



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Meeting of the Parliament

Thursday 15 December 2022

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

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

Thursday 15 December 2022

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
Devolution Settlement	1
National Treatment Centre Highland	2
Scottish Resilience Partnership	3
Promise Scotland.....	4
Barra and Vatersay Community Campus Project.....	5
Specialist Medical Equipment (Procurement)	6
Abortion Clinics (Buffer Zones).....	7
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	9
Closing the Attainment Gap.....	9
Cancer Treatment Waiting Standards	12
Strep A (Antibiotics).....	15
Self-Isolation Support Grant	17
Women's Health Champion.....	18
Public Transport.....	19
Communication Resilience	21
Action on Poverty.....	22
Hospice Care Sector (Funding)	23
Student Fuel Bills	23
Displaced Ukrainians (Funding)	24
Avian Flu.....	24
Acorn Project (Update)	25
Gender Reform Recognition (Scotland) Bill (Safeguards).....	26
Royal Mail (Industrial Action).....	26
POINTS OF ORDER	28
YEAR OF DISABLED WORKERS 2022	30
<i>Motion debated—[Pam Duncan-Glancy].</i>	
Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab).....	30
Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)	33
Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)	34
Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	35
Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)	37
Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab).....	39
Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab).....	41
The Minister for Just Transition, Employment and Fair Work (Richard Lochhead)	42
PORTFOLIO QUESTION TIME	46
NET ZERO, ENERGY AND TRANSPORT	46
Heat in Homes (Hydrogen).....	46
Deposit Return Scheme (Drinks Producers)	47
Deposit Return Scheme (Launch Date)	48
Heat in Buildings Strategy	51
Off-gas-grid Households (Support).....	52
Rail Services (North-east Scotland)	54
Strategic Transport Projects Review 2	56
CalMac Ferries (Meetings)	58
BUDGET 2023-24	59
<i>Statement—[John Swinney].</i>	
The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney).....	60
ASSET TRANSFERS AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT	95
The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur).....	95
Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con)	100
Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab).....	102
Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)	105
Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con).....	107

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)	109
Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)	111
Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)	112
Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP).....	114
Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green).....	116
Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)	118
Paul Sweeney	120
Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con).....	122
Tom Arthur	124
BUSINESS MOTION	129
<i>Motion moved—[George Adam]—and agreed to.</i>	
DECISION TIME	130

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 15 December 2022

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

General Question Time

Devolution Settlement

1. **Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether any changes to the current devolution settlement should only be implemented with the explicit democratic consent of the Scottish people. (S6O-01700)

The Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (Angus Robertson): The Scottish devolution settlement is founded on the principle that the people of Scotland are governed only with their consent. The devolution settlement built in a requirement that changes to this Parliament's powers should be made only with the agreement of this Parliament, either by approval of section 30 orders or by legislative consent under the Sewel convention. Unfortunately, the current United Kingdom Government has failed to adhere to the democratic principle and has restricted the powers of this Parliament without its agreement.

Kenneth Gibson: The Labour leader, Keir Starmer, says that winning the next UK general election would deliver a mandate for his party to implement constitutional change but refuses to recognise that a pro-independence victory across Scotland would deliver a similar mandate. What does that say about Labour's credentials as a democratic party? Does the cabinet secretary have any confidence that the Labour Party's timid and compliant branch office in Scotland might evolve a different view that respects the democratically expressed wishes of the Scottish people?

Angus Robertson: That double standard undermines the credibility of Labour's recent constitutional report. It would be unacceptable for changes to devolution to be made without the agreement of the Scottish Parliament. Proceeding to implement proposals to change the devolution settlement on the basis of a manifesto pledge, while denying the right of a Scottish Government—which is elected on the same basis—to hold a referendum on independence, would further undermine Scottish democracy.

In passing, I note that, yesterday, the House of Commons debated measures that could have ensured that this Parliament would have the power

to hold a referendum on Scotland's future. The Tories voted to block Scottish democracy and the Labour Party abstained.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Over recent weeks, I have repeatedly asked questions in this Parliament on currency, Europe and border checks for an independent Scotland, but ministers have been unable to answer any of them. Is the cabinet secretary sure that he is ready for a referendum?

Angus Robertson: I would be delighted to have a referendum and delighted to have the Scottish Liberal Democrats' support for us to hold a referendum in Scotland. Perhaps Willie Rennie could confirm how Liberal Democrat MPs voted in yesterday's vote in the House of Commons. I suspect that they bravely abstained.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Question 2 was withdrawn.

National Treatment Centre Highland

3. **Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when the national treatment centre Highland will be fully operational. (S6O-01702)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): NTC Highland is on track to open in April 2023.

Edward Mountain: I welcome the long-overdue national treatment centre in Inverness and the fact that it is nearing completion only 18 months late. Patients need that facility now more than ever, especially as research shows that there is a risk of a seven-year wait for orthopaedic treatment. Unacceptable waiting times will not begin to reduce until the national treatment centre has a full workforce in place, but 30 per cent of the staff are still to be recruited. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the national treatment centre will not only open on 3 April but be fully operational on 3 April?

Humza Yousaf: I know that it is the season, but the member should not be such a Grinch when it comes to the fantastic investment that the Scottish National Party-led Government is making in Inverness and Highland. He should welcome the fact that we are on track to deliver 1,350 orthopaedic procedures in the first year of NTC Highland opening. He should be grateful for the investment that the SNP is making in Highland, which is the right thing to do. Of course, we announced our NTC programme pre-pandemic, but it is now even more important, given the pressures of the pandemic.

Staffing and recruitment is on-going. Edward Mountain gave some figures for the workforce to be recruited by NHS Highland; recruitment efforts

are on-going. As he would expect in relation to a project of this size and scale, the centre will open in a phased manner, and rightly so. However, it will meet the target that I set out in October of 1,350 orthopaedic procedures in the first financial year.

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): It may be panto season, but I am not sure that the audience bought that answer.

