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Tuesday 6 September 2022

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 6 September 2022

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader is the Rev Andrew Agnew, pastor of the Livingroom Church.

The Rev Andrew Agnew (The Livingroom Church): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, I thank you for the invitation to address you during your time for reflection. You stand—or sit—at the beginning of another important year of work. Similarly, at the Livingroom Church in Wallyford, a small town on the edge of Musselburgh, where I am the minister, we stand at the beginning of another important year of work.

At times such as these, we re-clarify our aims, motivate our people and prepare for the many challenges in the year that lies ahead of us. I want to choose three biblical commands that guide me as I co-lead our church, in the hope that they might inspire you, too.

The first is to

“seek the welfare of the city”.

Those words were spoken to a minority group in Persia who were viewed as strange. Those who followed the God of Israel were told to work for the good of the country that they were in. It was not their ultimate home, but they were to live and settle there, and, especially, they were to pray for the good of their host country. Thanks to the amazing Parliamentary Prayer Scotland group, we, in our church, are learning to do that regularly: to pray for you and your work, especially as you endeavour to help this country after years of trauma.

The second command is to

“put on the armour of God”.

Those words were spoken to a different minority group in the city of Ephesus, which is in modern-day Turkey. The Christians who lived there had their critics and enemies. Life then, as now, was in a cosmopolitan society with differing values and beliefs. The words were a call to take truth, faith and the good news of Jesus as Lord and Saviour, who was crucified, buried and resurrected for our forgiveness. We are teaching our church dependence on Jesus as we face the challenges ahead.

The third command is to

“fix our eyes on Jesus”.

Those words were spoken to another minority group of Christians, from Jewish backgrounds, who were facing imprisonment because of their association with Jesus. They were given examples of people in the Bible who experienced hardship yet trusted God, and then they were helped to focus on the supreme example of Jesus, who gave his very life for our salvation, to give them strength to stay the course, come what may.

Members of this Parliament, we, in Wallyford, joining our sisters and brothers from Parliamentary Prayer Scotland and many other churches, will be praying for you for wisdom, truth, courage, protection, guidance, strength and blessing and to do what is right in the year ahead. May God bless you.

Topical Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is topical question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, short and succinct questions and responses would be appreciated.

Drug Deaths

1. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Government how it is responding to the report, *Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2021*, which was published on 28 July 2022. (S6T-00841)

The Minister for Drugs Policy (Angela Constance): Every life lost to a drug death is a tragedy. The report that National Records of Scotland published in July showed that we lost 1,330 people to drugs in Scotland in 2021. Those are not statistics but are lives that ended far too soon, each one underlining that we are still in the midst of a public health emergency.

I will give a full statement on the issue on Thursday, and I will appear before three committees meeting jointly next week. However, this Government's response will be to redouble our commitment to the national mission on saving and improving lives. The principles that will guide us through the emergency are that we will follow the evidence, invest to transform services and trust our lived and living experience.

Claire Baker: It is three years since the Scottish Government announced a public health emergency, yet the figures demonstrate little emergency response. It is no wonder that the accusation, "We keep dying; you keep talking" continues. The progress on medically assisted treatment standards, in particular, is lamentable. Although a target has been set to introduce standards 1 to 5 within a year, implementation is now more than a year behind the timescale that was initially promised. What action has taken place over the summer to push for effective delivery of the MAT standards?

Angela Constance: We should not underestimate the scale of the loss of life in Scotland. Drug deaths are, of course, preventable, unacceptable and tragic, and we all have a responsibility to play our part in turning the tide.

Regarding the MAT standards, Ms Baker will be aware that, for the first time in Scotland, the Government has issued ministerial direction. All authorities—whether those are the chief executive officers of local authorities, integration joint boards or health boards—have received letters. There is a clear expectation and demand that improvement plans and implementation plans will be submitted to the Government by the end of this month. We

are in the process of gathering and scrutinising that information and I will, of course, in line with my previous commitments to Ms Baker and to Parliament, keep Parliament fully updated on the crucial, life-saving MAT standards. They are not a tick box and they are certainly not optional.

Regarding activity over the summer, Ms Baker will know that we have published our national mission strategic plan. The vital final recommendations of the Scottish Drug Deaths Taskforce have also been published.

Claire Baker: A figure of £250 million has been committed over five years, and we have heard many announcements, but the key task is to prevent deaths. What is the Scottish Government doing to monitor the impact of interventions? How is it able to increase investment or expand activity in areas where progress is being made? What additional support is the Government committing to ensure that we see progress and that the figures start to come down significantly?

Angela Constance: As I said in my initial answer, I will respond to Parliament on the vital report by the Drug Deaths Taskforce.

On resourcing, I hope that Ms Baker and others accept that the national mission moneys are a 67 per cent real-terms increase. I have also endeavoured to ensure continuity of funding, both to alcohol and drug partnerships and to vital grass-roots organisations. We are pursuing a belt-and-braces approach by funding front-line services while also directly funding organisations.

Ms Baker makes the point that investment is not only about quantum but is also about targeting to ensure that resources reach where they must. That comes down to monitoring and evaluation. We are publishing more information than ever before to ensure both efficacy and transparency. How we allocate money is also vital, so that we get cross-government and cross-sector collaboration. We are serious about both reducing harm and supporting recovery in this country.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): We all know that residential rehabilitation is absolutely life saving, and it needs to be front and centre of the Scottish National Party Government's efforts to end Scotland's drug-related deaths epidemic. I was shocked to learn yesterday from my constituent James, who is a resident at Calderglen house in South Lanarkshire, that it is more than half empty right now. There are 13 empty beds at present.

The minister said that it is imperative that resources reach where they must reach. I say to her that three people every day are dying. Why are people not able to access those beds?

Angela Constance: I appreciate that question from Ms Webber. I am, indeed, a powerful

advocate for residential rehabilitation as part of that recovery-oriented whole system of care. Ms Webber will be aware that this Government has committed £100 million. Thus far, we have made commitments of around £23 million, which is both about utilising the unused capacity in the sector and about increasing capacity in the sector over and above that.

For the first time ever, we have, in effect, ring fenced money to alcohol and drug partnerships for residential rehab. Also for the first time ever, we are monitoring the number of residential rehabilitation places that each ADP is funding, so I know that, over the course of 2021-22, over 500 placements were funded.

If there are particular issues about the care pathway for the member's constituent, I would be more than happy—indeed, it is my duty—to hear about it, so she would be very welcome to contact me separately on that matter.

Ferries

2. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it can confirm whether hull 801 will be delivered by May 2023 and hull 802 by December 2023 and within the latest cost to complete budget of £123 million. (S6T-00844)

The Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise (Ivan McKee): The target date for the completion of hull 801—the Glen Sannox—remains by the end of May 2023, and for hull 802 it is by the end of December 2023. The current budget to complete both vessels remains £123 million, as was set out in the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy's update to Parliament on 23 March 2022.

The Deputy First Minister and the Minister for Transport were able to see at first hand the progress made on both vessels during their visit to the shipyard on 2 August this year. We continue to press the shipyard to continue to progress to completion of the vessels in that agreed timeframe and within budget.

Edward Mountain: The answer is that they will be delivered on the latest timescale and on the latest budget. We know that there is only £30 million left in the budget pot and at least another 15 months of build time, so, to be frank, an overspend is probably inevitable.

Given the latest disastrous information on harbour upgrades, in what year will both ferries be operational on their planned routes?

Ivan McKee: As I indicated, the completion dates for the ferries are by the end of May 2023 and by the end of December 2023. Both ferries will go into operation, obviously, after those dates.

Work is continuing to make sure that the turnaround in the yard is delivering those results, and the yard is increasingly becoming more competitive to allow it to bid for other business going forward.

Edward Mountain: There we have it. We have a Scottish Government that does not even know when the infrastructure will be in place to allow the ferries to operate on the routes. We have a Scottish Government that mucked up the contract, with the nationalisation of the yard. It will overspend its budget and delay building the harbour infrastructure that we so desperately need. What more could possibly have gone wrong?

Ivan McKee: The member is incorrect. The harbour infrastructure is being put in place to ensure that the ferries can operate. The completion dates for the ferries are as I have already indicated, and the work continues to make the yard more competitive so that it can bid for and win more work on the open market. That is what this Government is focused on—saving the jobs, saving the shipyard and making sure that commercial shipbuilding on the Clyde has a future.

If we had listened to others, we would not be in that position today, and we would not have saved more than 300 jobs over that period of time. That is what is important, and that is what this Government cares about—the industrial future of that sector on the Clyde.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): The Scottish Government has demonstrated its crystal-clear commitment to the communities that are served by the ferry services and its strong commitment to ensuring that the proud tradition of shipbuilding continues in Port Glasgow on the Clyde and that jobs are protected from those who would have closed the yard. What can the Government and Ferguson Marine do to give the yard a secure future and guarantee jobs and skills for generations to come?

Ivan McKee: Stuart McMillan is right to highlight the need for us all to work to give a secure future to the yard and to future generations of employees. Potentially, work will be available from the Government; we have said that we will have a small vessels programme, and there will be longer-term proposals to invest in new ferry vessels. We want Ferguson Marine to be in a position to secure some of that work. However, whether work comes from the Government, other public sources or the private sector, the yard needs to be competitive. We have made clear our expectation in that regard, and we continue to monitor progress closely.

A lot of changes have been put in place since the new chief executive was appointed earlier this

year, and we can now see, and say, that significant progress has been made and that the yard is back to being a serious contender for future vessel contracts. I hope that all members will welcome and get behind that.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The substitute vessel that is being used on the Ardrossan to Arran route is 38 years old. Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd says that it has looked at more than 600 vessels in recent years but has managed to procure only one. Will the minister confirm when the work on project Neptune will be published, and will the Scottish Government commit to bringing forward a more sustainable plan to build capacity and construct vessels here in Scotland?

Ivan McKee: I make Katy Clark aware that my colleague the Minister for Transport will be in the chamber on Thursday to give an update on those issues. I look forward to hearing from the minister about the progress that has been made and the plans that are in place to address the issues that the member has raised.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The minister was asked about harbour upgrades but did not give a very clear answer. The Ardrossan harbour task force was formed more than six years ago, but we still have no agreement on who is going to pay for what or when the work will be done. When will Ardrossan harbour be ready to take the MV Glen Sannox?

Ivan McKee: Graham Simpson will be aware that Peel Ports is the owner of that facility, but the Government is committed to making sure that the issue is resolved. My colleague the Minister for Transport is working on that and has said that we are working to ensure that matters are in place for when the ferries will be operational.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes topical question time.

Business Motion

14:17

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-05882, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to this week's business. Any member who wishes to speak against the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Tuesday 6 September 2022

delete

followed by Scottish Government Business

and insert

followed by First Minister's Statement: Programme for Government

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Programme for Government

(b) Wednesday 7 September 2022

delete

followed by Scottish Government Business

and insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Public Sector Pay and Emergency Budget Review

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Programme for Government – Cost of Living

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.20 pm Decision Time

(c) Thursday 8 September 2022

delete

followed by Scottish Government Business

and insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Update on Displaced People from Ukraine

followed by Ministerial Statement: National Mission on Drugs Update

followed by Ministerial Statement: Future of Scottish Ferries

followed by Ministerial Statement: Protecting Those Most at Risk – COVID-19 Vaccination Programme Winter 2022—[George Adam.]

Motion agreed to.

Programme for Government 2022-23

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Nicola Sturgeon on the programme for government. The First Minister's statement will be followed by a debate, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:18

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The programme for government is published in the context of the most severe cost crisis in our lifetimes. That crisis is pushing millions into poverty and threatening the viability of businesses, and it will almost certainly push the United Kingdom economy into recession. It poses a danger not just to livelihoods but to lives. To be blunt, it is a humanitarian emergency.

The Scottish Government is already committed to measures that, this year, are worth almost £3 billion and will help with rising costs. Today, I will set out further steps to mitigate the impact of what is a rapidly escalating crisis. However, the magnitude of what is being experienced by people and businesses across the UK means that mitigation is nowhere near sufficient. It is therefore essential that I also address today the wider context. What is needed now is action on a scale similar to the Covid response—action that will tackle the causes of inflation and pull the UK back from the brink. That means action to reform the energy market, action to freeze energy prices, more cash support for those already struggling to pay bills and increased funding for public services.

Regrettably, the powers to act in the manner and on the scale needed do not lie with this Parliament. Frankly, they should. If they did, we could have acted already—but they do not. These powers are, for now, reserved to Westminster.

A new UK Prime Minister has, of course, just been appointed. I congratulate Liz Truss and wish her well. Our political differences are significant but, as with the previous three Prime Ministers, I will work hard to establish a good working relationship.

I have today written to the new Prime Minister, renewing my request for an emergency four-nations summit on the cost crisis. I have also reaffirmed the actions that the Scottish Government is asking the UK Government to take without delay. First, it must cancel the October rise in the energy cap and freeze energy prices at the current level. A freeze on bills would deliver immediate relief to households, and help to lower inflation, easing the wider cost crisis.

Secondly, the freeze must be applied to businesses and to the public and third sectors. That is essential to stop an avalanche of business bankruptcies and job losses, and to prevent essential services being squeezed by the cost of heating schools, hospitals and other public and community buildings.

Although a freeze in energy bills is absolutely essential, it is not sufficient. The energy price cap has already increased by 54 per cent. So, thirdly, the UK Government must target additional cash support to those already struggling.

Fourthly, the UK Government must increase the budgets of devolved Governments, or grant us greater powers to borrow, so that we can do more to help public services and workers.

Finally, if reports that Liz Truss is considering an energy price freeze are accurate, that is welcome. However, the costs must not simply fall on consumers over the longer term. As a contribution to funding such measures, the UK Government should introduce an enhanced windfall profits tax, for example by broadening the energy profits levy and removing the investment allowance.

The Scottish Government will continue to do all that we can to help. We will always try to find money for things that matter. However, under the current devolved settlement, our budget is essentially fixed, and it is under severe and increasing pressure. I have a duty to be frank about the limits that that puts on our ability to respond as fully as we want to.

Let me illustrate that point very starkly. To start with, this year's Scottish Government budget was 2.9 per cent lower than it was the year before. Every penny was allocated when the budget was passed by Parliament back in February. Since then, inflation has gone from 2 per cent last summer, to 6 per cent in February, to more than 10 per cent now. That means that our budget today is worth a staggering £1.7 billion less than it was when it was published last December.

In addition, and by necessity, we are also spending more in some areas than was anticipated. For example, public sector pay deals are, so far, costing £700 million more than we budgeted for.

To be clear, I don't begrudge a penny of that. On the contrary, paying higher wages is the biggest contribution we can make to helping families with soaring costs. When we intervened in the local government dispute, we did so to help shift funding from the highest to the lowest paid, and secure the best possible increases overall. That was the right thing to do.

Criticism of workers and trade unions fighting for higher pay is deeply misplaced. That is why, to the

Tories, threatening to row back on protections for workers and restrict the right to strike, and to Labour, who last month voted at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to block a bigger pay rise for council workers, I say this: our job in the midst of a cost crisis is not to press down on pay. Our job is to boost it with every penny that we can lay our hands on.

That is the approach that this Government will take, but there is no unallocated pot of money from which to fund higher pay deals or extra support for those in need. Our powers over tax and borrowing are also woefully inadequate, so, unless Westminster increases the total amount of money available, every additional percentage point on a pay deal and every pound that we spend on measures to help with rising costs must be funded by reductions elsewhere in our budget. That is the reality, and it means hard choices.

Our emergency budget review is intended to maximise the help that we can provide, while still balancing the books. That will mean stopping some things that we planned to do to fund what is essential to support people through this crisis. John Swinney will say more about the budget review in a statement tomorrow. However, that work will be impacted by the fiscal plans of the UK Government. For example, if Liz Truss decides to pay for irresponsible and regressive tax cuts by reducing spending on public services, that could mean an immediate cut in Scotland's budget. It is not possible, therefore, to conclude our own budget review until we understand the impact of decisions that will be taken at Westminster in the days and weeks ahead. However, I can confirm that, within two weeks of an expected UK Government budget, we will lay out an emergency Scottish Government budget review to Parliament. That will then inform our annual budget bill for 2023-24.

The cost of living crisis means that this programme for government is even more focused than usual—deliberately so. Our ambition and our intentions are unchanged. Our commitment to the full-Parliament plans set out in last year's programme for government and in the Bute house agreement stands, but increased uncertainty and rising costs are very real. Quite simply, given all that I have set out, we cannot do everything that, in more normal times, we would want to do. I know that that is not a message that anyone wants to hear but, unfortunately, that is the reality.

Understandably, there are also calls on the Scottish Government every day for more support. We will respond as positively as we can. Where we cannot do so, though, it is not a lack of political will that stops us. It is a lack of money. So, as well as targeting our own resources as effectively as we can, we will continue to apply maximum

pressure on the UK Government to provide the additional funding that is so desperately needed. I hope that, in doing so, in the interests of the people of Scotland, we will have the full support of parties across the chamber.

I turn to the priority actions set out in the programme for government. Those are focused on providing help now, but also on continuing our long-term work to build a wealthier, fairer and greener country. We will take the following steps to strengthen the emergency safety net for those who are, right now, struggling to pay bills. First, to provide more help for people who may be at risk of self-rationing or even self-disconnection from their energy supply, we will double the fuel insecurity fund from £10 million to £20 million this year. Secondly, we will give local authorities flexibility to use discretionary housing payments to help with energy costs as well as rent payments. We will also increase funding for discretionary housing payments by £5 million. Thirdly, we will extend eligibility for the tenant grant fund, introduced as part of our Covid response, so that it can provide help for those struggling to pay rent as a result of wider cost of living increases.

This Parliament—regrettably—does not have the power to freeze energy prices, but there are other costs that we can, and will, use our devolved powers to bear firmly down on. To that end, I can announce that ScotRail fares will be frozen until at least March 2023.

