing and helps them to manage their symptoms better.

I commend those in the Cheyne Gang for their great work. It is fantastic to hear that they help more than 100 members in Edinburgh, Leith, Innerleithen, Helensburgh and Forfar, as well as in areas of Glasgow close to my constituency, and a group in Coldstream. The British Lung Foundation and Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland also support many other singing groups across Scotland.

I encourage members to look at the local information system for Scotland—ALISS—which is funded by the Scottish Government through the Health and Social Care Alliance. ALISS is a web-based resource that maps community assets and connects people who are living with long-term conditions with sources of help and support in their communities, including many singing groups across Scotland.

The Cheyne Gang is part of that great resource. Singing is an excellent example of helping people to self-manage their conditions. Scotland has been

a world leader in supporting people to live well and on their own terms with whatever conditions they may have, since our self-management strategy was published in 2008.

Self-management puts people who are living with long-term conditions in the driving seat of their care. One key element of self-management for people with COPD is pulmonary rehabilitation. It is already a key recommendation in national clinical guidelines that that evidence-based programme be provided, and we want NHS boards to increase patients' access to it. We will do that through implementation of the first respiratory care action plan for Scotland. The draft plan, which sets out key priorities in the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of long-term respiratory conditions, has been published for consultation. We know that true change will happen only through working with others, hearing from them about their experiences, good and bad, and learning about what we could do differently and what we must do better. I was pleased to hear that Cheyne Gang members have fed back their experiences through the consultation.

We must also ensure that we focus on preventing the development of long-term respiratory conditions when we can. That goes far beyond those organisations that provide care and treatment. The future of our ability to live well rests with all parts of society. We must break through the traditional boundaries and ensure that health—good health—is everybody's business. As we progress with our vision for public health reform, we will continue to work across other parts of Government as we strive to improve air quality, provide warm homes, tackle fuel poverty and continue to support people to stop smoking and eat healthily.

I want to recognise the strong and dynamic third sector that exists in Scotland, which plays a crucial role in the wellbeing of our communities. The Cheyne Gang is no exception, which is why I praise the fantastic work of that group and am grateful to its staff and volunteers for everything that they do to make that work possible.

Meeting closed at 19:11.

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