One in seven Scots are currently languishing on waiting lists. It was reported earlier this year that half the Government’s NTCs would be delayed. This is therefore not only an issue in Highland. Does the cabinet secretary accept that jam tomorrow is not good enough, and will he tell us whether he expects any further slippage in the current timetable elsewhere in the country?

Humza Yousaf: I gave a recent update on national treatment centres and their opening dates. I am happy to write to Paul O’Kane if he has not seen that in order to provide the latest in that regard.

The Government is taking steps to deal with those long waits. What was missing from pantomime villain Paul O’Kane’s question was the fact that the pandemic has had a huge impact. He is simply burying his head in the sand if he does not recognise the impact and effect of the biggest shock our national health service has ever faced in its 74-year existence.

We have seen some progress in reducing the longest waits right up and down the country, which is the relentless focus of my role and of the Government as a whole.

Scottish Resilience Partnership

4. Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has recently had with the Scottish resilience partnership in preparation for the winter. (S6O-01703)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): The Scottish resilience partnership is a strategic policy forum for resilience issues that takes a common approach to setting a strategic direction and priorities for resilience in Scotland. I confirm that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans attended the most recent SRP meeting on 25 October 2022 and discussed with partners their updates on the preparations that they were taking for winter, including learning from previous severe weather events and testing and exercising. The SRP chair, Jim Savege, was present at the SGoRR(M)—Scottish Government resilience room ministerial—meeting on Wednesday 2 November and provided a brief update. The SRP deputy,

Deputy Chief Constable Graham was present on Thursday 8 December to represent the SRP.

Audrey Nicoll: Throughout this week, Scotland has seen a significant drop in temperatures, with associated yellow weather warnings issued. Industrial action south of the border has moved travellers on to roads, Shetland householders have been without power and, tragically, the risks around frozen ice on lakes were highlighted earlier in the week. Will the cabinet secretary outline what steps our constituents should take this winter to ensure that they stay safe during adverse weather events, and where they can find the best available information and advice?

Michael Matheson: The best location for constituents to seek advice on what they should do during periods of adverse weather is the Scottish Government’s Ready Scotland website at ready.scot. It provides information for the public on how to prepare and stay safe during periods of severe winter weather, including a warning to people not to venture on to frozen water. The advice also includes keeping up to date with the latest weather warnings, checking on vulnerable neighbours, and calling 105 free of charge in the event of a power failure for help and advice. I encourage anyone who is seeking advice to access that resource, which provides a range of different information on what action can be taken during adverse weather.

Promise Scotland

5. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the work of the Promise Scotland. (S6O-01704)

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): The Promise Scotland produced “Plan 21-24”, which sets the outcomes that must be achieved by organisations across Scotland by 2024. It is engaged in key national work on the children’s hearings system redesign and the development of a model for lifelong advocacy, and it is involved in work to understand the best models of governance and financial arrangements for care. At the local level, it is working with children’s services partnerships and national bodies through its role in delivering “Plan 21-24” and bringing together and supporting common interests and activities.

Rona Mackay: Will the minister please outline the financial and family support that is available to adopted children in Scotland?

Jamie Hepburn: A range of financial and practical support is available to adopted children, young people and their families. All local authorities have a legal duty to provide support to

meet the needs of adoptive families, which could include an adoption allowance in certain circumstances.

We are also taking direct action. This year, we have initiated the whole-family wellbeing programme to transform delivery of holistic family support. That includes investment of £2 million through children's services planning partnerships, and we are supporting them in driving that work at the local level. We have also provided £350,000 to third sector organisations that support adopted children, young people and their families. That money has been used to fund Adoption UK Scotland to provide a national helpline and to fund Birthlink to provide and maintain an adoption contact register to support contact between adopted people and their birth parents and relatives.

Barra and Vatersay Community Campus Project

6. Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress of the Barra and Vatersay community campus project. (S6O-01705)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Shirley-Anne Somerville): We are pleased that there has been extended engagement with the community and service delivery partners on a range of approaches, and the preferred cluster approach will ensure that a community hub is created.

NHS Western Isles has submitted to the Scottish Government its outline business case for the replacement of St Brendan's hospital. The business case will be reviewed and assessed by the NHS capital investment group at its next meeting in January. Following that review, we will make a decision on next steps, based on the group's recommendation.

Scottish Government officials and the Scottish Futures Trust remain in close contact with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and NHS Western Isles regarding delivery of that vital project, which will serve the Barra community.

Alasdair Allan: I welcome the progress on this much-needed facility. Is the cabinet secretary able to confirm when the next stages in the process of approving finance will take place and when more detailed architects' drawings might be available for the community to see?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In relation to the health elements of the campus, after the business case has been reviewed by the NHS capital investment group in the new year, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care will decide on the next steps in approval of finance.

Funding for the school elements of the campus has already been approved through phase 1 of the learning estate investment programme. Further detailed discussions are on-going as the project develops.

The design proposals were shared publicly earlier this year as part of the planning process. The feedback was very positive, which allowed the process to continue with expected wide community support. Following approval to proceed to the next stage of development in the new year, the design information will be made available to the community for comment through the planning process.

Specialist Medical Equipment (Procurement)

7. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures that national health service boards comply with public procurement rules in relation to the purchase and operation of specialist medical equipment. (S6O-01706)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Humza Yousaf): Specialist medical equipment is purchased from regulated procurement frameworks, where available, or under new procurement tenders that are initiated in accordance with the relevant legislation. Health boards employ specialist procurement professionals to ensure compliance with procurement rules. NHS standing financial instructions stipulate the required governance concerning the procurement of all products and services. The Scottish Government provides procurement guidance and support to all health boards via its procurement website, procurement policy notes and the Scottish procurement policy handbook.

Murdo Fraser: My constituent Jason Donnelly, of Medical Devices UK, has raised very serious concerns with me about failures in procurement practice, breaches of freedom of information legislation and potentially unsafe working practices in NHS Grampian. I believe that he has also raised those concerns with his constituency MSP, John Swinney.