As well as rising energy bills, housing costs and increasing levels of debt are a concern for many. We do not control mortgage or general borrowing rates, but we will continue discussions to encourage banks and other financial services firms to take an approach that maximises security for home owners and businesses.

We will also raise the minimum threshold at which bank arrestments can be made, and will introduce regulations to give greater protection to people who are repaying debts through the debt arrangement scheme. A new bankruptcy and diligence bill will also seek to improve the lives of people who are struggling with debt.

In what is perhaps the most significant announcement that I will make today, I can confirm to Parliament that we will take immediate action to protect tenants in the private and social rented sectors. I announce that we will shortly introduce emergency legislation, which will have two purposes. First, it will aim to give people security about the roof over their heads this winter, through a moratorium on evictions. Secondly, it will include measures to deliver a rent freeze. The Scottish Government does not have the power to prevent people's energy bills from soaring, but we can and will take action to ensure that their rent does not rise.

By definition, those are temporary measures, but they will provide much-needed security for many during what will be a difficult winter. We envisage that both measures will remain in place until at least the end of March next year. Crucially, I can confirm that we will time the emergency legislation to ensure—subject, of course, to Parliament's agreement—that the practical effect of this statement is that rents are frozen from today.

Two of the most important and fundamental sources of security for any of us are a job and a home. In times of economic and financial crisis, those can be the foundations that help people through. The Scottish Government's powers to respond to this crisis are constrained. That is a matter of the utmost frustration. However, our policy of no compulsory redundancies in the public sector—which we continue to support notwithstanding the budgetary pressures that we face—will give people who are delivering essential services the peace of mind of knowing that their jobs are safe over this winter. To those who live in rented accommodation, I say that we aim to ensure that their homes will be safe, too.

The choices that any Government makes ultimately come down to a question of values and priorities. Where we can, we are prioritising interventions that will provide security, stability and reassurance by safeguarding jobs and homes. We will put as much money as possible into people's pockets through decent pay rises, and we will continue to make tough choices to target support to the people who need it most.

The programme also sets out measures to address longer-term challenges and to build a wealthier, fairer and greener country. I can announce that a housing bill in the coming year will improve affordability for the longer term, provide new and strengthened rights for tenants, and implement key policies on short-term lets and the prevention of homelessness.

We will support more households to install energy efficiency measures through continued investment in, and extended eligibility for, the warmer homes Scotland programme. That will help to lower energy costs, reduce energy use and deliver our climate change obligations. We will also launch a £25 million Clyde mission decarbonisation fund to support zero-emission heat projects and communal heating systems along the length of the River Clyde.

We will also continue our work to tackle child poverty, increase opportunity and improve educational attainment. The most significant measure against child poverty anywhere in the UK is the Scottish child payment, which already delivers £20 per week for every eligible child up to the age of six. I can confirm today that, from 14

November, the Scottish child payment will increase again, to £25 per week per child. That means that it will have increased by 150 per cent in less than eight months. On that date, the payment will also open to applications for children up to the age of 16. Those extensions, to a strand of the social security safety net that is unique to Scotland, will make more than 400,000 children eligible for support of £1,300 per year.

It will lift children out of poverty and enhance their life chances, and will improve the lives of thousands of families across the country.

In addition, two best start grants—the early learning and school-age payments—will now be awarded automatically to families in receipt of the Scottish child payment without the need for a further application.

We will also make two child payment bridging payments by the end of the year. I know that there have been calls to increase the value of those payments in light of the cost crisis. For the reasons that I set out earlier, we cannot commit to that today, but I can confirm that it will be given priority consideration in the emergency budget review.

We will also take further action to reduce the cost of the school day. Having delivered universal free school meals for all pupils in primary 1 to 5, I can announce that we will now start work with local authorities to extend universal provision to all pupils in primary 6 and 7.

We will continue to keep the Promise to children and families in and at the edges of the care system. This year, the first £50 million of the £500 million whole family wellbeing fund will be invested to improve support for vulnerable families. I can also announce that we will introduce a children's care and justice bill to ensure that young people who come into contact with the justice and care systems are treated more appropriately. I am pleased to confirm that, among other measures, that bill will finally end the practice of placing children under 18 in young offenders institutions.

We will also continue to invest in and improve early education and childcare, and school education. Last year, we delivered the expansion of funded early learning and childcare for all three and four-year-olds, and eligible two-year-olds. In the year ahead, we will design and test options to extend year-round childcare for school-age children.

Our school buildings are in the best condition that they have ever been in, and over the coming year, work will start on a further 17 new schools. We will also introduce an education reform bill, which will establish an independent education inspectorate and a new public body responsible for qualifications. To support our commitment to

substantially eliminate the poverty-related attainment gap by 2026, we will invest £200 million each year in the Scottish attainment challenge. Having already met the initial target for widening access to higher education, we will now appoint a new widening access commissioner to build on that progress.

We will continue to support our national health service. The NHS recovery plan to tackle the Covid backlog and build sustainability will be supported by more than £1 billion of targeted investment over this parliamentary session. We will invest £50 million to help improve accident and emergency waiting times. We will ensure that waits of more than 18 months for out-patients are eliminated in most specialties by the end of the year, and for in-patients by September next year. We will then aim to eliminate waits of more than one year for out-patients by March next year, and for in-patients and day cases by September 2024.

As part of work to reduce waiting times, the next four national treatment centres will open over the coming year, in Fife, Forth Valley, Highland and at the Golden Jubilee hospital in Glasgow. We will also invest a further £10 million to improve waiting times for cancer diagnostics and treatments, and establish a further two rapid cancer diagnostic services.

We will also continue to offer protection from Covid. Over autumn and winter, Covid booster shots, alongside flu vaccines, will be offered to those most vulnerable to serious illness. We will provide NHS boards with funding and support to deliver co-ordinated services for those living with long Covid.

We will introduce legislation to establish a patient safety commissioner to help improve safety and amplify the voice of patients. We will also publish a new mental health and wellbeing strategy, and a refreshed suicide prevention strategy.

The year ahead will also see the creation in law of the national care service. The new service will deliver the consistency and quality of care across Scotland that people deserve. It will be the most significant development in health and social care since the establishment of the national health service.

We will also drive forward our national mission to reduce drug deaths, with a total investment of £250 million by the end of this parliamentary session.

We will continue to work with partners with the clear aim—if, and as soon as, possible—of establishing a safer drug consumption facility in Glasgow. We will also introduce a new public health bill to restrict promotions of less healthy

food and drink, and consult on proposals to restrict alcohol promotions.

We will take forward a range of actions to improve women's access to healthcare, and we will appoint a women's health champion. We will work with Gillian Mackay and MSPs across the chamber to safeguard women's access to abortion services without harassment or intimidation.

As well as investment in health and care services, we will support the justice system. We will introduce a criminal justice bill. Among other measures, the bill will provide for the abolition of the not proven verdict. If approved by Parliament, that will be a change of truly historic significance in Scotland, and one firmly intended to improve access to justice for victims of crime. The bill will also deliver statutory protection of the anonymity of complainers in sexual offence cases.

In the coming year, we will also consult on specific draft laws to give effect to the recommendations in Helena Kennedy's report on tackling misogynistic behaviours. We intend to introduce a misogyny and criminal justice bill later in the parliamentary session.

We will also introduce a police complaints and misconduct handling bill to improve the way that complaints about the police are managed and investigated, and a legal services regulation reform bill to improve the accountability and transparency of the legal complaints system.

We will introduce a charities regulation bill to update and strengthen the legal framework that governs the work of charities.

I turn to business and the economy. The pressures on business—as on individuals—are acute. We will continue to support both the lowest business rates poundage and the most generous small business rates relief scheme in the United Kingdom. We will support the business community in making demands to the UK Government for, among other measures, an energy price freeze and a reduction of VAT on energy bills.

For the longer term, we will continue to implement the national strategy for economic transformation, with a laser focus on entrepreneurship, productivity and skills and new market opportunities. In the year ahead, we will further fund the Scottish National Investment Bank to deliver its key missions.

We will support further improvements to broadband infrastructure. We will establish a national network of six new hubs for tech companies, giving Scotland's tech start-ups access to some of the best development and support anywhere in the world, as part of our wider work to promote entrepreneurship.

We will continue to deliver our export growth plan with new export plans for the life sciences and renewables sectors. It is worth noting that Scottish goods exports, excluding oil and gas, grew by more than 5 per cent in the two years to the end of March, compared with a fall elsewhere in the UK. Scotland's position as the most successful location in the UK outside London for inward investment projects has also been strengthened.

We will also introduce a local visitor levy bill to give local authorities additional fiscal flexibility. That will help councils, if they so choose, to fund activities related to tourism and related infrastructure. One of the central aims of the national strategy for economic transformation is to maximise the jobs and economic activity that the net zero transition can deliver. The recent ScotWind auction, which offered lease options for up to 28GW of energy, has the potential to deliver £28 billion of supply chain work.

Indeed, Scotland has a golden opportunity now to lead an energy transition that secures net zero, enhances energy security and lowers energy costs—we must grasp that opportunity. However, maximising that opportunity will require fundamental reform of the energy market. The scandal of the current situation—the scandal of extreme fuel poverty in energy-rich Scotland—is that renewable electricity is already relatively cheap.

Offshore and onshore wind can now provide electricity at a lower cost than nuclear or gas-fired power, but the wholesale price of electricity in Britain is driven by gas, which is the most expensive form of generation. That must change. We will press the UK Government to speed up fundamental reform of the energy market and break the link between the cost of gas and the price of renewable and low-carbon electricity.

In the meantime, we will do all that we can to speed up our development and use of renewable energy. This autumn, we will seek approval for the fourth national planning framework, which will support the delivery of renewable energy projects. In the year ahead, we will publish an energy strategy and a just transition plan to guide our path to net zero. We will continue to support solar energy and maintain Scotland's position as one of the most advanced nations in the world for the development of wave and tidal technologies. We will set out plans for a further expansion in onshore wind capacity, as we also support the massive expansion in offshore wind.

The scale of our onshore and offshore wind capacity also gives us huge potential in green hydrogen. In the coming months, we will work to develop a new hydrogen industry, with publication of the finalised hydrogen action plan and

investment proposition, backed by £100 million of capital funding.

Finally, we will establish two green ports in Scotland and make the first investments from the £500 million north-east and Moray just transition fund. We will also introduce a circular economy bill to increase the reuse and recycling of materials and, next August, we will launch the deposit return scheme to encourage the reuse and recycling of containers, such as drinks bottles.

We will also support public transport. In addition to the freezing of ScotRail fares, we will support bus services, including the continued delivery of free bus travel for all those under 22 and over 60. We will invest in vital improvements to ferry services and consult on the new islands connectivity plan. We will support the shift to electric road vehicles, and we will do even more in the year ahead to support active travel, with investment in new routes for walking, wheeling and cycling.

Alongside the climate crisis, we will take action to address the nature crisis. In the year ahead, we will publish a biodiversity strategy and take action to stimulate private investment in nature restoration. We will continue work to identify the location of a new national park and develop a land reform bill to further diversify land ownership and empower communities. We will work with partners to further improve flood protection and resilience, and we will support farmers and crofters to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We will introduce a wildlife management bill for grouse to reduce the negative impact of some grouse moor practices on wildlife and the environment.

In addition to the bills that I have mentioned already, the programme for government includes bills for the new devolved tax on aggregates and to clarify the law on trusts and succession.

Last but by no means least, the programme for government provides for a Scottish independence referendum bill. If the outcome of the forthcoming Supreme Court referral confirms that a consultative vote is within the competence of the Scottish Parliament, I can confirm that we will legislate for a referendum on 19 October next year.

The current crisis highlights starkly the pressing need for independence. We are being reminded every day that where and in whose hands power lies really matters. The crisis is much worse in the UK than it is in other developed countries because of a Brexit that Scotland voted against but was powerless to stop. Under the current devolution settlement, powers over borrowing, taxation and energy regulation—the key powers that are needed to address the crisis—are reserved to Westminster, and yet the exercise of those powers

by a UK Government that Scotland did not vote for has been woefully inadequate. As a consequence, and despite the obvious and urgent need to provide help to millions, people are suffering.

The Scottish Parliament, by contrast, stands ready, willing and eager to act, but we lack the powers and resources that we need to do so in all the ways necessary. Independence would give us—as it does to other independent countries—the levers that we desperately need to respond to such a crisis. More than that, independence would give us the wherewithal to build a better, wealthier and fairer future. That is the prize that we should now grasp.

Despite the uncertainties that we face and the current limitations on our powers, the programme for government seeks to chart a path towards a better future. We will do everything possible to support people and businesses through the months ahead, and we will do so in a manner that is consistent with our values and our long-term vision for Scotland. We will improve our energy security and cut carbon emissions. We will support business growth. We will tackle the lasting harm caused by child poverty. We will prioritise help for those who most need it and, just as we did in the face of a virus, we will foster a spirit of solidarity to help one another through the challenges ahead. We will provide as much security and reassurance as we can in these tough times, as we continue to lay the foundations for a more equal and more sustainable country. Together, we will build a wealthier, fairer, greener Scotland.

Programme for Government 2022-23

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
We move to the debate on the programme for government.

14:50

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):
The global cost of living crisis is as big a challenge to people and businesses across Scotland as the Covid pandemic, and it must be treated with the same seriousness by both our Governments. In a time of emergency, Governments must focus on what they need to do rather than what they wish to do for political purposes. They need to govern for the whole country and not just for their supporters. Unfortunately, the programme for government that we have just heard about from the Scottish National Party-Green Administration falls woefully short of rising to the big challenges that we all face here in Scotland, across the United Kingdom and around the world.

I join the First Minister in congratulating our new Prime Minister, Liz Truss. Although the Prime Minister has changed, sadly it is the same First Minister repeating her old mantra of directing blame elsewhere and seeking grievance with the UK Government, rather than working to help people in Scotland. We need both Governments to tackle the cost of living crisis together and work to help individuals, families, communities and businesses across Scotland.

I have discussed the subject with the new Prime Minister, and we know that plans are ready to be rolled out in the coming days to help to alleviate the problems that people are facing right now. Sadly, the SNP is not holding up its side of the deal. When Scottish people are struggling with their bills, instead of getting appropriate support and assistance from the Scottish Government, they are getting another unwanted bill from the SNP and the Greens—an indyref 2 bill. That is unacceptable at a time when people are struggling.

The SNP Government is prioritising its planning for a vote on separation, which it knows will divide Scotland at exactly the point when we should be coming together and uniting. Such a vote is the wrong priority at the worst possible time.

Ahead of the programme for government, the Scottish Conservatives published our plan for the year ahead in Parliament, which focused on five key priorities: supporting families and households through the cost of living crisis; working with businesses to grow our Scottish economy; rebuilding our public services after the damage of

the Covid pandemic; empowering every community to recover; and building a better Scotland for the next generation. They are the priorities that people across Scotland are looking for. In a time of national crisis, they are the right priorities for the whole of Scotland—the right priorities at a time of national emergency.

When the Parliament has debated the programme for government in the past three years, it has been with the backdrop of national challenges unlike any that we have seen before. In 2020, the Covid pandemic remained a threat with no certainty over how it would end. In 2021, we faced the difficulty of recovering from the pandemic, of getting our economy moving and of our public sector delivering the services that we all rely on day in, day out.

Today, there is the global cost of living crisis, which is having an impact on every household in Scotland, with higher energy bills and higher costs for everyday items that we normally take for granted. That crisis has been caused in large part by the first full-scale war between two sovereign countries in Europe since the second world war.

The past two years have not been normal times; they have been a period of emergency. Make no mistake—this year is no different. The cost of living crisis is one of the biggest threats to livelihoods in our lifetimes. It demands that our Governments put country above party. They must put normal politics to one side and rise to the occasion. They must make hard choices about putting their own—[*Interruption.*] I am happy to take interventions; I know that the First Minister prefers to make statements, when no one can intervene, but if any SNP member wants to intervene rather than heckle, please do. No—they have not been given the script from the front bench.

As I was saying, Governments must put politics to one side and rise to the occasion. They must make hard choices, and they must govern for the whole country, not just for their supporters.

It is under that weight of national expectation that we assess the programme for government that the SNP and Greens have put forward today. Unfortunately, it does not deliver on Scotland's needs. Throughout the summer—we have heard this from the First Minister again today—they have sought only to point the finger of blame at Westminster. When the time came for them to set out their own plan, as they could have done today, they have instead told Scots to wait a couple of weeks and to tune in later for an emergency budget. Where is the proposed rapid spending review that John Swinney carried out over the summer? Why cannot the SNP Government announce major support today? Surely, it has been able to find something in John Swinney's

inquiries over summer. [*Interruption.*] I will give way to the cabinet secretary if he will—

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): I am very happy to respond to Mr Ross's point. As the First Minister has set out, the Scottish Government is wrestling with a budget settlement that was agreed when inflation was at 2 per cent. Inflation is now at 10 per cent, hence the emergency statement that I will give to Parliament tomorrow and the extensive opportunity that will be available to members to question me on its contents.

I think that any rational individual would understand that it is sensible for us to wait to see what decisions a new United Kingdom Government might take to jeopardise our budget—because that is a very real threat that we face—before we take measures to support individuals, within our responsibilities, in addition to the marvellous news about the Scottish child payment. That is the only payment to support families in poverty around the country, and that is what this Government has delivered today.

Douglas Ross: Increasing the Scottish child payment was part of the proposals that the Scottish Conservatives put forward. Of course, the cry that we often hear is, "Where would we get the funding from?" Well, John Swinney is still squirrelling away £20 million for an independence referendum next year.

All the measures that are in the First Minister's statement and in the programme for government are re-announcements and future promises, which we know that the Government often fails to deliver. That same Government said that a £37 billion support package from the UK Government, worth £1,200 to more than a quarter of Scottish households, is not enough. Really? The UK Government has made that investment and will continue to invest going forward.