Mr Swinney wrote to the health secretary raising the concerns on 8 March this year, but, to my knowledge, there has not been a response to that letter. I wrote to the health secretary on 13 June and again on 30 September, but I have not had a response.

Given the very serious matters that my constituent has raised, when will I receive a reply to my letters? Will the health secretary institute an urgent inquiry into the concerns that have been raised that affect patient safety?

Humza Yousaf: I will, of course, look into any reasons why Mr Fraser has not received a response, and I apologise if a response has been unnecessarily delayed. The issues that have been raised by his constituent—he is correct that the Deputy First Minister has also raised them with me—involve pretty serious allegations relating to quite a long and complex procurement issue. Therefore, I can confirm to Murdo Fraser that I have asked NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to carry out an external review in relation to the allegations and the concerns that have been raised, and it is to report back to me by the end of January. I will keep Murdo Fraser and, indeed, the constituency MSP, John Swinney, updated on the outcome of that external review.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree and accept that the Scottish Government can learn from the potentially fraudulent mistakes of the United Kingdom Government by ruling out the use of VIP procurement lanes?

Humza Yousaf: Absolutely. VIP lanes were introduced by the UK Government during the pandemic to procure personal protective equipment. They were used by Government officials, ministers, MPs, members of the House of Lords and health professionals to submit offers of PPE. That was perhaps problematic in itself, but there are further concerns that proper due diligence—to put it mildly—was not carried out on some of the VIP lane submissions. We are used to jobs for the boys when it comes to the Conservatives; perhaps it is jobs for the baronesses, too.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Freedom of information requests have shown that previous Scottish National Party health secretaries were aware of the wrongdoing by NHS Grampian that Mr Donnelly refers to. Can the cabinet secretary explain why the Government has taken so long to take action in this very serious case?

Humza Yousaf: I would be careful in that regard. If Ms Baillie has concrete evidence that there was wrongdoing, I hope that she will be happy to provide that to me and, indeed, to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, which will be conducting the external review. It is important that we allow NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to conduct that review, which, as I said, I have asked to be completed by the end of January next year. I can keep Ms Baillie updated on its outcome.

Abortion Clinics (Buffer Zones)

8. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what the next steps are in implementing buffer zones outside abortion clinics in Scotland, in light of the United Kingdom

Supreme Court judgment on this issue handed down on 7 December 2022. (S6O-01707)

The Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government welcomes the UK Supreme Court's judgment. We are carefully considering the judgment in the Scottish context, and we remain committed to supporting Gillian Mackay with the development of her member's bill to safeguard access for women in Scotland to healthcare facilities that provide abortion services, without fear, harassment or intimidation.

Colin Beattie: It is vital that people are able to access healthcare services without being harassed, and I hope that our commitment to work cross party on the issue will continue. Now that the UK Supreme Court has clarified the legal situation on buffer zones, when does the Scottish Government expect to convene the next abortion summit?

Maree Todd: We remain committed to working with other parties across the chamber to ensure that women can access fundamental health services without feeling harassed or intimidated, as is their right. Officials are exploring potential dates for the summit on abortion care, which is currently expected to take place in February 2023.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time. There will be a short pause before we move to First Minister's question time.

I confirm that, under the next item of business, members who wish to ask constituency or general supplementaries should press their buttons during question 2, and that members who wish to ask supplementaries on questions 3 to 6 should press their buttons during the relevant question.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Closing the Attainment Gap

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): Will the First Minister remind us of the promise that she made seven years ago, about the attainment gap in Scotland's schools?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The promise was to close the attainment gap over the then forthcoming session of the Parliament. I made that commitment, which was referenced as being "within a decade". I remain committed to doing that, and during the course of this line of questioning I will be happy to talk about the progress that we are making.

Douglas Ross: The promise was to close the attainment gap—not to keep it where it was, narrow it a little or make some modest progress. No—Nicola Sturgeon wanted

"to close the attainment gap completely".

However, figures that have been published this week confirm that in primary schools the attainment gap is even wider than it was three years ago. That is the case for reading, writing, literacy and numeracy. The attainment gap is not closing. Since the First Minister made that pledge, there has been no progress. Has not she failed to keep her promise to young people across Scotland?

The First Minister: No. Just to be precise—I always like to be precise—I note that the specific commitment that was made was to "substantially eliminate" the attainment gap. For the avoidance of doubt—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Thank you, members.

The First Minister: —that was the wording in our manifesto, and I stand by it completely.

Pre-pandemic, the poverty-related attainment gap was closing. The negative impact of the pandemic cannot be ignored—in Scotland or elsewhere. In fact, the Department for Education south of the border said of the attainment gap that

"disruption to learning during the ... pandemic has had a greater impact on disadvantaged pupils",

so the situation is not unique to Scotland.

However, what we actually see in the statistics that have been published this week is that recovery is now under way and we are starting to see improvements again. The percentage of pupils achieving the expected levels in 2021-22, which is the period that the latest statistics cover, is higher

than that for the previous year for all primary school ages. In fact, we see the largest single-year increase in primary school literacy and numeracy since data collection began. There are also signs that the attainment gap is again narrowing, with the biggest single-year decrease in the gap in primary school literacy levels—again, since records began.

That is the progress that we are making. Was it interrupted by Covid? Of course it was—and that was the case in countries across the world. However, we continue to make progress and, of course, we remain committed to driving it further.

We also see progress in exam results, which show the gap between attainment levels in the least deprived and most deprived areas narrowing from the level in 2019, which was the pre-pandemic year, of course. In the past few days, we have also had the university applications end-of-cycle data, which shows that a record number of 18-year-old Scots have secured university places this year. The number of 18-year-olds from the most deprived areas securing places has also increased—by 31 per cent—since 2019. Again, that is a record high, which demonstrates the progress that we are making on closing the attainment gap and widening access.

Douglas Ross: It is telling that when I ask a short question the First Minister tells the truth. She told us that she promised to close the attainment gap. However, when she has time to ruffle through her big folder, she does not accept that and says that the promise has been kept. It has not; she has failed people across Scotland. Yet again, what we get from the First Minister is the Covid shield coming out to protect her.

Let us look at the pre-pandemic position. Even in the few areas where there was limited progress before the pandemic, the improvement was less than 1 per cent per year. It would have taken more than four decades to close the gap at primary school level, had we carried on at that rate. At secondary school level, the curriculum for excellence attainment gap was not closing at all.

The First Minister is still trying to say that this year's results are positive. However, the fact is that the gap has only just returned to 2016 levels, which was the point at which the First Minister made her pledge. Basically, she wants us to believe that we are winning the race when, in fact, we have only just got back to the starting line.

This year's figures show that at least one in five pupils is still not meeting the expected level for each of the essential core subjects. That is what the First Minister defines as progress: one in five children not reaching the standard that we expect. What makes that even more ridiculous is that, in 2015, the First Minister said:

“If you are not, as First Minister, prepared to put your neck on the line on the education of our young people then what are you prepared to.”

Does the First Minister stand by those words?

The First Minister: Absolutely—I stand by them 100 per cent. Few things—if anything is—are more important than the opportunities that we give our children and young people. Of course, to be accurate, when we talk about the attainment gap, we should say the “poverty-related attainment gap”, because poverty drives it. One of the measures of our commitment to tackling that is that we are putting money into the pockets of the poorest families in the country, which we are doing at the same time as Douglas Ross’s party takes money out of their pockets.

I will go back to the specifics. First, I do, and did, accept the premise of Douglas Ross’s first question. I then went on to give the precise language that we used, so that there was no dubiety.

Secondly, if Douglas Ross likes accuracy, he should perhaps start to practice it. I did not say that the target for 2026 had been met. I said—and backed it up with lots of evidence—that progress is being made.

Thirdly, I did not use Covid as a shield; rather, I cited evidence of the impact of Covid, in the same way that the Department for Education south of the border did, when it said:

“disruption to learning during the ... pandemic has had a greater impact on disadvantaged pupils.”

If Douglas Ross does not want to take the word of a Government that is run by his own party, perhaps he will take that of the chief executive officer of the Education Endowment Foundation, who said:

“The findings add to a heavy body of evidence telling us that socio-economic inequality in education—already entrenched before the pandemic—has grown.”

Again, I say that we see progress in narrowing of the attainment gap: we see it in the figures that were published this week, in exam results and in access to university. It is not yet “Job done”, which is why I stand by everything that I said. It is one of the most important things that the Government is doing, which is why we will continue to take the action that we are taking to achieve it.

Douglas Ross: “Progress”, First Minister. Let us look at the percentage of secondary 3 pupils who are achieving third level or better in literacy. The attainment gap for that in 2016-17 was 13.6 per cent; in 2021-22, it is 16.3 per cent. That is not progress. Here is a First Minister who told everyone to judge her on her record on education. It was to be her number 1 priority and the big test of her time in office, but she has failed on the

attainment gap, on class sizes, on standards, on violence in schools and on teacher numbers.

Nicola Sturgeon wanted us to judge her on education; she said that her neck was on the line. If that is the case—if the First Minister wants to be judged on education, if her job is on the line and if, as she said, there are fewer things that are more important than education—why does she not ditch the de facto referendum and make the next election all about her record on Scotland’s schools?

The First Minister: The judge of how long I stay in this job is not Douglas Ross; it is the people of Scotland. On all evidence, the people of Scotland think, when it comes to the choice between me and any of the other party leaders in this chamber, that they want me to be First Minister. I take that responsibility very seriously and I will continue to do the job to the very best of my ability.

We will continue to take the actions that we have been taking. Douglas Ross talks about teacher numbers, but there are more teachers per head of pupil population in Scotland than there are anywhere else in the United Kingdom, including where the Conservatives are in power. Spending on education in Scotland is higher than it is where the Conservatives are in power.

As I have already demonstrated, although there is considerable work to do, we are making progress in narrowing the attainment gap. We see that in figures this week, in exam results and in the fact that a record number of 18-year-olds from deprived areas are now going to university, which is something that I am proud of, and which everybody across Scotland should be proud of, too.

Cancer Treatment Waiting Standards

2. Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Everybody in our country has been touched by cancer, either directly or through a family member or friend. Cancer remains Scotland’s biggest killer. We have treatment waiting standards for a reason—we know that the faster someone is diagnosed and the faster they start treatment, the more likely they are to survive.

The Government has not met the 62-day standard for 10 years, and it is now not even meeting the 31-day standard. The situation is the worst that it has ever been. When will our cancer treatment standards be met?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): On the 31-day standard, performance this quarter has dipped very marginally below 95 per cent. Of course, we will work with health boards to get that back up. The 62-day standard for urgent referral for suspicion of cancer to first treatment is not

being met, but we are taking a range of actions to secure improvement there.

It is important to note that the targets are percentage targets. We set those targets, and I am not suggesting for a minute that they are not important, but when we look at the number of people treated on both those pathways, we can see a significant increase—more patients were treated on the 62-day and 31-day pathways in the latest quarter compared with the previous quarter, and in the latest quarter compared with the same time last year, and with the last full quarter before the Covid pandemic. In fact, we are now treating 35 per cent more people on the 62-day pathway than we were 10 years ago, and just under 16 per cent more on the 31-day pathway than we were 10 years ago.

That is evidence of the fact that more patients are going through and being treated on those pathways. That is important, because the premise of Anas Sarwar's question is absolutely correct: people need to receive urgent treatment for cancer. If we look at the 31-day performance target, we can see that the median wait for treatment there is four days. On the 62-day standard, the median wait for treatment is 48 days, and we will continue to take action to improve that even further.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister is right—the numbers are important, because the situation is stark. Figures that have come out this week show that, in the past three months alone, more than 1,000 people did not start their treatment on time. That has devastating consequences. Cancer was already Scotland's biggest killer but, in the past year, there have been 198 more cancer deaths above the five-year average. That is 198 more families who have lost a loved one.