The Scottish Conservatives have been absolutely clear that, as prices have increased, so, too, has the need for the UK Government to do more to help those who can least afford those increases. I look forward to the support package that the new Prime Minister and her Cabinet will outline in the coming days. I think that Scots expect the same level of action from their devolved Government.

However, that is another area in which the document falls short when it comes to the moment that we are discussing. It is clear that, at a time when the SNP Government should be focused on the—[*Interruption.*] I am quite happy to give way, First Minister.

The Presiding Officer: Douglas Ross, please continue.

Douglas Ross: The First Minister was chuntering away, so I thought—[*Interruption.*]

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I apologise to you, Presiding Officer, for commenting from a sedentary position. I was just wondering when Douglas Ross was going to say anything remotely of substance.

The Presiding Officer: I say to members that this is our first day back following recess. I would be very grateful if all members could remind themselves of the code of conduct, which requires that members treat one another with courtesy and respect at all times.

I move back to Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: Listening to your guidance, Presiding Officer, I will just respectfully say that I thought the same for 31 minutes as the First Minister set out her programme for government.

We have a Government that is focused on the national interest but a programme for government that is packed full of political priorities. It is ploughing ahead with its plans for a national care service and a £1.3 billion bureaucratic overhaul of social care, when the service is at breaking point and care staff on low wages are struggling with rising costs. It is refusing to back our North Sea oil and gas industry, and it is rejecting a new generation of nuclear power stations, despite energy supply being a key driver behind the cost of living crisis. The SNP and the Greens would rather import American gas and Russian oil than support jobs and communities in Scotland.

The First Minister got to her plans for a second independence referendum, which she intends to hold in October next year. At a time when Scots will be struggling with their bills and looking to this chamber for leadership, the SNP will have us debating another referendum bill.

During the Covid pandemic, the First Minister realised that it was not the time for another vote on independence so she abandoned her plans. How can she honestly say that the challenges that we face today are not worthy of the same response? Her own Government's figures from last month show that being part of the United Kingdom is worth £12 billion in additional public spending every year in Scotland. That is a resource that can only help us during this crisis, but it is one that the SNP is intent on getting rid of.

Instead of trying to unite the country to face that big challenge, the SNP Government is giving precedence to planning for a vote on separation, which it knows—it must know—will only divide Scotland all over again. It is the wrong priority at the worst possible time. Once again, the demands of the nationalist movement have been set above

those of the public, and all of Scotland will be poorer as a result.

This document is a failure even by the Government's own measure. Going into this debate, Scottish Conservatives had a look over last year's programme for government document. The First Minister stood up to deliver it and said, "This is what we're going to do over the next 12 months." Twenty-six of those commitments have not been delivered. Even worse, many of those commitments would have helped struggling families right now.

The First Minister mentioned the roll-out of free school meals for pupils in primary 6 and primary 7. She said the same last year. We were promised the roll-out of free school lunches for every primary school pupil, so what she has said is just a repetition of that.

A minimum national allowance for foster and kinship care was announced last year. What happened? The First Minister talked about the creation of new benefits such as pensioner-age winter heating assistance and low-income winter heating assistance. Those were all promised last year, but none of them has been delivered. Surely Scotland needs a national Government that will focus on those issues, rather than a nationalist campaign group.

The SNP and the Greens are failing to put their party politics to one side in the face of the massive challenges that we face. They are failing to pause their priorities to focus on the national interest, and they are failing to rise to the challenge of this crisis and be bold in their action, which the public expects. Those are the tests for the programme for government, and no one can credibly argue that they are being met by the commitments in today's document.

Therefore, the Scottish Conservatives have published our own plans for the year ahead in the Parliament. We should be scouring budgets to look for every penny that can be found for the cost of living support fund in order to help the poorest households and communities. If £20 million can still be coughed up for another independence vote, surely we can scrape a little bit further in the barrel for more important public resources.

At the same time, the Scottish Government should use its tax levers to pass on the UK tax cuts to Scottish workers, who are already the highest taxed workers anywhere in the United Kingdom. In these difficult times, we should do everything that we can to allow them to keep more of their own money in their pockets so that they can better support themselves and spend it in their local community, which will help local economies. I believe that those priorities should be in an SNP programme for government.

John Swinney: Will Mr Ross give way?

Douglas Ross: I will, if I have the time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Very briefly, Deputy First Minister.

John Swinney: Will Mr Ross place on the record whether he supports the pay deals that have been agreed, which incur greater costs for the Government and go beyond the expectations of public sector pay policy?

Douglas Ross: I put on the record that I was glad, given the mess that had been made of Glasgow, Edinburgh and other towns and cities across Scotland, that the First Minister finally found time in her busy schedule to get involved and get round the table. That should have happened weeks ago. If she had had fewer appearances at the fringe, she might have been able to get a resolution far earlier.

John Swinney: Will Mr Ross give way again?

Douglas Ross: I will—or maybe the First Minister might want to say something in the chamber rather than to the host of celebrities she spoke to at the fringe.

John Swinney: I think that Mr Ross needs to think about his gratuitous comments and about what he is muttering just now.

I would like an answer to my question. Does Mr Ross support the pay deals, which are higher than 2 per cent and incur higher costs for the Government to resolve? Yes or no.

Douglas Ross: I absolutely support rewarding our public service workers, including our council workers, who are some of the lowest paid anywhere in the country. They had to go on strike because they were being abandoned by the SNP Government. It took the Edinburgh festival to end before Nicola Sturgeon thought, “Actually, I had better do something about it.”

John Swinney: Will Mr Ross take an intervention?

Douglas Ross: I have given way to the member three times.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Ross really needs to bring his remarks to a conclusion.

Douglas Ross: I will bring my remarks to a conclusion. Giving way to the Deputy First Minister three times is very generous. I look forward to more robust debate going forward.

The priorities of the Scottish Conservatives reflect the national interest and fully focus on the big challenges that Scotland faces. There will always be disagreements in this chamber—that is natural in politics—but the programme for government was a chance to move Scottish

politics on from the usual Punch and Judy constitutional wrangling, which we have just seen a bit of, and to rise to the challenge and be the national Parliament that we should aspire to be. In that context, this programme for government from the SNP and the Greens can be viewed only as another missed opportunity.

15:05

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): This is a serious time, and it requires a serious debate. Scotland needs a programme for government that recognises the scale of the challenges facing our country. The most immediate challenge is the cost of living crisis, but wider action is also needed on the economy, the national health service, education and more, which I will come back to.

The cost of living crisis is a national emergency on the scale of the pandemic, and dealing with it requires both of Scotland’s Governments to move quickly and decisively. For months, families and businesses have been gripped by anxiety, as food, petrol and energy prices have skyrocketed. It is shameful that, on the day that the new price cap—if we can call it a cap—was announced and households were told to expect average bills to be more than £3,500, not a single Tory minister was available to reassure the public. It was immoral and inhumane to treat people like that.

I accept that the major action that we need in the face of the energy crisis is from the UK Government. It must cancel the planned increase in energy prices, as that one step would save families more than £1,000. The UK Government must impose a cap on energy prices for businesses, as that would prevent businesses from going bust. It must also impose a genuine and enhanced windfall tax on energy companies, which are making record profits. That would do two things: bring down bills and help to reduce inflation. Anything less than that would be an abdication of the UK Government’s responsibility and duty.

In that context, it is right for the Scottish Government to demand greater action from the UK Government, but my frustration, and the frustration of many around the chamber and the country, is that the Scottish Government has also been absent in this crisis and has at times acted as if it was a commentator, rather than recognising the powers and responsibilities that it has.

The First Minister often repeats that the Scottish Government has a fixed budget, and that was repeated again today. Actually, the Scottish Government has a legal duty to deliver a balanced budget, and roughly one third of its income comes from taxes that are imposed here in Scotland. The First Minister leads an Administration that can

raise revenue, grow the economy and make laws here in Scotland.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Anas Sarwar: Like the First Minister, I am not going to take any interventions.

The Administration that the First Minister leads should be doing everything that it can to help, using the powers and resources that it has. That is why Labour published our “Emergency Cost of Living Act”, which details some of the measures that we could take right now in Scotland. As I said on the day that we published our plans, I do not care about who claims credit for any changes that are implemented; I am more interested in families getting the support that they need right now. In that spirit, I welcome the change of heart from the SNP and the Greens on rent freezes. A rent freeze is a practical measure that will support many people who need help now. I am glad that months of campaigning from my colleague Mercedes Villalba and Living Rent have paid off.

We have come a long way in just a few months. In June, John Swinney stuck to the “Can’t do” script and said that the Scottish Government did not have the power to impose a rent freeze. That has been proved wrong. Just a few weeks ago, Patrick Harvie said that our proposals were unworkable. That has been proved wrong. One SNP member said that Mercedes Villalba was “naive” for even suggesting the measure. It is always welcome when politicians admit that they were wrong and commit to doing the right thing. I hope that we see more humility from the SNP and the Greens in the coming months.

The Government can do more. As I said, this summer, Scottish Labour set out plans for action that the Government can take right now with the powers that it has and within its budget. It could halve rail fares, cap the cost of bus journeys and set up an online fuel price tracker.

It is worth noting, just for a moment, that, on rail fares, what the First Minister actually did in government was increase rail fares earlier this year and she has now imposed a freeze. It is not a freezing of rail fares, but an increase and then a freeze, when the Government could have used its powers to halve rail fares as well as to cap the cost of bus journeys.

The Government could make emergency reforms to debt legislation, increase funding for money advice services and cancel school meal debt. It should be topping up the welfare fund, the water charge rebate and the business hardship fund. That would form the basis of an emergency cost of living act, using the powers and the resources that we have in this Parliament to change lives for the better.

For almost a year now, the Labour Party has been demanding action on the cost of living crisis. From the windfall tax to the energy price freeze and a rent freeze, we have been setting the agenda from opposition. Imagine what we could do in government.

A claim that is often repeated by the SNP is that it does not have the money. Well, it can start by not wasting money. For that reason, I welcome the promised emergency budget review, but it must be a real one, because it is clear that we can deliver more for the people of Scotland by focusing on their priorities, especially now when they need help the most.

Since 2007, the cost of the Scottish Government has doubled. Record numbers of ministers, special advisers and spin doctors are all helping to lead a campaign, not a Government. That is one cut that the Government can make right now and put money in people’s pockets instead.

In the SNP’s 15 years in government, more than £3 billion has been lost through incompetence and waste: £152 million on the failed ferry contract at Ferguson’s; £146 million on fixing mistakes in hospital construction at the Edinburgh sick kids and the Queen Elizabeth hospitals; almost £200 million on failed industrial interventions; almost £1 billion on agency staff in the NHS because Nicola Sturgeon cut training places while she was health secretary; and more than £1 billion on delayed discharge because her Government has not fixed social care. That in itself is worth £1,200 for every household in Scotland. That is the difference that the Government could make if it was not wasting opportunity and wasting money.

Turning to the wider programme for government, we should not forget that the SNP first promised to create a publicly owned, not-for-profit energy company in 2017. That policy was ditched before the pandemic, so there can be no using Covid excuses there. It is a perfect demonstration of the SNP promising big, making announcements to get the headlines and then failing to deliver. As an energy crisis hits Scotland, we must make sure that the lofty rhetoric of today does not become just another in the long list of policies announced with fanfare but never, ever delivered.

The First Minister has presided over a Government that has hoarded political power and too often failed to do something meaningful with it. Some might say that never has there been a politician with so much power who has done so little with it. In her grasp has been the power to transform Scotland, to grow our economy, to rebuild our NHS, to renew our education system and to deliver a green revolution. Instead, too often, the SNP has been timid and passive.

Maybe—just maybe—this time will be different, but after 15 years it is hard to give this Government the benefit of the doubt. Change will only come when the First Minister and her Government decide to end the culture in which every failure comes with a ready-made excuse. It is always somebody else's fault. No one will be surprised by the inclusion of a referendum bill, but they will be frustrated by the waste of money and resources, because the problem and the crisis are right now.

I hate to break it to the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the SNP, but whether people voted yes or no, leave or remain, their bills are going up right now. They need urgent action right now. We need the UK Government to step in right now to impose an energy price freeze and a windfall tax, and we need an emergency cost of living act in Scotland right now, to put more money in people's pockets.

It is right that, today, we have a heavy focus on the cost of living crisis, because of its immediate nature, but let us not pretend that there are not other crises rumbling on in Scotland under this Government's watch.

We were promised a period of recovery, but the recovery had not even started before we were thrown into the cost of living crisis. Under this Government's watch, there is a crisis in our NHS. The numbers today prove that. There are more than 700,000 Scots on an NHS waiting list, which means that one in eight Scots are waiting for an appointment or treatment. More than 9,000 children and young people are waiting for a mental health appointment.

There is a crisis in our education system and the promise to feed every child in Scotland's primary schools has been broken. The attainment gap refuses to close and, shamefully, money has been cut from schools in the poorest communities.

There is a crisis in our communities; we have the highest drug death rate in Europe; a quarter of our children live in poverty; and £6 billion has been cut from council budgets since 2014. The Scottish Government must use its powers. It must not look elsewhere to find someone to blame, and it must take action and make different choices because, fundamentally, politics is about choices.

I welcome some of today's moves—for example, the eviction ban, the rent freeze and the action that has been taken on the Scottish child payment. It is right that the First Minister has moved in that direction. I accept that, but much more needs to be done to address the cost of living crisis—it is not simply a cost of living crisis—because the action that has been announced is not enough. We need to go further and faster if we are to avert the crisis.

Now, more than ever, people need politicians who will put aside their own obsessions and priorities and act in the public interest. This cannot be just another programme for government that goes through the motions and promises change but delivers nothing. Government is more than simply a campaign; the title of First Minister is more than simply status; and power is more than just privilege and responsibility. Use government, use the status and use the power to change people's lives and improve Scotland right now.

15:16

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I rise for the Liberal Democrats.

This programme for government is a poor read and represents thin gruel to anxious Scots who will be looking to the Parliament for reassurance this afternoon. The First Minister gives the impression that her Government has responded to the crisis with £3 billion-worth of money, but that figure has been roundly debunked by the Scottish Parliament information centre time and time again. On another of today's flagship announcements, I note that, after a hike of rail fares by 4 per cent already this year, today's announcement only delays by two months a further increase in fares. When we consider rail travel costs across the rest of Europe, that is just embarrassing.

It is clear that, after more than 15 years in power, this is a Government that lacks the humility, creativity and ambition that is necessary to solve the problems that the people of Scotland currently face. Those problems are legion. We face the biggest hit to household budgets since the liberation of western Europe in 1918. Households in almost every demographic in Scotland are eyeing the coming months with fear due to energy costs, food prices, rising home costs and mortgages. The crisis is not coming over the horizon; it is already here.

Although the face at the helm in London has changed, the people of the United Kingdom have no faith that the Conservative Government has their best interests at heart. As Shakespeare might have put it, "Now is the summer of our discontent made inglorious and freezing winter by this daughter of Yorkshire". Liz Truss could dispel the anxieties of millions of households and businesses that fear their coming energy bills; she could do so in a heartbeat by adopting Liberal Democrat proposals—embraced by other parties—that would freeze the price cap for the coming year and paying for the freeze with a meaningful windfall tax on the superprofits of the energy producers.

However, the UK Government is not the only one with the levers of power that are necessary to help struggling Scottish families. I find it

astonishing that SNP members have used the summer to focus solely on their efforts to break up the UK, in large part blind to the suffering around them and desperately trying to pass the buck for things that they manifestly had the power to fix. I hope that, as the First Minister moved between the venues of her Edinburgh fringe festival appearances, she felt a profound sense of shame. All that mess, the lost business and the reputational damage to our festivals are the direct result of the year-on-year cuts by her Government to local council funding, which prevented those councils offering vital workers the pay rise that they deserved. Our capital was disgraced by the refuse strikes; Edinburgh was diminished, sullied and made a material threat to public health as the rubbish in bins piled high and the vermin feasted. If it was in the First Minister's power to intervene to end the bin strikes in early September, it was in her power to stop them in July.

We have heard today that the First Minister will plead governmental poverty to almost all of that and will lean into the fallacy that we have a fixed budget. She talked about hard choices. Let me direct her to some savings that she could make tomorrow. She could abandon her costly ministerial power grab of social care, scrap national testing in our schools, tell her ministers to stop playing dress-up diplomat in embassies that we do not need and stop spending her time and our money on a referendum that is simply not wanted by the people of Scotland.

The other crisis of the SNP's own creation is the fate of those Ukrainians who sought safe harbour in our country and are languishing in temporary accommodation. I refer members to my entry in the register of interests, in that my family and I have been hosting a Ukrainian refugee since August, under the homes for Ukraine scheme. Once again, not for the first time, I hear jeers and heckling at that. What message does it send to the families that we are trying to entreat to open their homes to Ukrainians if all that they get from SNP members is derision and scorn? It is utterly shameful.

During recess, I met aid workers based in Lviv who are working to provide safe passage out of Ukraine and into Scotland. They described the Scottish Government as being humiliatingly underprepared for the needs of refugees. The Government rolled out a supersponsor scheme, but called an abrupt halt to that a few months later, leaving thousands of people in limbo and even forcing some families to separate. Scottish ministers wanted the positive press of being seen to help, but did little of the backroom work necessary to make that happen, so we have homes across Scotland that are waiting to be matched with a Ukrainian guest and Ukrainians

who have been placed in remote areas without access to transport.

I am quite certain that as those huddled masses made their way across Europe with dreams of Scotland, they did not have a disused cruise ship or hurricane Katrina-style gym hall accommodation in mind. I say to the Government that it should reissue the call for homes, give councils the resources that they need to manage that properly and extend the discretionary travel scheme so that all those who seek safe harbour here can reach job opportunities far away from their homes. There are still 18,000 Ukrainians who are making their way here with a visa and a promise of home. That is a bin fire.

Some of the warning lights blinking across the dashboard of public policy have been crying out for the Government's attention for far longer than those that emerged this summer. Today's waiting time statistics are the worst that they have ever been. A staggering one in seven Scots is on a waiting list. The seeds of that crisis were sown long ago and lack of ministerial interest has allowed them to take root. That is why my party is calling for the health secretary to come to Parliament this week to set out a replacement for his failing NHS recovery plan. If he agrees to such a statement, I hope that he will adopt Scottish Lib Dem plans to recruit and retain staff through a burnout prevention strategy.

I am dismayed by the lack of provision in the programme for children's mental health and for people of all ages who are suffering from long Covid. The only out-patient waiting time target for child and adolescent mental health services is set to be missed. The national treatment centre that the First Minister announced has been delayed still further and a study published today found that a quarter of all deaths among five to 24-year-olds were from suicide. That is devastating. No child should ever be left feeling suicidal. We must move heaven and earth to ensure that every child knows that they are loved and supported, but that is not happening.

The same ministerial lack of interest is being visited on those Scots, many of them children, who are suffering from long Covid and whose number is fast approaching 200,000. There is precious little for them in this programme. It is to the SNP's shame that that is what patients have come to expect from them. Although the Government has accepted that Covid will exist among us, it continues making no provision for what Covid can later become. Yet another group of people has been forgotten about and abandoned on the altar of nationalism.

They are not alone. Island communities have once again been left high and dry by this Government in the pantomime of its re-

provisioning of lifeline ferries. They were originally scheduled for completion in 2014, but we are now told that they will not be ready until 2023. It is not only the boats that are behind schedule: the harbours are not even ready to take them. This would be comical if it was not for the impact that it is having on people's daily lives in island communities, and still nobody has been held to account for those inadequacies.

When the Supreme Court throws out the legality of a non-binding referendum, ministerial disinterest in the day job will reach new heights. All the oxygen of this Government will be diverted to the single issue around which it intends to fight the next general election. We have Green ministers for the first time in Scottish history. How sad it is, then, that their party has turned out to be the only Green party in the world that cares more about nationalism than it does about the environment. Let me say this: if the SNP and its Green coalition partners will not fight the climate emergency, the Scottish Liberal Democrats will.

We will fight the next general election on all the issues that matter to the people of Scotland. It is the height of arrogance to suggest that a general election can become solely about one's myopic world view, and the voters will render a judgment accordingly. The programme for government offers no real hope that we can expect to find anything different from a coalition Government that is fixated on only one thing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move on to the open debate. I ask those members who wish to speak in the open debate to make sure that they have pressed their request-to-speak buttons. I ask for back-bench speeches of six minutes. We have some time in hand should members wish to consider making or indeed taking interventions.

15:26

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): It appears that, every time we come back from recess, the price that the Scottish people are having to pay for being thirled to the UK has increased, and the cost is accelerating. The underlying causes of the cost of living crisis have some short-term elements, and we all hope for a speedy resolution to the war in Ukraine. However, we cannot ignore the long-term root causes of the situation.

The UK's frankly terrible economic performance over recent decades and the unequal nature of economic growth in an overcentralised UK state mean that the real wages of most people are well below what they would have been had long-term rates of growth matched the average of other large developed states. Low wages make many of our fellow citizens hugely vulnerable to price rises in

essential areas such as energy and food, and many in our society cannot absorb the extra costs.

As recent research from the Bottom Line think tank has observed, growth in small advanced economies that are similar to Scotland has been accelerating, leaving the UK trailing in their wake. The UK quite simply lacks the broad shoulders of small advanced economies.

Some of the drivers of inflation and the cost of living crisis are often forgotten. Covid has stimulated big shifts in consumer behaviours that whole sectors of the economy have not been able to deal with quickly enough due to supply chain disruption, labour market shortages and other disruptive effects of a Tory Brexit. Long-term issues of low levels of investment have meant that there is little spare capacity to respond to increases in demand in some sectors, and a raging debate is now on-going, albeit not here, about the inflationary effects of quantitative easing.

Those fundamental issues are not going to be resolved by a central bank using the crude single tool of interest rates, nor are they going to be resolved by our new Prime Minister, if early indications are anything to go by.

The fear of forthcoming energy price rises is palpable. The truth of the matter is that the current energy market is not able to provide energy to households and businesses at a price that they can afford. It is a market failure, and a failure of the UK Government as the creator of that market. It disproportionately affects consumers and businesses in Scotland despite Scotland being an energy producer.

Although I welcome the pre-trailed freezing of prices for 18 months, the question that has to be asked is who will pay for it. Companies and banks may benefit from Government-guaranteed bridging loans, yet consumers could end up paying over the odds for years—and paying the price of Tory failure. The energy market cannot continue in its current form.

I am on the record as calling for more borrowing powers for the Scottish Parliament, but arguably the energy crisis has shown why it is power over policy choices that we badly need.

The mitigations that the Scottish Government has put in place—the game-changing Scottish child payment, and an overall £3 billion, this financial year—are to be applauded, but are we really the type of country whose biggest ambition is to mitigate rather than fundamentally change? Are the Scottish Tories and the Labour Party in Scotland so supine that the answer is always that anybody and everybody can do better than us to protect our most vulnerable citizens?

In my constituency of Falkirk East, every business will be hit hard, given that there is no energy cap for them, with small businesses being most at risk. Around 85 per cent of the roughly 2,000 businesses in Falkirk East are very small, yet they employ approximately 7,650 of my constituents, many of whose jobs are now at risk. Some may therefore face the even greater price of a loss of employment on top of escalating domestic energy bills and general inflation.

Apparently, notwithstanding the damage that is being done to the Scottish people and Scottish business, our new Prime Minister sees a large part of the solution to the UK's energy crisis as being the exploitation of Scotland's rich energy resources—from wind to oil and more—but not in the interests of Scottish people. Indeed, as increasing numbers of Scottish people twig what they are up to, the Tories seem intent on curtailing the rights of the Scottish people to have a say in their future, and on circumventing democracy.

We face a cost of living crisis and an energy crisis. Both are underpinned by political chaos that will not be stopped by the introduction of yet another hapless Tory Prime Minister. That is a choice of two futures. I choose Scottish independence, not Tory dependence.

15:31

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): For 15 years, successive SNP First Ministers have stood up in the chamber to deliver a statement on their Government's plans for our country. However, for millions of Scottish people living in rural areas, that statement is about what the SNP can do for them.

It must seem like groundhog day for the Scottish Government because, once again, we find ourselves retreading the steps of unkept promises. Year after year, rural and island communities have been overlooked, short changed and misunderstood by the Government. This year's programme for government, hamstrung by the coalition with the Green Party, is no departure from that trend. In fact, it is getting worse. Rural affairs are mentioned just six times in what is a 36-page document.

Farmers and crofters are the linchpin of our rural communities. As the world tackles the food insecurity crisis in the wake of the war in Ukraine, they continue to work hard to keep us fed and watered. Their reward in this year's programme for government is uncertainty, more red tape, a bill on grouse, a tourist tax—I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests—and a system that has brought European farmers, with their tractors, to the streets in protest. The Government wants to align with that system.

The programme for government was a chance to tell members what the dedicated food security unit in Scotland is doing. Scottish farmers have waited for six years to find out what a post-Brexit agriculture bill would look like. In that time, the Scottish Government has managed to copy and paste the European Union's hated common agricultural policy. Still, SNP ministers opt to sideline academic and scientific consensus in favour of aligning with the EU.

Scotland's farmers want the tools to advance themselves, to protect the environment and to reverse the loss of biodiversity that has been witnessed under this Government. Farmers and industry bodies such as NFU Scotland have expressed deep concern over the Scottish Government's proposals. Left out on a limb and waiting for the Government to get a move on, they despair, as their views have simply not been listened to.

Back in May, 11 organisations, including NFUS, Quality Meat Scotland and Scottish Land & Estates, wrote to the Scottish Government to express their concerns over the impact of rising inflation. They called for crucial support payments to be brought forward to ease their cash flow concerns. Those concerns were mirrored by hundreds of farmers who I spoke to at agricultural shows over the summer. Four months later, we are still waiting.

The past year has been a tale of broken promises. The SNP Government talked the talk about thriving rural and island communities, but when will we see it walk the walk? A tourist tax is going to go down like a bucket of cold sick. Last year, we were told:

"By Summer 2022 we will introduce a new £5 million Islands Bond fund, providing up to £50,000 each for up to 100 households by 2026".

Where is that? It is a policy rejected outright by islanders.

We were told:

"16 subsea fibre cables to 15 of Scotland's islands will begin to be laid in ... 2022".

Where are they?

We were told of

"a £20 million Rural Entrepreneur Fund, providing grants of up to £10,000 to support the creation of new businesses, or the relocation of existing businesses"—

scrapped. The peatland restoration budget—slashed.

Where is the food processing, marketing and co-operation fund? Where is the seafood strategy? What has happened to the sustainable Scottish brand ambition? It has absolutely vanished.

We have seen failure after failure, and that is before mentioning the ferries fiasco, R100 or the centralisation of public services away from rural areas. When will this Government stop shirking its devolved responsibilities and confront those issues?

The debate has rightly focused on the cost of living crisis and on soaring energy prices. The contributions made in the debate have highlighted the gravity of the situation that we, in Scotland, are facing today. I have no doubt that members from all sides of the chamber will be receiving letters, emails and calls from constituents who are struggling with bills and wondering what this Government will do to support them. I am able to tell my constituents, with confidence, that our new Prime Minister will do everything that she can to support people and help them with their bills, in an announcement this week, building on the unprecedented package of support.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): Will the member take an intervention?

Rachael Hamilton: Yes, if the cabinet secretary tells me where all the policy proposals have gone.

Shona Robison: On the point about supporting household budgets, will the member and her party support the rent freeze and the moratorium on eviction?

Rachael Hamilton: We would like to see the detail of that legislation. [*Interruption.*] I do not see what is so funny about that. This is a Government that wants to bring in red tape and bureaucracy. It has not given farmers the detail of future farm policy. It is asking us to give our opinion on policies on which we have not even seen the detail of the legislation. It is an absolute joke.

This is not a programme for government. The people need something that is going to give back to them, particularly in rural areas. Devolution has placed significant power in the hands of this Government, which would allow it to address the unique issues that our country faces alongside the issues that the world at large is facing. Instead of using those powers for the benefit of people across the whole country, this SNP and Green Government is choosing to sacrifice our nation's prosperity for its own selfish ends.

15:38

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am glad to be speaking in the debate. I was elected last year. Last summer, it was frustrating that, due to Covid, visiting constituents—be they residents, members of social enterprises or workers at tourist attractions—was very hard to do. This summer, it has been great to visit constituents all over East

Lothian. All the meetings had a similar theme: the rise in the cost of living, be that through energy costs, inflation or supply costs. There was a real, palpable fear for their future.

My main reason for being interested in politics is the question of how we protect the most vulnerable in our society. I was always of the view that Westminster made that task more difficult and that an independent Scotland would be the best option to protect those who are most in need. Right here and right now, that view is stronger than ever.

This year, sterling is down 15 per cent and it is moving towards parity with the dollar. We have the lowest growth rate in the G20, apart from Russia's, and the highest forecast inflation rate in the G7. Last week, inflation was forecast to rise to 22 per cent. Those economic levers are held by Westminster.

I have had many discussions with families who are worried sick about how they will pay their energy bills. Costs will mean that expenditure outstrips their income—it is as simple as that. Many families already cannot afford to eat, never mind heat. It is not a choice about what to pay—they cannot do it.

Last week, the University of York estimated that, if the energy cap rise goes ahead, 72 per cent of households in Scotland will be in fuel poverty, rising to 86 per cent of pensioners. That is 70,000 people in my constituency of East Lothian. Another survey highlighted that 25 per cent of residents plan to keep their heating off this winter. Among one-parent families, the figure rises to 35 per cent. That is 25,000 people in East Lothian who will not be putting their heating on this winter.

Last week, I chaired the third meeting of the East Lothian poverty forum, which I set up and which brings together national and local groups that work in the anti-poverty sector. All the groups reported a massive increase in referrals to them and their services. The East Lothian Foodbank reported that, since last October, when the universal credit uplift was removed, it has seen an average 80 to 90 per cent increase in demand, year on year.

The participants in the forum agreed on four main priorities. The first was to ensure that food banks can meet demand, because how they will do that is a real worry. Secondly, premises in each locale were identified as heat banks or heat refuges. It is incredible that, in 2022, we are even talking about heat banks, where people will go to get heat and survive. The third priority was that advice services must be adequately resourced. Finally, benefits maximisation should be a key target.

We are experiencing the most difficult cost of living conditions in at least 50 years. All of us in this place must pledge to protect the most vulnerable in society. That is what we are all here for. That is what our constituents expect, and the programme for government sets out how the Scottish Government is doing just that. The Scottish child payment is unique to Scotland—let us remember that—and it is the most ambitious child poverty reduction measure in the UK. The payment was doubled to £20 a week per child in April; a further increase to £25 from November will mean a rise of 150 per cent in the past eight months.

There are 104,000 children in receipt of the Scottish child payment, and it will be automatically increased to £25 a week. All eligible under-16s will now benefit from the new £25 rate, with all payments backdated to the date on which their application was received. In East Lothian, that has meant about 2,500 successful applications resulting in about £1.5 million being paid out. With the announcement today of the extension to the child payment programme, that figure will increase.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of clarity, the announcement today was only about moving the date forward by seven weeks. The announcement on doubling the Scottish child payment was made in the budget in December last year, and the announcement on the additional £5 on the Scottish child payment was made in the child poverty delivery plan in March this year. So, none of that was announced today—it is a reannouncement of previous policy.

Paul McLennan: I do not agree with that statement.

Coming back to the point, the main thing is that the Scottish child payment will go up to £25. The payment will be extended and it will help more vulnerable families. That is what the Scottish Government is doing. It is not happening in the Labour-controlled Welsh Government—it is happening here.

I welcome the announcement of the extension of universal free school meals from primaries 1 to 5 to primaries 6 and 7. The reaffirmed pledge to keep that promise is very welcome. I am also delighted that the first £50 million of the whole family wellbeing funding will be available this year to protect the most vulnerable families.

I welcome, too, the announcement of the rent freeze for public and private rented properties, which will help people who are struggling with rising bills. I look forward to working with housing bodies in East Lothian to implement that policy and protect more of our residents.

The Scottish Government is taking every action that it can within the fixed budget that we have because of our limited legislative powers. If we do not act, more people will die this winter than ever before. I repeat: more people will die. The most significant policy levers to tackle the crisis are with the UK Government, and its summer of complete inaction has compounded the difficulties that everybody is facing. The new Prime Minister, Liz Truss, needs to set out very quickly what actions the UK Government could take now. Many Governments in Europe have already taken action to begin to address the crisis. As has been mentioned, we need an immediate cancellation of the October price cap rise and an uprating of benefits, at the very least.

The Scottish Government is doing the best that it can within the restrictive devolved set-up. Imagine what it could do with the powers of a fully independent nation.

15:44

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): A year ago in the programme for government debate, we discussed recovery—what it would take to recover from the truly historic impact of a 20 per cent drop in the economy, because that is what happened during lockdown. It gave rise to increases in the cost of labour and materials the like of which we had never seen. We are now plunged into a cost of living emergency, with the energy price cap rising initially by 50 per cent and the prospect that energy prices could quadruple. That would place up to 80 per cent of Scottish households in fuel poverty, which is truly staggering. We must therefore welcome the steps set out in the programme for government that will help to deal with that.

An emergency budget is undoubtedly necessary. Measures to deal with fuel insecurity, such as the fuel poverty fund, are welcome. A freeze on ScotRail fares is also welcome, although the Scottish Government could at least acknowledge that we have already seen those rise before the implementation of the freeze. Action on debt is, indeed, due. Although the First Minister is right to point out that financial regulation is a reserved matter, powers over debt policy and legislation on debt reside here. We must stretch every sinew. As not only fuel prices but interest rates rise and people struggle with their bills, they will, frankly, face debt the like of which we have not seen in more than a generation.

The proposed measures are all welcome, but they are the same ones that Labour members called for during the summer. When we recognised the scale of the emergency, we made the same proposals. Unfortunately, the context is set somewhat by the way in which the First

Minister made her speech today. It took her a thousand words, set out on four pages—almost a third of her statement—before she set out a single one of those measures. That tells us something about her priorities: she would rather get her excuses in first than deal with what we can do with the powers that we have.

We know the reason for our not having had any proposals on the cost of living crisis sooner than now. It is because that was not the plan. We all know what the plan was: we were going to have papers about the constitution, which were to be released, one after another, during the summer. I think that we have had two. Where are the other half-dozen? They were pulled because the Government recognised that the subject was not the people's priority and that whatever claim it might want to make about the constitution will not deal with the issues that people face here and now. Years and decades of constitutional wrangling have done nothing to help people to face the bills and costs that they have now—that is the reality.

The situation does not come without a wider context, too. The reality is that the economic situation in Scotland is a matter of concern. I welcome Michelle Thomson raising the issue of the rises in earnings and productivity. However, if we look at those measures, we can see that Scotland's recovery is lagging behind that of the rest of the UK. The Scottish Fiscal Commission's report showed that earnings growth here is lagging behind not only that in the best-performing parts of the UK but the UK average. Since 2015, our productivity has stalled. Where in the programme for government is there discussion of those issues?

Organisations such as the Wise Group and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation are calling for immediate action on wage maximisation. The simple truth—the simple logic—is that in our economy we have both wage suppression and labour shortages. Where is the direct action on those? How many people with driving licences could earn £40,000 per year—yet cannot, just for want of the right training course? That is not the only skilled trade that could benefit from having new people. There are jobs out there, but there is a lack of direct action from the Government to help people into them by removing the barriers that are in their way and helping them into the training that they might need.