The national health service crisis is costing lives. We were told to expect a catch-up plan but, instead, things continue to get worse. We have patients who are worried about their diagnosis, families who are anxious for treatment to start and people who have lost a loved one. They are watching, so I ask again: when will our cancer treatment standards be met?

The First Minister: I will come on to the range of actions that we are taking to meet the percentage targets, which are important, but the numbers that I am talking about here are important for the very reasons that Anas Sarwar has mentioned. The numbers signify individual patients with cancer.

The figure that I gave a moment ago was a percentage figure. On the 62-day pathway, 10 years ago, in the quarter that we are talking about just now, 3,110 people were seen; in the most recent quarter, 4,161 people were seen. On the

other pathway, 10 years ago, the figure was 5,500 people; today, it is almost 6,500. What does that say? It says that our cancer services are seeing more patients, and they are seeing more patients on those urgent pathways. That is important, and it is important for individuals.

However, there is more work to do here. For example, over the next few years, we will invest £40 million to support cancer services and, specifically, to improve waiting times. That investment is focused particularly on urology and colorectal and breast cancer, because those are the pathways that are under the greatest challenge. We are investing in the endoscopy and urology diagnostic plan. We have six one-stop urology diagnostic hubs. We are committed to earlier diagnosis through the rapid cancer diagnostic services that are coming on stream.

All of that work is important to further improve performance, but it is really important to recognise the volume of work that our cancer services are doing each and every day.

Anas Sarwar: The First Minister cannot escape from the fact that treatment standards not being met means people not being diagnosed in time, treatment not starting in time and people losing their lives. The standard response from the First Minister will not comfort people who cannot get treatment or are losing a loved one. There has not been a single day during Nicola Sturgeon's time as First Minister on which she has met the 62-day cancer treatment standard—not a single day.

The First Minister might not want to listen to me, but this is what Macmillan Cancer Support said this week:

"Cancer waiting times have been getting worse for years and today's figures show the worrying trend continues right across the country, even before the added pressure of winter is factored in."

Macmillan is again raising the alarm about cancer care in Scotland. If a doctor suspects that someone has cancer, the patient rightly expects to be diagnosed and treated in time. This is costing lives. After 15 years in Government and 10 years as First Minister, during which the 62-day standard has never been met, it is important that we get a straight answer. So, I ask again: when will both cancer treatment standards be met? Will it be in one year, five years, 10 years or never?

The First Minister: We will continue to work each and every day to meet not only those targets but all targets across our health service. That is happening right now and in the most challenging of circumstances, as I think everyone knows. The fact of the matter is that, because of the investments that are being made and the actions that are being taken, the capacity of cancer services is increasing. That is demonstrated by the

increase in the number of patients being treated on those pathways, which is important.

Of course we need to see even more patients being treated, but I repeat the point that I made earlier: for the 31-day standard, the median waiting time is not 31 days but four days from the decision being made to treat a cancer patient to the treatment actually starting. For the 62-day standard, which is from urgent referral to treatment, the median waiting time is 48 days. We will continue taking action to improve that further.

I do listen—I listen very carefully to what is said in the chamber. I also listen very carefully to and work closely with organisations such as Macmillan Cancer Support, which does such a good job across cancer services.

It is because we take all of that so seriously that we have put, and will continue to put, so much effort into ensuring that we reward those working in our national health service as well as we possibly can. Today, this is the only part of the United Kingdom in which there are no strikes in our national health service. The commitment that we give to our national health service, which will be demonstrated in the budget this afternoon, is to continue to build capacity so that we continue to improve treatment for patients with cancer and for patients who present to the NHS for any reason.

The Presiding Officer: I will take constituency and general supplementary questions after question 6. Members who have pressed their request-to-speak buttons do not need to do so again.

Strep A (Antibiotics)

3. Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): To ask the First Minister how the Scottish Government plans to address reported shortages of antibiotics, in light of the growing number of Strep A cases. (S6F-01647)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Medicines supply is a reserved matter, but the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has discussed the issue with the United Kingdom Government to seek assurances about supply of antibiotics to treat group A Strep, in response to the sharp increase in demand. We have been advised that manufacturers in the UK currently have adequate supplies of antibiotics and that wholesalers and manufacturers are working at speed to continually replenish stock.

Scottish Government officials have issued a medicine supply alert notice providing advice to healthcare professionals on prescribing options, including alternative antibiotics if the first-line option is unavailable. In addition to that, work is under way to further strengthen the resilience of the supply chain, including by releasing antibiotics

from medicines stockpiles, increasing manufacture of antibiotic liquid preparation and, where necessary, importing additional supplies.

Rachael Hamilton: Just today, the health secretary claimed that there are no shortages of antibiotics here. At the same time, NHS Scotland said that a medicine supply alert was imminent. Doctors in my constituency in the Borders have described the situation as “horrendous”. Hospital staff and pharmacists have echoed those concerns and chemists cannot get hold even of liquid penicillin to treat kids who have sore throats.

Does the First Minister accept that the health secretary should be more aware of the seriousness of the situation with antibiotics supply in Scotland, instead of burying his head in the sand?

The First Minister: This is a really serious issue that involves the health of children. I believe that we all take that seriously, and I think that we should treat the issue in that context. Nobody is burying their head in the sand over this. Notwithstanding the fact that, as I said earlier, medicines supply is actually a reserved matter—it is not within the responsibilities of this Parliament or this Government—we take our responsibilities seriously. This week, the Cabinet had a very lengthy discussion on Strep A in general, and on antibiotics supply, in particular. The chief pharmaceutical officer took part in that discussion.

We are, of course, aware of some localised supply problems with penicillin and amoxicillin liquid preparations due to the increase in demand across the whole UK, but such demand-led shortages are not uncommon. The national health service has robust systems in place to deal with them, and the assessment right now is that there is sufficient supply in the UK to meet needs.