I take issue with what Douglas Ross said about this being a programme for government that is full of political priorities. I do not think that it is. We have some cost of living measures, but this is apparently a pared-down programme, which has been reduced in order to focus on the cost of living. I question whether a number of its

measures truly address our priorities right now. Do reform of the legal complaints process and changes to charities legislation really narrow the focus on the direct challenges? I wonder whether those should really be priorities in a pared-down programme for government.

We also have little detail on the major proposals that could make a difference. If we were to really examine the issues, we might reiterate our concerns about the proposed introduction of a national care service. Are people out there clamouring for more centralisation and better-quality bureaucracy in care? No—they want clear, practical and pragmatic changes to the way in which care is delivered, but none of those things is addressed in the Government's current proposals. It is shameful that the Government has reiterated its pay increase of £10.50 per hour. Frankly, its rejection of our costed proposal for an immediate pay increase to £12.00 per hour for those workers now sounds very hollow indeed when the self-same workers, whose work is extremely important, are struggling with their bills.

Ultimately, this is not a Government that does transformation well. When we look at the police or the colleges we can see that there is a rebrand but no investment. Unfortunately, it looks as though the national care service is headed in the same direction, and the Scottish Qualifications Authority is also headed for yet another rebrand, with no substantial change—there is very little detail in the programme for government about what is planned.

The simple reality is that people are not clamouring for more constitutional change or for a referendum; people want action, help and bills dealt with now, rather than a court case, bickering or attempts to start a campaign for an election that might not happen for 18 months. People want a Government that stretches every sinew to use every power to help them here and now with bills the likes of which they have never seen before. That is not what we have in this programme for government.

15:50

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I am sure that the workforce at Ferguson Marine will be delighted to hear the comments that Anas Sarwar made in his speech.

I wanted to speak in today's debate because this summer's recess was a very different one for my office: we received more calls and emails than ever from people who are struggling to afford to pay energy bills now. We anticipate that kind of casework over the winter months—sadly—but not during the summer. Those people were not worrying about paying their bills in a few months'

time; they are struggling to pay their bills now, even before the cold weather has set in.

I welcome this year's programme for government, which will build on the actions of the Scottish Government and some of the steps that the Scottish Government is taking to support household budgets, such as those on the Scottish child payment, the carers allowance supplement and the council tax reduction scheme. Among the other announcements that the First Minister made today, the announcement of the doubling of the fuel insecurity fund from £10 million to £20 million will be welcome, as will the flexibilities given to local authorities to use their discretionary housing payments.

The fact remains that the key levers in the crisis remain in the hands of the Tories in Westminster—their inaction has caused huge anxiety for families and massive uncertainty for businesses. The summer of navel gazing and blue-on-blue attacks has guaranteed that more families, businesses and households will move into crisis.

Food banks in my constituency have contacted me to highlight how demand for their services is rocketing. However, as more and more people look to tighten their budgets, donations to food banks are on the decrease. That will make it even harder for food banks and other third sector organisations that support vulnerable people in my community in Inverclyde to continue to support those in need as the cost of living crisis deepens. Paul McLennan touched on that point in his comments. His constituency is totally different from mine, but there are similarities in terms of the understanding of what is happening on the ground.

I did not get involved in politics to promote food banks; I got involved in politics to help people. Sadly, at the moment, food banks are an absolute necessity. The economic crisis that we currently face, which is being led by the inaction of the UK Government, is absolutely shocking and appalling. Too many people will die this year because of the inaction of the Tory Government. Child poverty is expected to rise to the highest level since the peaks of the 1990s and a further 3 million children will be plunged into absolute poverty without UK Government action.

Although I welcome the actions of the Scottish Government, I call on MSPs from across the chamber, but particularly the Conservative members sitting to my left, to ensure that their colleagues in Westminster work together to deliver similarly bold actions to help households across the country. I genuinely hope that the Scottish Tories will agree with me that Westminster needs to do more to help people through the crisis. I hope that Mr Ross will hold urgent talks with the

new Prime Minister on the issue. However, with Liz Truss repeatedly saying that she is not in favour of “handouts”, I am not going to hold my breath, despite the United Nations' special rapporteur on poverty, Philip Alston, saying that the UK Government's policies have led to

“systematic immiseration of millions across Great Britain”.

During challenge poverty week, which takes place next month, it will be one year since the universal credit uplift was scrapped by the UK Government. It is not just the inaction of the Tories in Westminster that the Scottish Government is having to mitigate—it also has to take decisions to deal with the harmful actions of the UK Government. Regardless of its limited powers, the SNP Government is doing more than any other UK Administration to tackle child poverty.

Rachael Hamilton: I think that we all agree that school meals for primary 1s to primary 5s are essential, especially during a cost of living crisis, so why in the programme for government did the First Minister say that they have been delivered when we know full well that they have not?

Stuart McMillan: I am just coming on to that.

Regardless of the limited powers that it has, the SNP Government is doing more than is being done elsewhere. The doubling of free childcare provision to 1,140 hours and the expansion of the provision of universal free school meals were designed to help household budgets, and they have never been more important. I welcome the announcement to extend the provision to primary 6s and 7s.

I do not think that any member would suggest that expanding any service will always be easy, because it is clear that it will not be, whether it is done by my party in power here or Rachael Hamilton's party down at Westminster. Acting and trying to do something is important; in comparison, we see the inaction of the Tory Government in Westminster.

The package of five family benefits for low-income families is providing unparalleled support, and I am delighted that the Scottish child payment will increase to £25 per week per eligible child on 14 November. Applications will also open for all eligible under-16s from that date. Following the doubling of the payment to £20 in April of this year, that represents an increase of 150 per cent in less than eight months.

Douglas Ross spoke earlier of the national Parliament that we aspire to be. I wonder whether he was thinking about the UK Government's cruel two-child limit. There is no cap on the number of children per family who can receive the Scottish child payment. I wonder whether he was thinking of what his Government in Westminster has done.

It has punished people, compared with what the Scottish Government has attempted to do.

Presiding Officer, I am conscious of the time. I genuinely welcome the programme for government. It is probably not the programme for government that the Scottish Government would have envisaged, but it is essential and necessary, and it is a programme for government of its time.

15:56

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I welcome members back to the chamber.

I appreciate that this year's programme for government comes against the backdrop of a perfect storm of the worldwide pandemic that we are coming out of, which effectively paralysed our economy for more than two years, and an unexpected war, which has undoubtedly pushed prices up, and not only for energy.

With much of the rhetoric that we have heard from SNP members in the debate, one would be forgiven for thinking that we do not already have a powerful devolved Government in Scotland, which has had day-to-day responsibility for many aspects of our lives for more than a decade.

Statistically, it has been a miserable summer for many people in Scotland, and let me tell members why. We found out today that NHS Scotland backlogs and waiting times have reached an all-time high. This morning, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine issued a statement that is unprecedented in its tone. It said that the latest figures are the worst since records began and should "ring alarm bells" in political leaders' ears.

It said that

"The depth and scale of this crisis"—

and it is a crisis—

"is deeply concerning. Patients are already coming to harm, a consequence of long and dangerous waiting times."

Those are all its words, not mine.

Stuart McMillan is right to say that too many people may die, but how many of them will die needlessly lying on gurneys in hospital waiting rooms and corridors? How many of them will die waiting to see a consultant when they have been waiting for years to see someone to treat their cancer? Too many promises made by the Scottish Government have been broken.

This summer, we learned that the attainment gap remains stubbornly high. We saw public sector strikes that left our key cities looking like middens, to be frank. Our ferry network recorded its highest-ever number of mechanical breakdowns, because of—guess what?—its ever-ageing fleet. We heard in topical question time

today that ministers cannot answer straightforward questions about when the ferries will be operational and delivering lifeline services to our island communities.

More worryingly, violent crime in Scotland has risen to its highest level in five years. Crimes of a sexual nature went up by 20 per cent last year and are also at their highest levels. I will focus on crime and justice for the remainder of my speech, and I will start with police funding, because this is the programme for government debate.

Let us look at last year's programme for government, which promised boldly in black and white that it would

"protect the police resource budget in real terms for the entirety of this Parliament".

What a short-lived promise that turned out to be. We know from the spending review that we heard about before the recess that the police were looking at nearly £66 million of real-terms funding cuts over the next five years. What does that mean in reality? What are the consequences of that? That prompted the chief constable to make a very rare and unprecedented intervention. He warned that the police will face "difficult and exhausting" choices that

"have the potential to lead to disruption, protest, disharmony."

Those are his words, not mine. He could not have been clearer about the consequences of those cuts.

The programme for government will offer scant reassurance to anyone who works on the front line in our emergency services or, indeed, our entire justice sector, and it will not be any comfort to those who are on the receiving end of rising violent crime in Scotland. What about the 70,000 recorded violent crimes in Scotland last year? That is the highest number since Nicola Sturgeon took office. What about the 14,500 crimes of a sexual nature? That is the highest number since records began. What about child grooming offences, which were up 80 per cent over five years? What about the 65,000 incidents of domestic abuse? Again, that is the highest number on record.

Members could forgive me for thinking that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans is completely out of touch in writing in *1919* magazine today that

"Scotland continues to be such a safe place to live".

Fine—but tell that to the tens of thousands of our fellow Scots who are suffering abuse, assault and attack, and are waiting for years to get their day in court.

All of that, of course, comes against the backdrop of a cut to police numbers, which have

fallen to their lowest level since 2008. The consequences of that are dire, too. Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary warned that there is a real risk of the police

“becoming paralysed and unable to cope with unfettered demand.”

The Scottish Police Federation has reiterated that. It says that cuts to numbers will have a detrimental effect for the public at large and that the police are now

“scrabbling around trying to keep the wheels on the bus”.

I do not blame the federation for that quote because we learned last week that the police are becoming de facto ambulance drivers due to chronic shortages in the health service. They are essentially picking up the pieces of broken systems—broken devolved systems that the Government is in charge of. Social care, healthcare, mental health and addiction services have all been cut, as well. I would argue that it is not just irresponsible to cut police funding; it is, frankly, dangerous.

In reflecting on this year's programme for government, I ask: how can we have confidence that any of the promises that have been made today will actually be delivered, because the track record is poor? Michelle's law was promised but not delivered. Suzanne's law was promised but not delivered. HMP Stirling was promised by 2020, but it is still not delivered. HMP Barlinnie and Highland replacements were promised, but they have now disappeared off the face of the earth.

Of course I welcome the plans to legislate in a number of areas. It is good to see in the programme legal services reform, police complaints handling and, of course, the perennial promise that the Government will finally do something about the controversial not proven verdict. However, it is what is not in the programme for government that bothers me the most. It is disappointing that there are no plans to introduce a specific bill for victims' rights. I ask the Scottish Government to look favourably and, indeed, constructively on my victims bill as I try to progress it through the Parliament. However, to be frank, it should not take my victims bill or Pam Gosal's plans for reform of domestic abuse law to make the Government act on those matters. Ministers have the power to make those changes now, far more quickly and far more easily than any of us could do.

With that in mind, I ask whether the public will have any faith that the SNP-Green coalition will fund and protect our emergency services and, more important, protect our communities, or whether people share my very real concern that the First Minister and her ministers have other things on their minds and other priorities between

now and next October. I am more than happy to be proven wrong on that, but if today's opening statement by the First Minister is anything to go by, I fear that I will not be.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I call Ariane Burgess, who has a generous six minutes.

16:04

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): When Greens came into government through the Bute house agreement a year ago, one of our main priorities was a new deal for tenants. Although Scotland already has the strongest tenants' rights in the UK, the Bute house agreement set out why we need to go much further to reform renting. That is because housing is a fundamental human right.

Everyone has the right to a safe, high-quality home that is affordable and meets their needs, but many people who rent or want to rent a home still do not have that. That is why, last Christmas, I warmly welcomed the Scottish Government's launch of a consultation on an ambitious programme of reform, including new tenants' rights, higher quality standards, more protection against eviction and rent controls. Put together, that forms the biggest package of reform for a generation. As the PFG confirms, all that work is moving ahead through this parliamentary session and—no doubt—beyond.

Over the past year, many of us have recognised that the scale of the cost of living crisis means that we need more urgent action, right now—robust, properly worked up and effective action. That is why I am so pleased at today's announcement by the First Minister on a rent freeze and a halt to evictions until at least 31 March.

The cost crisis will hurt many, many people, but people who rent their homes are some of the most vulnerable to the harsh winter that is ahead. The problem is profoundly serious in my region—in much of the Highlands and Islands, where winter can be particularly harsh, housing and energy costs are already sky high. I know that many will be dreading what is in store in the coming months.

Protecting people from rising rents and losing their homes is the right thing to do as winter looms, so it is welcome that the emergency legislation is part of a bigger package of help, including assistance with costs from the tenant grant fund and discretionary housing payments. A renewed effort must also be made to make sure that tenants and landlords know their rights and responsibilities now and after the new legislation is passed.

We can do more to help with the wider cost of living. We have already helped with household budgets by doubling child payments and introducing free bus travel for everyone who is under 22. I am proud that the programme for government will implement our shared commitment to increasing investment in energy efficiency and renewable heat, which will make it cheaper and greener for people to heat their home.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): The rent freeze is welcome, but does Ariane Burgess agree that it is vital for it to include rent increases that have been issued but have not yet come into force?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give Ariane Burgess the time back for the intervention.

Ariane Burgess: I recognise Labour's support for such action. In June, we could not support Labour's proposal, because flaws in how it was set out meant that it would not have worked—it would have had adverse consequences, such as prompting evictions. Labour proposed emergency measures for a bill that was explicitly designed for a post-emergency context, which would have put the measures and the bill much more at risk of legal challenge. However, I look forward to Labour's whole-hearted support for the PFG and the steps that will come after it. Labour members could have a word with their colleagues in Labour in Wales—the one part of the UK where Labour could do what the Scottish Government seeks to do today—where Labour is miles off the mark.

It is regrettable that other changes that would make a dent in the cost crisis, such as raising the minimum wage or reversing the cruel cuts to universal credit, can be made only by Westminster. The Tories seem obsessed with tax cuts, which will do nothing to help those with the lowest incomes. The new Prime Minister has vowed to approve more drilling in the North Sea, instead of investing in clean power from our own renewable resources, in recognition of how much the cost crisis is a product of fossil fuel addiction in the first place.

Scotland is leading the way on a renewable future and we are leading the way on protecting tenants. No other part of the UK proposes anything close to the ambition that the First Minister has set out on supporting renters. It is part of our journey to join the norm in other European countries, where regulation of rents is built into the way in which housing works. It is part of our journey, set out in the Bute house agreement, to make rents not simply the cork that bobs about on the waves of the market but something that is driven by affordability, quality and tenants' voices.

Today's commitment to a rent freeze and a halt to evictions during this cost of living crisis is the latest example of Greens working with colleagues in government, taking action, making a difference and delivering on our promises.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Paul Sweeney, who will be followed by Emma Roddick, the final speaker in the open debate. You have a generous six minutes.

16:10

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Many of the proposals that the First Minister announced this afternoon are welcome. However, they are all long overdue and, in many instances, the Government could and should have gone further and with much more urgency.

We had a series of debates on the cost of living crisis in May and June, but nothing of any substance was put in place. We could have acted then. Instead, we went into a parliamentary recess lasting almost a quarter of the year. Parliament could have been recalled with a few hours' notice, given the scale of the crisis. Labour called repeatedly for that to happen, but not a finger was lifted. Meanwhile, my constituents have been calling my office in tears and have attended my advice surgeries worried sick about the impact that the crisis will have on them and on their families.

Although I agree with the First Minister that the Tory Government has utterly failed to grasp the scale of the crisis—it has been consumed by a self-indulgent party leadership contest—that makes it all the more depressing that the Government here in Edinburgh has also been posted missing all summer.

I want to welcome specific measures that were announced today. The proposal for an initial overdose prevention centre in Glasgow has my full support, and the Government knows that my member's bill intends to complement that effort through a licensing system that will enable rapid scaling up of those facilities nationally. My bill consultation closes tomorrow.

I also commend the no compulsory redundancy policy. However, that should be in place indefinitely in the public sector. I also note with interest the £25 million Clyde heat decarbonisation fund, which sounds promising, and I look forward to seeing further detail on that.

Although I am not convinced that the measures to tackle child poverty go anywhere near far or fast enough, I welcome increased funding of any description that will help to tackle child poverty in Scotland, however inadequate the effect that that redistribution of incomes has across the economy.

I also note the rent freeze announcement, although I have concerns about its short, seven-month duration. I encourage the Government to extend the minimum period of the freeze well beyond March 2023, to give comfort to tenants about their security.

In June, Mercedes Villalba proposed a rent freeze. Green MSPs told her that that was unworkable at that time. I do not know what is different now, why the Government has suddenly U-turned and why the excuses that it gave to us in June are no longer a concern. Frankly, the explanations that we have heard today from previous speakers have been woefully inadequate and unconvincing by any measure. A lot of that change has to be to do with members of the Green Party being in open revolt about their parliamentary representatives betraying them in that way.

We are three months—a quarter of a year—down the line from Mercedes Villalba's proposal. How many tenants have had their rents raised in that period? How many landlords have taken advantage of the Government's inertia? We know that, for example, rents in Glasgow are up 41 per cent since 2010, meaning that the average rent is more than £1,000 a month. Meanwhile, wages are down 3 per cent over the same period.

Mercedes Villalba: I am sure that Mr Sweeney will join me in welcoming this development from the Scottish Government. Does he also agree that it is vital that we strengthen the appeal process, so that tenants who are faced with unreasonably high rents already are empowered to challenge those at tribunal?

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

Paul Sweeney: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I thank my friend for that intervention. It is critical that the Government hears that proposal and ensures that the emergency legislation incorporates that mechanism. I have just outlined that the decoupling of housing costs from incomes has been going on for more than a decade in this country, and we must address that issue urgently.

We are in a cost of living crisis. Months of Government inaction has cost hard-pressed tenants money. Although it is welcome that the Government has finally acted on rent freezes, it is utterly unconscionable that they are poorer because of the failure to act three months ago. That is why we must address that time lag urgently.

The Government is right to call for a freeze to energy costs this winter and in what it said about the increase in the cap. The Labour Party agrees

whole-heartedly with that approach, but we could be taking action here, too. Just a few months ago, I visited a municipally run district heating system in Clydebank that could take the entire town off the gas grid. It already provides energy to the Golden Jubilee hospital and numerous public buildings in West Dunbartonshire, but it cannot be connected to residential properties because there is no funding to do that. I would welcome clarity on whether the project would be eligible for the Clyde mission decarbonisation fund, which was announced earlier today. The fund cannot be another half-baked neoliberal programme that is exploited by foreign state-owned firms, such as Vattenfall in Sweden, when it could be a national system of innovation that uses Scottish companies, is owned by the Scottish people and delivers benefits back into our national economy.

We need to be honest about the scale of the challenge that the lowest earners in Scotland face. Half a million people in Scotland have no money left after they have covered essential monthly expenses, and more than a million have less than £125 left over every month. With energy bills, prices in the shops and interest rates all rising, most families in Scotland will face the hardest winter in our lifetimes.

While we had a summer of strikes, the Government was reluctant to respond unless it was dragged kicking and screaming from the Edinburgh festival to sort out the problems. There has been a failure to utilise the leveraging of the public sector and the procuring power of the state to drive up standards across industry. Just one example of that relates to the ScotWind projects, as the Government has completely failed to make the adoption of collective bargaining a condition for the licensing of ScotWind contracts. That has been a gross failure.

Although it is good to be back in the chamber, frankly, we could have been here taking action all summer. I have no doubt that we can get through this mess if there is the will to do so, but I worry that the Government would rather point the finger of blame elsewhere than lift a finger here to help.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the final speech in the open debate, after which we will move to closing speeches, when all members who have participated in the debate need to be in the chamber.

16:17

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): It has been quite a return to Parliament this week. Those of us who were elected for the first time in 2021 are quite used to dealing with national crises, but it is not every year that we get a new Prime Minister—almost, but not quite.

Unfortunately, Liz Truss shows no sign of dealing with the crises any differently from her predecessors. Among her early commitments has been to prioritise helping the rich to get richer, with tax cuts for high earners at a time when public spending should be increased, and to engage in a contest in who can most strongly deny the democratic will of Scotland.

However, I will go back to the Government that does have a mandate in this country. The SNP Government's flagship policy in the programme for government is increasing the Scottish child payment. That money goes straight into the hands of those who need it to keep children out of poverty.

Like, I assume, most of us here, I had a very busy recess, which was packed with surgeries and meetings with community groups that are struggling to support people through the cost of living crisis. I have heard from constituents who are begging their council to cut off their energy supply to avoid being landed with bills that will soon amount to more each month than their rent.

Shetland Islands Council has shared with me particularly stark statistics that show that residents of the isles will need to be on a salary of at least £104,000 a year to avoid being plunged into fuel poverty. That is an extreme example of a reality that is present across my region—people sit in chilly homes, surrounded by large-scale renewables projects that provide green energy to the rest of the UK, wondering how on earth they are going to pay for the rising cost of energy.

Things are bleak, and it is correct to say that the biggest levers of power that can change the situation—those relating to energy policy, social security and borrowing powers—lie with Westminster. However, that has not stopped the Scottish Government from putting money right into folks' hands and doing what it can—more than what initially seemed possible—to support individuals.

As I listened to the First Minister earlier, I struggled to count the number of significant announcements for people in the Highlands and Islands. The one that I am most delighted to see is a rent freeze. As members might remember, I had hoped to speak in a debate that was held right before recess on an amendment that was lodged by Mercedes Villalba, and to say that I am relieved that a freeze will now be introduced ahead of the new housing bill would be an understatement. That is the right thing to do. It prioritises people's safety and security over private financial gain, and it will save lives. I feel for those who have had their rents increased in recent months, but I hope that people can see the value in the peace of mind that is provided by not having further increases at a time when very few can afford them.

I am also glad to hear that the housing bill will deal with protections in the long term as well as addressing short-term lets and other housing pressures, which are devastating communities in the Highlands and Islands. I look forward to scrutinising the bill in more detail and taking forward the evidence that has already been presented to me by constituents as well as by organisations such as Crisis, Shelter Scotland and Living Rent Highlands and Islands on just how bad the situation already is. If communities in my region are to stand any chance of continuing, and if employers, including the NHS, are to be able to recruit in those areas, we need people to be able to find an affordable place to live. Sadly, that is not possible in many of our towns.

I want my region to diversify, to use its vast resources and knowledge and to be a key player in Scotland's place on the world stage. That is far from out of reach, but we need support to retain the people who we have and, right now, only those on the highest of salaries can live and work in and contribute to those communities. Housing is absolutely at the heart of that issue, and today's announcement recognises that.

On another matter, a constituent recently shared with me how important "Prima Facie"—a play that tells the story of a defence lawyer who ends up fighting her own sexual assault case in court—has been to them personally and in reopening conversation on sexual crimes through popular culture. Although the play is based on English law, the running theme that the law does not currently work for victims of sexual assault and rape is still relevant here in Scotland. The law does not work for women. I therefore sincerely welcome the significant news that the Scottish Government is pressing forward with much needed changes that have the potential to address that horrendous imbalance and make it possible for a survivor to even imagine that their case might succeed.

Change is not easy and, particularly in professions such as law and, yes, politics, there is a huge fear about fixing something when folk admit that it is broken but insist that the way that it has always been done is the way that it always must be done. I understand that the reforms will not be easy and will be controversial, but they are worth it and it is personally meaningful to me that the Scottish Government feels that they are worth it, too.

Despite the fact that the programme for government document is not so long this time, this year's programme is packed with good news, and I hope that people will read it. I am certain that those who do so will wonder whether some of the Opposition MSPs who have spoken today were accidentally reading a memo from Liz Truss. Action is being taken here, and it is desperately

needed from down south, too. I hope that I am shocked and surprised to see that action being taken soon. In the meantime, Westminster and Whitehall are complicit in the extortion of people across this country in the name of disgustingly high profits for energy companies. It is clear from the failure of Westminster to provide social security that we cannot afford to remain a part of this United Kingdom.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the closing speeches. We still have quite a lot of time, so Jackie Baillie can have an enormously generous seven or eight minutes.

16:22

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Thank you very much, Presiding Officer.

I will focus my closing comments on the cost of living crisis and the current state of our much-loved NHS. Before I come on to that, let me reflect on the time that both Governments have wasted before introducing measures. We know that the Tories have been wholly distracted by the psychodrama that has been their leadership contest. I am glad that it is over—I am sure that they are, too—but I am not sure that it will make any significant difference, given that we have “Continuity Boris” in number 10.

Others have—perhaps unkindly—mentioned the First Minister’s appearance at no less than five fringe festival shows last month; she must have walked past the rubbish that was piled high in the streets outside. Public sector workers were fighting for a pay deal that will keep their homes heated and food on the table, but if they had wanted an audience with Nicola Sturgeon then, they would have had to buy a ticket at the box office on the Royal Mile. That said, I very much welcome the pay deal that was arrived at—although it was, for the First Minister, a summer of designer clothes, Equity cards and jetting around Europe.

Back at home, the biggest single item of concern for people up and down the country was, and remains, the cost of living crisis. They are scared of being cold, of going to bed hungry and of being unable to pay their rent or mortgage. They are facing eye-watering increases that are simply unaffordable. I meet people who used to donate to food banks but who are now the beneficiaries of food banks. Prices are going up, but that is not being matched in wages. Some of us are, unfortunately, old enough to remember what it was like in the 70s and 80s, with double-digit inflation and houses being repossessed. We are heading that way again.

Businesses are in trouble, too. While barely recovering from the pandemic, they are now facing

increased costs for energy and goods at the same as footfall is declining and people are, naturally, spending less. There is no energy cap for businesses, so many of them face an uncertain future unless they get help.

Scottish Labour has set out our plans for an emergency cost of living act that would use devolved powers to provide urgent help. The plans cover a rent freeze, a winter evictions ban, a business hardship fund, a water rebate of £100 for every household, half-price rail fares, funding for money advice and energy advice, legislation to improve debt solutions, doubling of the Scottish child payment and topping up of the welfare fund.

At UK level, Labour’s plans to freeze the energy price cap this winter would have saved households in Scotland, including off-grid homes, £1,000. We are putting forward real plans to help people at a time of crisis.

The First Minister: I appreciate that it is a UK Labour position, but could Jackie Baillie clarify whether it is still Keir Starmer’s position that energy bills should be frozen for just six months?

Jackie Baillie: I think that the First Minister will find that those were initial proposals and what we would—*[Interruption.]* The First Minister is laughing, but until now she has come up with not one single proposal. What we will do is freeze energy bills, because we care about people. We will not dismiss our responsibility and blame it on Westminster, which is what she does all too often.

We are putting forward real plans, and what an achievement it is that Labour in opposition is coming up with the solutions that are now being adopted by both Governments—an energy freeze at UK level and rent freezes in Scotland, too. Just imagine what we could achieve in power.

Let me be generous in my praise for the U-turn by the SNP on rent freezes, and let me give credit to Mercedes Villalba, who pursued that idea throughout the passage of coronavirus legislation many months ago. It is her determination that has brought us to this point. I hope that the Government will, in the future, be equally bold about other Labour suggestions—although, how disappointing it is that the SNP and Greens blocked that at that time. However, I always welcome converts.

It has to be said that it must be a tad embarrassing for the Greens to be wheeled out to deliver the SNP line against something that was in the Greens’ manifesto, and to act as a human shield for the Government. I am told that Patrick Harvie wanted to announce that change of heart at the Green Party conference, only to have the announcement pinched from him by the First Minister. I really hope that the ministerial Mondeos are worth it, because the SNP is having a laugh at

his expense. If Patrick Harvie wants a lesson in how to influence people, I am sure that Mercedes Villalba will be happy to take a meeting.

We are all agreed that making homes energy efficient is something that the Scottish Government can do—indeed, it is critical when people are facing soaring bills—so why was there an underspend in area-based schemes for home insulation last year, and why are we heading for an underspend this year? Is it because we have insufficient capacity with installers? Not a single house has been done in the Western Isles because the installer that was there is no longer operating.

Why has the budget for energy efficiency been cut this year, during an energy crisis? Why is the warmer homes Scotland scheme heading for an underspend? What a mess. What a missed opportunity.

The incompetence is breathtaking, but it gets worse. Energy Action Scotland is an organisation that does tremendous work on fuel poverty, advises the Government and helped to bring people together for the First Minister's energy summit. It was told during the summer that its Government funding would be withdrawn—during an energy crisis. You really could not make this up if you tried.

I am proud to be an honorary vice-president of Energy Action Scotland, together with Gillian Martin and Murdo Fraser. Indeed, John Swinney is a former honorary vice-president, so he knows the work that it does. I hope that John Swinney will give a commitment today, on behalf of the Government, to continue funding Energy Action Scotland. I would be happy to take an intervention on that. No—there is no intervention, Presiding Officer. That says it all.

We know that some people will face a worse winter than others will face. When a vulnerable person is housebound and unable to move, heating is essential to their physical wellbeing. Yesterday, I met Carolynne Hunter, who cares for her 12-year-old daughter, Freya, at home. Freya requires 24-hour care. Their monthly heating bill will go from £400 to £800 in October and to £1,700 in January. However, it does not stop there: Freya requires a range of medical equipment that uses lots of energy, the cost of which is not fully reimbursed by the NHS. Carolynne is facing the prospect of having to put Freya in hospital or in a care home, because she simply cannot afford to keep her at home. That is utterly heartbreaking. For the Scottish Government, doing nothing must not be an option.

I turn to the NHS. I used to say that Humza Yousaf was missing in action. I was perhaps being too kind; he is simply missing, paralysed by

indecision. Meanwhile, 747,000 people—one in eight Scots—are languishing on waiting lists with no end in sight. Today, we have the worst accident and emergency waits on record. The First Minister announced £50 million for that issue, but that had already been announced in June, so there is nothing new.

Of course, delayed discharge rates have reached a record high since guidance was first introduced in 2016. Child and adolescent mental health services waiting times are getting worse, not better. National treatment centres to help to manage waiting lists are delayed. Cancer remains Scotland's biggest killer, yet there are still thousands of people going undiagnosed and untreated. The Scottish Government's "NHS Recovery Plan 2021-2026" is, quite simply, not fit for purpose.

The pandemic has exposed the problems in the NHS, but the problems all pre-date Covid and are the responsibility of the SNP Government.

Our heroic NHS staff are at breaking point. They worked hard through the pandemic to care for us and our loved ones, but now they are facing a workforce crisis, with more than 6,000 unfilled vacancies, low wages and long hours. They are exhausted, and simply lining the pockets of private-sector agencies to fill the gaps in nursing care is not sustainable. NHS staff need a proper pay deal: it is time that the First Minister and her Government got serious about that.

The SNP has been in power for 15 years and Scotland is going backwards. Life expectancy is declining, and poverty and inequality levels are rising. The people of Scotland are currently being failed by both their Governments, so what we need is a laser focus on people's needs. The Government must use its powers and act in the interests of the people of Scotland—and it must do it now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Liz Smith; I can give you a very generous nine or 10 minutes.

16:32

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer.

There is no doubt that this has been a particularly difficult summer, during which it has not been easy to find any good news. The Westminster and Scottish Governments have not had their troubles to seek, and it is painfully obvious to all members that the public want their Governments to be fully focused—laser-like, as Jackie Baillie has just said—on the major challenges that we all face, and that they want both Governments to talk to each other, to cooperate and to set aside the constant bickering

that does nothing to assuage their concerns about the future.

Yesterday, a constituent said to me that she did not believe that the Scottish public care terribly much about who sorts their energy bills, who picks up their bins, who is responsible for the transport that gets them to work or who sorts the deeply damaging strikes that have become too familiar across the country; they just want to get the issues sorted so that they can get on with their lives.

The First Minister is absolutely right to say that Westminster has a big role to play: it does, but so, too, does the Scottish Government, and it is important that those roles complement rather than contradict each other.

There has been consensus in the debate that it is the economy that matters most; it cannot be any other way in a time of crisis. I will concentrate on the economy, starting with this week's stark economic analysis of where we are in terms of the Scottish Fiscal Commission's forecasts. The SFC is a body that rightly earns considerable respect from John Swinney, who perhaps knows better than any of us about the true numbers that his department sees and, therefore, the extent of the economic problems that Scotland faces.

Professor Graeme Roy said again to the Finance and Public Administration Committee this morning that although many countries in the world face significant economic challenges, Scotland's are particularly acute. That is pretty clear from almost every aspect of the analysis.

For many months, the Scottish Fiscal Commission has been highlighting the issue of weak productivity, which is, as Daniel Johnson highlighted in his speech and as I would argue, the main long-term problem in the economy. It is true that that is also a problem in the UK economy, but it is worse in Scotland and is putting untold pressures on gross domestic product and on our potential for economic growth. That, combined with the demographic issues that mean that the population of Scotland is likely to fall by 16 per cent in the next 50 years and an emphasis on the problems caused by a shrinking working population, suggests very difficult circumstances for us all.

The long and short of it is that much more must be done to ensure that Scotland is a much more attractive place in which to live and work. That is the strong message that is coming from business and industry. We need tax incentives, investment incentives and innovation and skills incentives. If we do not have those in place, our other endeavours to ensure that society functions well will not work and our wellbeing will not be enhanced.

So far, so good. We also need a sense of realpolitik about exactly where we are. The obituaries that followed the death last week of Mikhail Gorbachev, who was a giant of European and world history, reminded us that he not only understood, with perestroika, the need to place the economy at the heart of politics, but that he also understood, through glasnost, the importance of democracy and that, in addition to adherence to the principles that we all treasure, Governments must accept and respond to criticism.

There is a lesson here. Over the summer, the divisions within Scottish politics—and, yes, within my own party—have been stark. What alarms me, as a relative veteran—

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Will Liz Smith accept an intervention?

Liz Smith: I will, in a minute.

What alarms me, as a relative veteran in this Parliament, are the negativity and occasional vindictiveness that are now pervasive. Their promulgation and the response to them too often define the future of our politics.

Gillian Martin: Does Liz Smith think that it helps the case for democracy when the new leader of the Conservative Party tries to change the goalposts for referenda?

Liz Smith: It is pretty clear from what I have just said that I am not going to take sides. It is very clear from what constituents have said to me—and I am sure it is the same for all members—that they want our undivided focus to be on the economy, not on other issues. That is not an argument to have now. The public deserve better. They must have that focus. I say again that it is right that both Governments take responsibility for that.

I will address the economic issues before I come to some others. As Douglas Ross rightly said in his remarks, the cost of living issue is urgent. Direct support is urgent. I hope that we will hear more about that tomorrow, but it must be accompanied by the fiscal discipline of low taxation and a small state. We have become used to the opposite, both north and south of the border, partly as a response to the Covid pandemic but also because of our expectation that it is now the state that should take responsibility for our lives. That situation cannot be allowed to last.

It is also the case that business must have as much certainty as possible in these difficult times. That is one reason why I have been asking the Scottish Government to match the UK Government's pledge to reduce the income tax rate from 20p to 19p in 2024. The SNP knows that if it does not commit to that, there will be a lower block grant adjustment. That will create many

issues, given the declining tax base in relation to what is happening in the UK. The SFC's forecasts on that are particularly grim.

We also want to avoid any increase in the business rate, which, incidentally, is hinted at in the medium-term financial strategy, but we want it to be set in stone—and, in the future, we want to move to reduce the rate.

At the same time, given the worrying trend of weak productivity in Scotland, we need to do much more to support businesses on upskilling and reskilling. We need to be on their side, addressing the barriers in the private and public sectors that restrict modernisation and supporting them on employment policy and entrepreneurship. The issue of developing more flexibility in the labour market, which has also been highlighted by the SFC, is a huge one.