That said, where there are shortages of liquid penicillin, for example, notices are put out about alternatives that can be used—the solid form of the same antibiotics or, sometimes, alternative antibiotics. With alternative antibiotics, we have the option of drawing down from medicines stockpiles.

Such issues are of the utmost seriousness and I ask all members to treat them in that way. Everybody takes the matter very seriously and we are all working hard and working together to make sure that there is a good response now, in the face of rising demand.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Many parents from my constituency were in touch last week about the lack of antibiotics for their children who were suspected of having Strep A. One mother with a two-year-old child had to contact more than 20 pharmacies before their prescription was filled.

At the start of last week, Humza Yousaf told the Parliament that there was no problem with supply, but unfortunately that is not the reality. He was clearly confused, because the First Minister's Government has just issued an antibiotics shortage alert. Can the First Minister tell us whether Humza Yousaf was wrong? Will she outline what steps she will take to address the supply chain issues and reassure parents?

The First Minister: Jackie Baillie stood up then and acted as if she was giving information that was somehow new. I said in my original answer that the Scottish Government had issued a medicine supply alert notice, and we do that for a particular reason. I have already covered that, but I will come back to it.

Humza Yousaf has been, and continues to be, right in what he says. There is no overall shortage of antibiotics, but when there is a surge in demand—not just in the case of Strep A, but in other situations—there will often be localised shortages. However, there are systems in place in the NHS to deal with that. When the particular first-line antibiotic for any condition might be in shortage, there are alternatives. Part of the purpose of the supply notice is to advise healthcare practitioners of the alternatives that can be used if liquid penicillin, for example, which is the first-line antibiotic in this case, is not available. That is the proper way to do things. Everybody is treating the matter with the utmost seriousness.

I come back to the factual point that medicines supply is not within the responsibilities of this Government: unfortunately, it is a reserved matter. We continue to work with the UK Government, but we also to do everything that we can to ensure adequate supply, and that is what we will continue to do.

Self-Isolation Support Grant

4. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what impact the self-isolation support grant has had on low-income workers who have contracted Covid-19. (S6F-01649)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Grants of £73 million have been made to low-income workers and their families to help them to isolate from Covid-19. That support has helped over 150,000 low-income households all over Scotland since the scheme began in October 2020.

When the UK Government removed the £20 universal credit top-up, we continued offering the grant to all low-income households that would have been eligible previously. The grant was, of course, a temporary measure while self-isolation was an essential tool to control Covid. The scheme will close from 5 January next year.

However, we will be able to reinstate it quickly if circumstances require it.

Stuart McMillan: I thank the First Minister for that reply. The payment was crucial for many people during the pandemic and was the longest-running scheme of its kind in the UK.

Does the First Minister agree that the payment, in addition to the Scottish child payment, shows that this Parliament has the best interests of the people of Scotland, along with tackling poverty, at the heart of decision making? Does she agree that, with the full powers of independence, we could do much more without the need to mitigate decisions that are made at Westminster that are punishing the poorest people in society?

The First Minister: It is always really striking just how uncomfortable the Scottish Conservatives get when poverty is mentioned in the chamber. *[Interruption.]* I am not sure that it is always visible to the people who are watching at home, but the catcalling, heckling and shuffling in seats always start from the Conservatives, because they know deep down inside—or not even so deep down inside—that their party is pushing more and more people into poverty every week.

It is this Government's responsibility to do everything that we can to lift people out of poverty. The Scottish child payment is the foremost example of that. During times of extremity at the height of the Covid pandemic, the self-isolation payment was a very important tool, and 150,000 low-income households all over the country were helped through the pandemic. It was an important measure. I hope that it will not be necessary again, but we stand ready to reintroduce it, should circumstances dictate that it is necessary.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Will the Scottish Government extend the eligibility for its new employment injury assistance to key workers who are suffering from long Covid that was caught at work and who are now unable to return?

The First Minister: I am certainly happy to look into that. In general terms, we will do everything we can to help those who continue to be impacted by Covid. I am happy to look into the detail of the particular question and to revert to Mark Griffin as soon as possible.

Women's Health Champion

5. Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister, further to her commitment in June that a women's health champion for Scotland would be appointed in the summer, whether such an appointment will be made before Christmas. (S6F-01648)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): A number of high-quality candidates have been

interviewed for that important role, and the appointments process is now in its final stages. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care will provide an update to the Parliament early in the new year.

Of course, addressing women's health inequalities is much bigger than just one person, but there is no doubt that the appointment of a women's health champion is an important part of our women's health plan. That is why we have invested the time that is necessary to consider who is the very best candidate for the role. The appointment has taken a bit longer than we had envisaged but, as I said, that process is now in its final stages.

Carol Mochan: That answer is disappointing, but I cannot say that I am surprised by the news that the appointment will not be made before Christmas. In June, the First Minister promised that the appointment would be made during the summer; in September, the Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport told me that the announcement would be made very soon; and, in October, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care advised that the appointment was imminent.

Given that health inequalities disproportionately impact on women from deprived areas, that women's health matters are not being considered and treated with respect in the workplace, and that diagnosis rates for cancers that specifically impact on women remain stubbornly high, we need a women's health champion—we have needed a women's health champion—timeously. The First Minister knows that the delay is unacceptable. Will she commit to personally ensuring that the appointment is one of her first actions in 2023?

The First Minister: I have already set out that the health secretary will update the Parliament very early in the new year. It would be unacceptable to appoint somebody whom we did not think was the best person for the role, whatever their skills and attributes. It is essential that we get the right person with the right skills and the right expertise, and I am confident that we will do that. As I said, that process is in its final stages.

I agree very much with Carol Mochan that the appointment of a women's health champion is important, but delivery of the women's health plan does not rest solely on that; we continue to take forward the strands of the plan. However, there is no doubt that our ability to do that will be augmented by the appointment early in the new year.