The SNP has presided over years of labour market structural imbalances. That is why it is so important that we talk meaningfully about and deliver upskilling, reskilling, entrepreneurship and flexible working. If we do not, we will be in a very difficult place, because we will reduce the attraction of investment.

The accompanying aspect is the importance of improving the delivery of the public services that are so crucial to our communities and our wellbeing. The delivery of education, health, transport, housing and criminal justice services is all devolved. My colleagues and other members across the chamber have set out the long list of failings that have all occurred within the devolved area of competence and spending and within the context of a block grant that, in both cash and real terms—yes, minus the Covid spend—was the highest on record.

There is also a long list of examples of waste. Millions of pounds of public money—Anas Sarwar mentioned this—have been squandered by the Government on the delays to the ferries, which are on-going, it seems; on BiFab; on Prestwick airport; on the malicious prosecution of the Rangers FC administrators; and so the list continues. That is why the Scottish Conservatives believe that this Parliament needs to do something to address Audit Scotland's concerns and improve scrutiny and accountability. For me, that includes a finance bill procedure. Not only is waste on that scale inexcusable, but there is a huge opportunity cost attached to it, given where that money could have been spent.

Rachael Hamilton rightly spoke about the support that is desperately needed to address our fragile rural communities. She highlighted the urgent need for a sustainable future farm policy following the protracted consultation period. Support is needed for our islands, which have in

some cases been completely isolated this year when it comes to food supplies, transport to the mainland and broadband connectivity.

Jamie Greene highlighted the significant problems in the justice portfolio, most especially those that reflect the increases in serious crime and those that hitherto have undermined the rights of victims, as opposed to criminals. I wish Mr Greene well for his member's bill.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans (Keith Brown): Will the member take an intervention?

Liz Smith: I am finishing.

Today's statement and debate have shown just how much there is to do. Westminster has important responsibility, but so, too, does this Parliament. Governments need to get on with the jobs that they were elected to do without any distractions or eyes off the ball. In my view, the public deserve nothing less.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the Deputy First Minister to wind up the debate. I would be very grateful if you could take us up to decision time.

16:43

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): I thought that Liz Smith was doing really rather well for most of her speech, until the latter part of it, but she touched on a certain concept when she described herself as a veteran of this institution. If she considers herself to be a veteran of this institution, I am not quite sure where that leaves me. When I entered a 10,000m race after my 55th birthday, I had the horrific experience of being described as a "superveteran" under the entry criteria. Being a veteran is bad enough; being a superveteran was a stage too far.

Liz Smith made a plea for a thoughtful and substantive discussion about the issues that we face as a country. It is crystal clear from the tenor of today's debate and the very different tone around the programme for government document that the Government has produced that we are facing an acute and serious challenge to the quality of life of individuals in our country, which comes on the back of the acute threat to the social and economic wellbeing of our country through the Covid pandemic. If we are to have that quality of debate—which I am all for—perhaps we have to recognise that some of the contributions to the debate do not help, and to be honest about that.

Alex Cole-Hamilton made some comments about the Government's approach to the housing of Ukrainian refugees. A total of 15,757 refugees have been accommodated and welcomed into

Scotland. The Government had committed to welcoming 3,000; five times as many have been welcomed into our country, representing 18 per cent of the United Kingdom's total sponsorship arrivals.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the Deputy First Minister give way?

John Swinney: I will, in a second. Alex Cole-Hamilton attacked and belittled the contribution to that effort by people and the Government in Scotland. That was a regrettable mistake for him to make.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I cannot believe that again I have to remind the Deputy First Minister that the SNP Government is not the people of Scotland. I was belittling the approach of his Government, not that of the people. He needs to wake up to that, because it is a mistake that his Government makes time and again. The SNP is not Scotland.

Will the Deputy First Minister guarantee that all Ukrainians—both those in-country and those on their way here with a visa and a promise of a home—will have a permanent place to live or somewhere they can live for at least six months that is not a hotel, a cruise ship, a barracks or a gym hall?

John Swinney: Alex Cole-Hamilton has not redeemed himself with that response. My point is that the Government is working with our local authority partners and with households the length and breadth of the country to welcome Ukrainian refugees. If Alex Cole-Hamilton does not have it in him to welcome that whole process, it says more about him than it does about me.

Liz Smith made the point that I, perhaps more than anybody else, know the scale of the financial challenges that we face. Believe me, since I found myself providing maternity cover over the summer for Kate Forbes, that realisation has become ever more significant for me. The housing of Ukrainian refugees—a larger number than we anticipated—raises a financial cost to our budget, which I have to provide as part of our moral duty as a country, but it has to come out of the block grant.

In addition, ministers have spent a great deal of time over the summer in trying to secure pay deals, which has been difficult. Members of the public and our public sector workforce are very anxious about their financial circumstances and, understandably, they want to increase their pay. The Government has been trying to work with them. We have secured an agreement with the police on their pay; we have secured an agreement with train drivers; and, last week, after intensive efforts, we secured agreement with local authority workers.

I will make a few points about the local authority dispute. Members have criticised ministers for not involving themselves earlier in the process. The Scottish Government provided a recurring £140 million of additional resources to local authorities, to enable a pot of 5 per cent to be offered by them to trade unions. The Government cannot make an offer to trade unions, because we do not employ the local authority workforce, so we provided that £140 million. The decision of a majority of the leaders of local authorities—not SNP leaders—was to offer 3.5 per cent. That was supported by the Labour and Conservative leaders in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and it was a provocative and antagonistic act, which made the reconciliation of the issue more difficult.

Jackie Baillie: The cabinet secretary will recall that the decision that was taken at COSLA was to offer 5 per cent. That was supported by Labour. The key question was whether the Government would provide more money. Subsequently, it has provided a lot more money. We look forward to that happening for the NHS staff as well.

John Swinney: As always, Jackie Baillie has to be watched very closely with regard to her proximity to accuracy in the comments that she makes. She knows full well that, one Friday, the Labour Party and the Conservatives voted by a majority to offer 3.5 per cent when the Government had put enough money on the table to enable 5 per cent to be offered. If Labour had done the latter, we would have been in an easier position to resolve the dispute.

I make that point about the scale of pay deals because public sector pay policy was set in the budget at 2 per cent. Clearly, public sector pay is now much higher than 2 per cent, so—to go back to Liz Smith's point—I am having to find within the budget significantly more money to fund public sector pay.

Although I hear all the points that have been raised about the issue, at this stage in the financial year, I cannot increase the size of the budget that is available in Scotland. I am prohibited by law from changing the tax rates. I do not have the power to undertake any resource borrowing to pay for pay deals. We have to operate within the confines of the existing arrangements, which is why I will be making a statement to Parliament tomorrow in which I will set out why some resources are going to have to be reallocated to meet the cost of public sector pay. Liz Smith has helpfully given me the platform to explain to Parliament why that is necessary.

There is another piece of work that the Government is undertaking, which is about ensuring that we can maximise the support that is available for people who face the cost of living crisis. In the debate, we heard about energy costs,

and there has been pretty broad agreement that that issue falls to the United Kingdom to resolve, because of the reservation of energy and the scale of financial flexibilities that are required.

This Government is acting through the measures that we are taking already and those that have been announced today, such as the addition to the fuel security fund, the expansion of discretionary housing payments and the eligibility changes to the tenant grant fund. All those practical measures are in addition to the sizeable investment that has been made to the Scottish child payment to make sure that families will be able to benefit to the tune of £25 per child per week, from 14 December. That is a huge contribution from this Government to some of the most vulnerable families in our country, and a payment of that type is not available in any other parts of the United Kingdom.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the Deputy First Minister take an intervention?

John Swinney: We are taking concrete and practical steps to support families through our own responsibilities now. At the conclusion of the emergency budget review, once I have addressed issues of the cost pressures coming from Ukraine, pay deals or the other issues that I am wrestling with, we will try to do more to support families who are facing difficulty by making further hard choices about the existing financial commitments.

I will give way to Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you, Deputy First Minister. I had pointed my microphone down again because I was not sure that you were taking my intervention.

We welcome the increase to the child payment that was announced in the budget in December and the £5 increase that was announced in the child poverty plan in March. Those are not new announcements; what is new is that the commencement date has been brought forward by seven weeks. However, that amounts to only £35 extra for the kids who currently get the Scottish child payment—£35 in the midst of a cost of living crisis. Does the Deputy First Minister think that that is enough?

John Swinney: If the Scottish child payment did not exist, those families would be significantly worse off. They are in a stronger position because of the investment that the Scottish Government has made. The fact that something was announced in December does not mean that the money is in people's pockets yet. However, it will be in a few weeks' time, when people will really need that money. I am glad that the Scottish Government has been able to provide that.

A number of comments have been made about the economy and economic performance. Liz Smith made a number of comments on that point, as did Daniel Johnson, and particularly on the Scottish Fiscal Commission's report. However, there is a more significant issue than the challenges around productivity, which I think we can resolve with the focus on innovation in the programme for government and through measures such as the tech scalars. For me, the critical issue is probably Scotland's population.

Twenty years ago, in this Parliament—we were not even in this building at the time—the then Labour First Minister Jack McConnell introduced the fresh talent initiative because he was so concerned about the prospect of a declining working-age population in Scotland. He was absolutely correct then, in 2002. As the leader of the SNP at the time, I enthusiastically supported the measures that he introduced, which were correct and necessary. However, they did not have that much of an effect, because the migration resulting from the expansion of the EU in 2004 resolved the issue. Mr McConnell's sensible intervention was not necessary, because EU migration solved our working-age population problems. Now, we are learning the hard way about the implications of Brexit, because Brexit has turned off the movement of people coming into this country and our population is projected to decline. That is the responsibility of the folly of Brexit.

Liz Smith: Notwithstanding that point, the population change is not as severe in the rest of the UK as it is in Scotland. There were also issues prior to Brexit. Does Mr Swinney accept the argument that is made by a lot of economists and, to some extent, politicians that, at the moment, Scotland is not a sufficiently attractive place in which to work and live?

John Swinney: If that is an obstacle to anybody, we must act to address that, and I commit the Government to doing so. If we look at the long-term trends in population, we see that Scotland's population challenges have been long standing. However, the act of Brexit—and the hard Brexit inflicted on Scotland against our democratic wishes—has made our challenge even greater, and we know where responsibility for that lies.

Stuart McMillan: Surely Liz Smith—and, I am sure, the Deputy First Minister—would agree that the increase in the Scottish Government's footprint across the world is one way of trying to address the issue of migration and people coming to this country to work, live and make their lives here.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Why is it not working?

John Swinney: Mr McMillan has a point. I heard the usual cheerful, grimacing comments from Mr Lumsden on the Conservative benches. Let me point out to Mr Lumsden that, if he wants some evidence to substantiate the value of our international presence, it might be the fact that Scotland's position has been reaffirmed as the most successful location in the United Kingdom, outside London, for inward investment projects. It might also be the fact that Scottish goods exports, excluding oil and gas, grew by more than 5 per cent in the two years to the end of March, compared to a fall elsewhere in the United Kingdom. That is perhaps the evidence that Scotland has a voice in the world.

Douglas Lumsden: If everything is so good, why is the population forecast to fall by 16 per cent in Scotland but by only 2 per cent in the rest of the UK? Surely that is down to Mr Swinney's failure and that of the SNP Government.

John Swinney: It is down to the absolute bone-headed stupidity of Brexit, which Mr Lumsden went along with.

Liz Smith encouraged the Scottish Government to engage in constructive dialogue with the UK Government. We have been trying to do that. The First Minister wrote to the Prime Minister many, many weeks ago, asking the Prime Minister to convene a four-nations interministerial meeting to discuss the energy crisis. The Prime Minister refused to have that discussion. We wait to see what Liz Truss does today, because such a meeting is overdue.

I wrote to the chancellor about a month ago, asking for a restatement of budgets to take into account the public sector pay pressure. I have not had a reply.

There has not been a functioning Government in the United Kingdom—[*Interruption.*] Mr Sarwar does not think that we have been working hard enough, but—believe you me—I am exhausted and it is only the first day back in Parliament. We have been working hard to resolve pay deals and a variety of other issues, but the UK Government has been posted missing for the entirety of the summer period.

I will close on this point. In the debate, much has been said to the effect that the Government should stop talking about independence because of the scale of the cost of living crisis. This is a Parliament of different opinions: we come from different political traditions and we believe different things. My view is that there is no clearer example of why Scotland should be an independent country than the energy crisis. We live in an energy-rich country where we have virtually 100 per cent capacity to generate renewable electricity, but we are locked into a UK market that bases our

electricity prices on the wholesale gas price. What an absolute absurdity. Again, a failing market is about to be bailed out by a UK Government, just as the financial services sector was bailed out many years ago.

Looking at the lie of the land just now, there is, to me, a compelling argument that Scotland must have the democratic choice of independence so that our country can decide what is best for the people who choose to live here.

Decision Time

17:01

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

Commonwealth Games 2022 (Team Scotland)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-05639, in the name of Liz Smith, on team Scotland at the 2022 Commonwealth games. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates Team Scotland on its most successful Commonwealth Games ever outside of Scotland; sends its congratulations to all of the athletes who earned Team Scotland's 51 medals, 13 of which were gold, to come sixth overall in the Birmingham Commonwealth Games 2022 medal table; recalls the many momentous achievements from Team Scotland's athletes, including Eilish McColgan's games record gold medal in the 10,000m, 32 years after her mother's win, and Laura Muir becoming the first ever Scot to win gold at the 1500m at a Commonwealth Games; recognises the significant impact it believes these special moments will have on inspiring the next generation of Scottish athletes, and wishes new and returning athletes, including from the Mid Scotland and Fife region, the best of luck and success for the 2026 Commonwealth Games in Victoria, as well as for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris.

17:03

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is my great privilege to lead this members' business debate, especially at the end of a summer when it has not been easy to be optimistic about anything. Our extraordinary athletes lifted the gloom, however, with their sheer determination, professionalism and strong sense of national pride, and they are to be warmly congratulated, as are the many thousands of coaches and support teams, who do so much hard work behind the scenes, often without the public accolades.

At the start of recess, I was part of the cross-party group that went to Munich, a city that I last visited way back in 1972, when, as a very young child, I was taken by my parents to two events at the Olympic games. Driving past the Olympic park, with its remarkable, groundbreaking architecture, reminded me of just how special it was to be at the games and of the inspiration that I derived from them at a very young age.

The same was true for many of us eight years ago, when we attended several events at the Commonwealth games in Glasgow. There are other members speaking in the debate this evening, most notably my colleague Brian Whittle, who knows better than any of us what it means to compete on the world stage. However, I know what it feels like to be selected to represent your country—seven times, in my case—and about all the hard work, commitment, team spirit and

athletic ability that are the essential ingredients for success.

For 10 years now, I have had the privilege of chairing the Parliament's cross-party group on sport, which brings all our members into close association with the sporting bodies across Scotland and with the Scottish Sports Association, which is so ably looked after by Kim Atkinson and her colleagues. It is evident to all that the passion in Scottish sport is as strong as ever, and the success that we have just witnessed in Birmingham should reflect on those administrators as well as on our athletes.

During the past 10 years—at Glasgow 2014, Gold Coast 2018 and Birmingham 2022—Scotland's athletes have been outstanding, and it is right that the Parliament pays tribute to them. That brings me to the Birmingham games, which took place between 28 July and 8 August this year. After the extraordinary successes of the previous Commonwealth games, in which 53 and 44 medals respectively were won, team Scotland was widely presumed by many to be on course for more modest success in comparison. The team was certainly not expected to top the extraordinary performance in Australia four years previously. However, a total of 13 gold medals, 11 silver medals and 27 bronze medals, plus sixth place overall, tells its own story.

I do not have time this evening to pay individual tribute to all our medallists, but I will say something about some of the highlights. The tense final lap of Eilish McColgan's gold medal race in the 10,000m is every bit as hair-raising when watching it on repeat as it was when watching it live. That is not to mention that it came 36 years after her mother, Liz McColgan, achieved the first of her 10,000m Commonwealth gold medals in Edinburgh, which was followed by her performance in Auckland. Those are fairytale endings indeed.

Another particularly historic highlight was Laura Muir winning Scotland's first-ever 1,500m gold medal at the Commonwealth games, only to replicate that victory a few weeks later by retaining her European title in Munich. Laura grew up in Milnathort in Kinross-shire, in the region that I have the privilege to represent in Parliament. Another athlete from Mid Scotland and Fife brought back two gold medals to Scotland: Duncan Scott, who grew up in Alloa. He has become a familiar name in recent years, thanks to his outstanding versatility in swimming events. Scott won the men's 200m freestyle and the men's 200m individual medley, as well as winning two bronze medals. I thank him for coming to the Parliament some years ago to inspire others with his story.

Major sporting events are a time not only to celebrate the achievements of those who are participating but to take stock and look forward. We all know that sport and physical activity matter, but they are also—or they should be—the golden thread that connects health, communities and opportunities. They also have a positive effect on our economy, on educational attainment and employability and on community cohesion—and, my goodness, we need that more than ever these days.

There are, however, considerable challenges out there that it is vital to address if we are to continue Scotland's upward path in athletic success. We need to pay attention to the resources that underpin our sport: access to playing fields and indoor centres; the financial structures that help our governing bodies to put in place the appropriate support and training facilities; and the collaborative projects that help local authorities, central Government and the sporting agencies to work together on the same page. In addition, we need to deal honestly and openly with the issues of discrimination and racism.

In my own sport of cricket, no one could fail to be deeply concerned by the recent findings of the independent report into institutional failings at Cricket Scotland. I thank Malcolm Dingwall-Smith for offering MSPs the opportunity yesterday to hear about the measures that are being put in place. Tomorrow evening, in Kaurab Stewart's members' business debate, we will have the opportunity to debate some of those issues in greater detail. However, I commend sportscotland for helping us all to understand the extent of the challenge that we face.

We often talk about the legacy of international games. Munich is rightly proud of the fact that every single facility that was built for the Olympics in 1972 is still in good working order and is booked up daily. Barcelona is proud of the new infrastructure and the investment that came to the city. Glasgow is proud of the regeneration of many of its derelict lands, and in Birmingham, Sir Chris Hoy heralded fellow cyclist Laura Kenny as the perfect role model to get young people active, despite what had been a very tough year for her.

I would like to see one other thing as the lasting legacy of Birmingham, and in Scotland, we are well on the way there. In recent years, we have seen an increase in the number of sporting volunteers, to 200,000. To young people especially, those volunteers are the lifeline into sport. They are our unsung heroes and heroines, and they matter a lot. For every medal that is won in elite sport, there have been thousands of volunteers. I thank them all for what they do for

Scottish sport, and say to them: Birmingham's success was partly yours. [*Applause.*]

17:11

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I thank Liz Smith for bringing the debate to the chamber; I am really pleased to speak in it.

The title of my colleague's motion is "Team Scotland at the 2020 Commonwealth Games"—and what a magnificent games for Scotland it was. As my colleague pointed out, it was our most successful games away from home, with our athletes simply shining on the world stage. The medals just kept coming, with 51 of them in total: 13 gold, 11 silver and 27 bronze. That was bettered only by team Scotland's performance at Glasgow 2014, when we took 53 medals: 19 gold, 15 silver and 19 bronze. To say that those outstanding athletes did Scotland proud is an understatement, and I heartily congratulate the 260-strong team on coming in sixth overall at Birmingham, during 11 days of nail-biting competition. For a small country, we are once again punching way above our weight.

I also express my pride in a multiple medal winner in the pool: the swimmer Katie Shanahan, who is from Bishopbriggs in my constituency. It was a truly magical moment watching the former Bishopbriggs academy pupil lifting a bronze medal in the 400m medley, followed by another bronze in the 200m backstroke—and all at her debut games at the age of 18. That is outstanding. The icing on the cake was Katie's silver medal win in the 200m backstroke a few days later at the European aquatics championships in Rome. That was an incredible achievement in such a short space of time.

I had the privilege of meeting Katie, and her mum Allison, at her old school yesterday to present her with the motion that I lodged in Parliament to congratulate her on her success. Katie is a remarkable young woman: self-effacing, passionate about her sport and—to top it all—an academic high achiever, having swept the board in her advanced highers and qualifications this year. It was a pleasure to meet her and her mum, who she credits with her success due to the amazing support that she has received throughout her sporting career. As she starts another chapter of her life, studying sport and journalism at the University of Stirling while training for the next international competition, I wish her nothing but the best—she deserves it.

There were record hauls in swimming and cycling, and a sweep of the para bowls, and Scotland claimed medals in five of the six para sports. For the first time in the history of the games, the Scottish team comprised more women

than men—134 females compared with 125 males—and around 43 per cent of the medals that were earned were clinched by female athletes. There were many momentous achievements from Scotland, including—as my colleague Liz Smith pointed out—Eilish McColgan's stand-out record gold medal in the 10,000m, 32 years after the second win by her mum, Liz, and Laura Muir becoming the first ever Scot to win gold in the 1,500m at a Commonwealth games.

The swimmer Duncan Scott—again, mentioned by Liz Smith—who is a six-time Olympic medallist, claimed six medals in Birmingham to become Scotland's most decorated Commonwealth games athlete—what an accolade. In addition, who could possibly forget the inspirational Micky Yule, who was one of Scotland's flag bearers during the opening ceremony? Twelve years ago, the former Royal Engineer woke up from a coma after stepping on an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan; he lost both legs. This summer, he took a Commonwealth bronze medal, finishing third in the para heavyweight bench press final—what an incredible journey.

The dedication and drive of Katie and the rest of team Scotland are truly inspirational. Their successes are a testament to their years of hard work and commitment and can only serve to encourage aspiring young athletes to reach for the stars. I pay tribute to the encouragement that our schools give in nurturing those young athletes while supporting them in their studies and to the dedicated support and sacrifice of family members and volunteers in helping them to achieve their ambitions.

17:15

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I thank my colleague Liz Smith for giving me the opportunity to talk about sport again in the chamber.

I was there at the games but just as a punter. I took my youngest daughter, who wanted to go down and see the 200m. I managed to get tickets for the Saturday and, on that day, got to see Jake Wightman win his 1,500m bronze medal. Having just won the world title, he took a bronze medal at the Commonwealth games in 3 minutes and 30 seconds. Although that was way inside the Commonwealth record, he was beaten by another two athletes.

People who say that the Commonwealth games are one of the lesser global events do not understand how difficult it is to win a medal at those championships. I can tell members how difficult it is from personal experience. I tried every event that I could possibly do to get a flipping medal at the Commonwealth games. I did the

200m, the 400m, the 800m and the 4 x 400m relay and, at the last minute, managed to sneak in a sneaky wee silver medal.

It is flipping hard to get a medal at the Commonwealth games. That demonstrates to members how difficult it was for Jake Wightman to be the world champion, manage to get an incredible bronze medal and go on to take a silver medal in the 800m at the European championships. He has also just broken one of the hardest records to break in the Scottish record books: Tom McKean's 800m record. It is an incredible achievement.

I ran with Jake's dad and mum. That is how old I am. The Commonwealth games are often when we blood new athletes and performers. However, looking down the great list of medallists, we see Neil Fachie, Duncan Scott, Sam Kinghorn and Ross Murdoch who have come back and done us proud.

As I said, I was lucky enough to be at the games. I saw the athletics and took my daughter to see the hockey and squash. By the way, one of the most important medals that were won at the games was the squash bronze medal. It was the first time that Scotland had won a medal in that event. It is worth mentioning that.

I have talked quite a lot in the chamber about Laura Muir. Her 1,500m gold medal was outstanding. She also won the 800m bronze and has won the European 1,500m gold medal and a world championships bronze. She is an astonishing athlete.

As was rightly mentioned, Eilish McColgan won the 10,000m and emulated her mother. It got me thinking about the fact that I was in the stadium both times that her mother won and about how old I must be. I actually ran with Eilish McColgan's mum and dad in Liz McColgan's first session after she gave birth to Eilish. I am such an old man. It has made a happy man very old. Liz won in 1986 and 1990.

The Scottish team's achievement is astonishing. We rightly bask in the reflected glory of such fantastic Scottish achievements and rightly acknowledge the backroom staff, coaches, clubs and officials and all the families who have impacted on those great performances of our sports men and women, but it is important that we look beyond the elite and ensure that the people watching who are inspired and who, therefore, aspire to follow get the same opportunities.

That was brought home to me in the stadium when my 14-year-old daughter asked me, "Dad, where are the next Commonwealth games?" I told her that they would be in Australia. She said, "Will I be too young then?" I told her that, if she is fast

enough, she is old enough. She aspires to be there.

We have become very good in Scotland and the UK at developing elite performance with support from sportscotland and UK Sport. However, I worry that the opportunities for the people who follow are reducing. Without question, Covid led to a misstep in sports development from which we have not quite recovered yet. Facilities that closed are yet to reach pre-Covid opening levels and we have lost some officials and some help. We must acknowledge that two years of Covid has left our children less active and less able to access sporting activity. In many cases, there are changed behaviours that we need to address.

Scotland's achievements at the Commonwealth games and on the world stage are remarkable. We always punch above our weight on the world stage. Such world-class athletes inspire the next generation—I can testify to that from my daughter's response and that of my coaching squad.

We need to match that aspiration and ensure that sport is available for all. I have said often in the chamber that sport is grossly underfunded. As I have also said, sport is such a force for good. We need to enable participation if we want to report on similar successes in four years' time. We must address the situation, which I am sure that the minister and I will have discussions about long into the evenings.

17:20

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Liz Smith for bringing this upbeat and lovely debate to the chamber. On behalf of Scottish Labour, I congratulate every member of team Scotland on their efforts at the Commonwealth games. As we have heard, the team secured the second-largest medal haul in its history, and the largest outside a home games—it won 51 medals, 13 of which were gold. That is a huge success and it is right that people have spoken fondly of that time in the summer.

It is the athletes who we see, but, as Brian Whittle mentioned, many more people help out in the background—from the coaches at national level to the volunteers at local clubs, families and friends who give up much of their time to support individuals, and those who have campaigned for years to ensure that sport and leisure facilities the length and breadth of our country stay open. Despite facing significant difficulties and cuts to services, our sports facilities often stay open because of volunteers' commitment. Such people allow our athletes to flourish and make such a successful contribution.

As has been mentioned, what stands out is the success of female athletes, which I will focus on in some of my speech. Like other members, I was delighted to see Eilish McColgan win gold in the women's 10,000m and set a Commonwealth games record along the way. Laura Muir's 1,500m, which has been mentioned, was another significant success for team Scotland. Scotland's athletes performed on one of the highest stages and won in some of the most competitive events, as Brian Whittle mentioned. Such special moments live with athletes, their support teams and viewers at home for a lifetime.

Team Scotland's leader was Elinor Middlemiss, who is the first female to hold the role. We hope that many more women will hold that position in the future. The team had more female than male members, which is another great success for the country. It is abundantly clear that we have come a long way in smashing the glass ceiling, although I argue, as always, that there is much further to go.

We must use the Commonwealth games as a platform and an opportunity for women and girls across the country to be inspired by more summers of sporting success for Scottish athletes. As Brian Whittle mentioned, investment must be made to allow Scottish sport to continue to grow and improve.

For many children in Scotland today, it remains the case that a gym membership is too expensive and that paying to access sports pitches and running tracks would be too much of a financial strain on families. As a result of lots of cuts in local services—and, let us be clear, to councils—we have a long way to go before we can truly achieve equality of opportunity in sport.

We hear plenty of commitments from the Government but, too often, they are not met with sufficient action. I appreciate that the Covid-19 pandemic put sport on hold for a significant period and made community sport that bit more difficult, but I call on the Scottish Government to use team Scotland's success as a catalyst for a greater focus on sport and to ensure that there is opportunity for all of us to take part in sport.

I congratulate team Scotland again on its success in the Commonwealth games and I wish the athletes well in their preparations for the Olympics in 2024. I call on the Scottish Government to ensure a positive response that allows access to sport and sporting facilities for all.

17:24

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate Liz Smith on securing tonight's members' business debate.

It was great to watch team Scotland at the 2022 Commonwealth games in Birmingham this summer, and the pictures on social media suggested that the athletes, coaches and support staff had a fantastic time celebrating their second most successful games at the special reception at Stirling castle last week.

I congratulate the 260-strong team on winning 51 medals in Birmingham—a record tally, which was only two shy of the 53 that team Scotland won in Glasgow in 2014. At the Birmingham games, for the first time, we saw a squad that had more females than males. Like Carol Mochan, I congratulate the chef de mission, Elinor Middlemiss, who made history at this year's games as the first female to lead Scotland's team.

The success does not stop there. Team Scotland's para athletes won more medals than ever before, and female athletes won more medals than male athletes for the first time. Those milestones are hugely important. I hope that more women and girls will be encouraged to get involved in sport at all levels, not just in competing roles but in supporting and coaching roles. Colleagues across the Parliament touched on that.

My constituency, Greenock and Inverclyde, can claim ties to this year's team Scotland. Former cross-country champion Mark Pollard, from Greenock, led the 33-strong athletics squad. Mark was head of performance at Scottish Athletics, which demonstrated its fantastic set-up at Inverclyde Athletics Club—one of Scotland's leading amateur athletics clubs.

Events such as the Commonwealth games showcase the variety of sports in which people can participate. The athletes can be great role models for young people to look up to. At the Commonwealth games, some sports are showcased that do not feature in other major events.

The highlight for me was watching Eilish McColgan win gold in the 10,000m and becoming the Scottish record holder, after breaking her mum Liz McColgan's record. I remember, as a 14-year-old boy in 1986, jumping up and down in my living room as I watched Eilish's mother win the gold. I will not say that I jumped up and down as much this time, but Eilish's win was the standout moment of the games for me. Her winning the gold was outstanding, and the other standout moment was the scene of joy afterwards as mum and daughter embraced. Plenty of tears were shed in the stadium and, I am sure, right across Scotland—it was such an emotional moment.

I will not repeat what other members have said. I wish team Scotland every success as they prepare to compete in the Commonwealth youth games in Trinidad and Tobago next week before

setting their sights on the next Commonwealth games in Victoria in 2026. Who knows? Maybe Brian Whittle's daughter will be a member of the team by then.

17:28

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): I thank Liz Smith for lodging the motion and securing tonight's debate and I thank members for their speeches. We have relived many of the highlights of the Commonwealth games and I have seen so many smiles around the chamber.

The Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth games were an immense celebration of sport and culture and I must congratulate the Commonwealth Games Federation, the organising committee, Birmingham City Council and the 13,000 volunteers from the city and surrounding areas who came together to make the games such an unforgettable experience.

My colleague Liz Smith was right to highlight the role of volunteers in bringing the games to life—they absolutely made the games. There will be opportunities for volunteers who want to get involved in sporting events in Scotland next year when the Union Cycliste Internationale world championships—a pioneering programme of 13 cycling events—come to Scotland.

As minister for sport, it was truly a privilege to be in Birmingham and to see team Scotland compete. Because of the disruption that Covid caused to the training programme and qualification events, no target was set for medals, but the hard work, determination and commitment of team Scotland was demonstrated when the team not only reached their Gold Coast record but absolutely smashed it.

As many have said, that commitment was demonstrated not only by the athletes, but by an entire team of coaches, managers, doctors, physiotherapists, nutritionists and volunteers, all of whom got the athletes into peak condition and to the start line to enable them to perform at their best.

Elinor Middlemiss, team Scotland's first female chef de mission, and her team were outstanding in looking after everyone. That is a challenging enough task when the team are in one location, but due to the challenges of Covid, the team were spread across a number of athletes villages.

I am delighted that Carol Mochan and Stuart McMillan chose to highlight the role of women and girls in sport. Elinor Middlemiss is indeed a pioneer and an absolute role model. We cannot be what we cannot see, and I hope that everyone in the chamber will join in with our week-long

celebration of women and girls in sport in Scotland, which will run from 3 to 9 October—and, in that respect, I should mention #shecanshewill.

Somehow, despite the challenges, we came together as a team, and that showed in the results. Team Scotland's achievements are reflected not just in the medal table; there were also an incredible 18 fourth-place finishes and three mechanical failures when medals seemed as if they were absolutely in the bag. My sense is that we were very close to being even better than our performance—and, next time, we will be better. However, although everybody wants to go for gold, absolutely every result was celebrated by the team and by those in the stands.

A number of other significant achievements lie behind the medals. First of all, Brian Whittle was quite right to highlight the medal in squash; it was a quarter century in the making, and it was my privilege to be involved in the medal ceremony.

Scotland has now won more than 100 medals in the pool at the Commonwealth games, and, overall, Scotland has won more than 500 medals since the games first began. We are a small country, but boy, do we achieve great things. Rona Mackay and others brought vividly to life the connection that we feel with the athletes from our communities the length and breadth of Scotland.

The games will be remembered for many reasons, but before I share some of my highlights, I want to pay tribute to Rab Wardell following his tragic passing. In a long and very successful career, Rab made a fantastic contribution to Scottish cycling and competed at the 2006 Commonwealth games. In the days before his death, he won the Scottish mountain bike championships in Dumfries and Galloway, adding to the many other titles that he won throughout his career. Rab's death has shocked people across the sporting world and beyond, and he will be deeply missed. I know that all of our thoughts will be with Rab's partner and team Scotland member, Katie Archibald, at what is an unimaginably difficult time.

For the first time at a major games, there were, as many have pointed out, more female than male athletes, and they brought back a fantastic 21 medals and a further two in mixed events. We also saw more para athletes competing in more sports and achieving more medals than ever before. As others have done, I want to take this opportunity to mention our para powerlifter Micky Yule, who after two fourth-place finishes in previous games, finally managed to get the Commonwealth medal that he rightly deserved. For me, the emotional images of him celebrating with his daughter, which I am sure that we have all seen, demonstrate the power of sport.

In fact, the entire team recognised Micky's drive and determination before his medal success by nominating him as one of the flag bearers for the opening ceremony. That honour is given by the rest of the team, and the fact that Micky was the first para athlete to be chosen was a clear statement by the team that sport should not have any barriers of any kind. Micky was joined by badminton star Kirsty Gilmour, the first openly gay athlete to carry the saltire at an opening ceremony. The uniform, which I am sporting tonight, was designed by Siobhan Mackenzie and is absolutely stunning. Indeed, the team was named best dressed at the opening ceremony, and I am so proud to be sporting a team Scotland kilt today.

With the closing of Birmingham 2022, we move on to Victoria in Australia in 2026. Many of the athletes who competed for Scotland in Birmingham will hope to be on the plane, and many young athletes, who will have been inspired by watching the games either in the stands or on television, will hope to join their heroes. As minister for sport, I want to make sure that the next generation has the opportunities to achieve its ambitions. It might not be at the same level as a major sporting event, but we will work with sportscotland and its partners to harness the energy and desire of those young athletes to ensure that they reach their full potential, whatever their aspirations.

Grassroots sport is absolutely vital for the health of our nation, both physically and mentally, and when we shine a light on the achievements of our elite athletes, we inspire the country to be more physically active. Sport has the power to transform lives and reconnect people—especially after the pandemic of the last few years. I have been so impressed by the resilience of the Scottish sporting sector during the pandemic; it has been adaptable and creative, and it has worked together to serve the communities that it works with.

Again, I thank everyone involved with team Scotland for supporting our athletes, and I wish them well for the rest of this year. We must not forget the preparations for the Paris Olympics in 2024 and the games in Victoria in 2026. The Scottish Government is really proud to support our athletes and will continue to work with all of our partners to maintain and further develop our sporting offer to people of all ages and backgrounds.

Meeting closed at 17:36.

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