Public Transport

6. **Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** To ask the First Minister how the Scottish

Government is supporting public transport to be better used and more affordable. (S6F-01653)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We are taking decisive action to widen access to and maintain the affordability of public transport, particularly during the current cost of living crisis. Up to 2.3 million people in Scotland are now able to access free bus travel through the schemes for older and disabled people and for those aged under 22. Since we launched the under-22s scheme in January, more than 35.6 million journeys have been made, which have provided access to jobs, education and leisure activities and enabled younger people to develop sustainable travel habits early in life.

We have frozen rail fares until at least March next year and, likewise, we have intervened to hold fares in the northern isles ferry network at current levels until the end of March next year.

Ross Greer: The First Minister is right to highlight the success of free bus travel for under-22s in particular—an initiative that the Scottish Greens first secured when we were in opposition and which we have been proud to see delivered since we joined the Government.

The Bute house agreement commits the Scottish Government and the Scottish Greens to taking a number of actions that are intended to boost public transport usage and improve affordability, including introducing a community bus fund; making significant infrastructure upgrades through strategic transport projects review 2, such as the Clyde metro; and taking action on fares. Given the comments last week by the Climate Change Committee, does the First Minister agree that making bus and rail usage more reliable and affordable is essential to meeting Scotland's climate ambitions?

The First Minister: I agree very much with that. I also agree and take the opportunity to recognise that free bus travel for under-22s is a great example of the partnership in government between the Scottish National Party and the Green Party—I know that the Conservatives and Labour love hearing about that.

It is important to incentivise public transport use, but that on its own will not be enough to drive down sector emissions. Cars account for nearly 40 per cent of transport emissions, so I agree with the Climate Change Committee that plans to discourage car use are needed to accompany current plans to encourage active travel and the use of public transport. The need for both those aspects is set out in "A route map to achieve a 20 per cent reduction in car kilometres by 2030".

As well as the action that I have outlined, the on-going fair fares review will ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares

in the future. All those actions are important and necessary, and the SNP-Green Government will continue to take them.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): When are we going to see the national smart travel card that the SNP promised us more than six years ago?

The First Minister: As I have demonstrated, the actions that the Government is taking on public transport stand comparison with those of any Government across these islands. Unlike Governments elsewhere, we will continue to progress all those actions.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementaries.

Communication Resilience

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): On Monday, the appalling weather in Shetland caused major power line faults and cut off nearly 4,000 properties. I thank all those who are involved in trying to resolve this major incident, which has had an impact on residents, who have shown great community strength and resilience, although some people face a fourth day without power.

Regular information updates from Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks and Shetland Islands Council have been well reported in local media, but what can the Scottish Government do to address communication issues when the power is down, digital land-lines have run out of back-up power and the mobile signal is patchy? How can households access key information with dead batteries and no internet? Will the Scottish Government provide more resource for communication resilience to deal with episodes such as this and storm Arwen last year, given that adverse weather events are likely to occur more frequently because of the climate crisis?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Beatrice Wishart's question is pertinent and timely. Parts of Shetland continue to experience an extended loss of power. SSEN is making every effort to restore supplies, but many properties have been off power for days. Local agencies have declared a major incident, and a significant response is being and has been mobilised to support the affected communities.

The numbers as of this morning—they might have moved on since then—were that 2,400 customers across Shetland remained offline and 2,899 customers' power had been restored since the power cut took place. Resources continue to be deployed to Shetland, and SSEN has a 60-strong team out in the field to work on repairing damage. Another 62 field staff were to arrive by ferry this morning, including mutual aid support workers from Scottish Power Energy Networks

and Northern Powergrid, and approximately 20 further field staff will arrive by ferry tomorrow morning, which will take the total number of staff who are working to restore power in Shetland to approximately 140.

A Scottish Government resilience operation was formally activated on Tuesday to provide whatever support and co-ordination we can, and SGoRR—Scottish Government resilience room—will have a further meeting this afternoon. I will take the point about communication resilience to those people in that meeting and ask for consideration of what more the Scottish Government can do to support the communication efforts, because that is important—although I know that everybody is working hard to communicate information as best they can.

A final piece of information is that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Veterans who, of course, has ministerial responsibility for resilience, is currently en route to Shetland to see for himself the operation that is under way.

Action on Poverty

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): New research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that 7.2 million people are going without basics and 4.7 million are struggling to pay their bills. At the same time, the Child Poverty Action Group has published a report that shows that the cost of bringing up a child has significantly lowered in Scotland as a result of Scottish Government interventions. Given that most of the key levers are reserved, what action does the First Minister think that the United Kingdom Government urgently needs to take to help people through the winter? [*Interruption.*]

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Again, we are getting the same response from the Conservatives at the mention of poverty. I say to the Scottish Conservatives that, no matter how uncomfortable it makes them, the Government and my party in Parliament will never stop talking about the scourge of poverty—particularly child poverty—and our determination to tackle and eradicate it.

The actions that we are taking—chief among them the Scottish child payment—are lowering the cost of raising a child in Scotland, which is positive, and we will continue to look for all possible ways to do that.

In response to the question on what the UK Government could most usefully do, it is to emulate the example of the Scottish Government and introduce its own equivalent of the Scottish child payment.

Hospice Care Sector (Funding)

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): There are growing concerns about the financial resilience of hospices across Scotland. The sector faces significant pressures with regard to staffing and energy costs. I met hospice staff in my region who report that they are already supporting the delivery of core services from their reserves. One of the impacts of the pandemic is that more people need to move to palliative care. Will the First Minister agree to convene urgent talks with the sector and undertake a review of matched funding for the hospice care sector, which has now fallen to one of the lowest levels that we have ever seen?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I will undertake to ensure that discussions take place directly with the sector. The Government will, of course, liaise with the sector regularly on a range of issues. I will ensure that specific conversations take place about the pressures that they are facing, in common with other parts of the voluntary and statutory sectors as well as the national health service, which are all dealing with the impact of increased inflation and energy costs.

Our budget this afternoon will very much have at its heart our determination to help sectors that are delivering those front-line services across the country as much as we possibly can. I will ensure that officials and ministers liaise with the hospice sector to see what more support we might be able to provide.

Student Fuel Bills

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I was contacted this week by a student who had been forced to go to the library the day before her exam because her flat was dangerously cold. Lucy Penman said that she could not afford to keep the heating on for more than an hour and a half; in her words, her “fingers were losing feeling”. Her friends are in a similar situation. Students across Scotland are struggling with a surge in the cost of fuel bills this winter, and they need urgent intervention from the Scottish Government.

What does the First Minister have to say to Lucy and her friends, who are struggling to keep warm this winter? Will she also commit her Government to support the National Union of Students Scotland’s fighting for students campaign for extra support? Scotland’s students do not need warm words; they want to see real action.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I appreciate how difficult things are right now for students, as they are for everybody given rising energy costs and other inflationary pressures. We provide universities with funding so that they can provide hardship funds to students who need

them. Universities should make their students aware of how to access that funding.

We will continue to work with NUS Scotland as we have done over many years to consider how best to support students generally, but particularly in these difficult times. We already do much to support students to ensure that student debt is much lower in Scotland than it is in other parts of the United Kingdom, not least through free tuition.

The fact of the matter is that the driving factors behind increased energy costs do not lie within the powers of this Government. I hope that, one day soon, they will, so that we can tackle so many of these issues at root cause instead of having to continue to deal with just their symptoms.

Displaced Ukrainians (Funding)

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): To ask the First Minister for her response to the update from the United Kingdom Government’s Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on the funding for displaced Ukrainians and the funding implications for Scotland’s public sector support.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The announcement represents a significant cut in the funding available to deliver public services to those in need. I think that it is counterproductive and short-sighted for the UK Government to make those cuts to the tariff for local councils, and we will be joining with the Welsh Government to make clear our opposition to them.

Right now, Ukrainians displaced by the war need more, not less, support, and we have continually called on the UK Government to extend funding in line with the three-year visa. Of course, Scotland has the highest number of arrivals by population share in the UK as we continue to seek to provide a place of safety; we use our own budget to do that—and we will continue to do so—but the UK Government needs to continue to step up and fulfil its responsibilities, and we will continue to encourage it to do exactly that.

Avian Flu

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): It has been reported that 230,000 birds have been killed in Aberdeenshire following six distinct outbreaks of avian flu, and the chief veterinary officer has said that those outbreaks have occurred after flocks have been housed with

“no concerns over ... management practices.”

The impact on the bird populations is tragic, but there will also be an impact on farmers, so what is the Scottish Government doing to help farmers

who fear that their livelihoods are being threatened by this terrible tragedy?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Bird flu is a significant concern right now, and both the chief vet and the cabinet secretary, Mairi Gougeon, are monitoring the situation carefully. The measures that are in place in Scotland are given serious consideration on an on-going basis, and I know that the chief vet has spoken at length on the basis of the decisions that we have taken so far.

It is absolutely right to say that this is having a big impact on farmers, and we will continue to liaise with the farming community on how we best support them through what is an extremely challenging period.

Acorn Project (Update)

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): The threat that Tory ideology poses to Scottish society continues to loom large, and the Tories' actions pose a direct threat to our drive towards net zero and our combating the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. Efforts arising from the latest support from the nature restoration fund are being threatened by the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, potentially undermining our ability to protect Scotland's environment, while a report this week from PwC has revealed that Scotland's just transition to net zero is at risk from the Tories' post-Brexit immigration policy.

Can the First Minister update Parliament on any recent discussions that the Scottish Government has had regarding the United Kingdom Government's investment in the Scottish cluster and the Acorn carbon capture and storage and hydrogen project?

The First Minister: First, the retained EU law bill, which sounds technical and abstract, puts at very real risk the high standards that people in Scotland have come to expect as a result of European Union membership. It threatens to eliminate 47 years of environmental protections, food standards, workers' rights and much else in the rush to facilitate a deregulated race-to-the-bottom economy. Angus Robertson has written twice to the secretary of state in charge of the bill, including with proposed amendments to limit its damage, but to date there has been no reply. Of course, the approach to immigration is, as the member has rightly said, also a threat to Scotland's prosperity and our progress to net zero.

On the issue of carbon capture, utilisation and storage and the Acorn project, we continue to press the UK Government to include the project in its support for carbon capture, and I hope that we will see some positive movement from the UK

Government in that respect in the not-too-distant future.

Gender Reform Recognition (Scotland) Bill (Safeguards)

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): A poll this morning revealed that the vast majority of Scots are opposed to your Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill—

The Presiding Officer: Speak through the chair, please.

Pam Gosal: —including the removal of key safeguards such as lowering to 16 the age when one can legally change their gender. First Minister, how many more warnings do you need before you listen to the concerns of women and keep the safeguards that currently exist?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, it is for this Parliament to decide whether it passes that legislation, as is the case with any piece of legislation. There is full scrutiny under way right now and, of course, Parliament will next look at the proposals in plenary session next week.

The bill does not create a single new right for trans people; all it does is simplify existing processes. I encourage anyone who has not already done so to read this morning's comments by the United Nations official who has already given evidence to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, setting out in detail why, in his view, the bill brings Scotland into line with its international obligations.

There are significant safeguards in the bill. Of course, there are concerns that men may abuse provisions relating to trans people to harm women. However, one of the comments of the UN official is that there is no evidence that that is the case in any of the countries that already have such legislation in place. However, the point is that, if any man was to seek to do so, the bill does not increase their ability to do that. The bill is about making a process that already exists for trans people much more humane and less invasive. Of course, it is for Parliament to consider the many amendments that have been lodged and to reach a final view on the bill next week.

Royal Mail (Industrial Action)

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): The general secretary of the Communication Workers Union has written to the First Minister to seek urgent talks about the future of postal services, as part of a bid to end the on-going dispute with Royal Mail. Will the First Minister meet the Communication Workers Union and give consideration to what steps she can take to defend postal services?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I am happy to consider meeting the trade union. I am not sure whether I have yet received the letter that Katy Clark refers to—I have seen it talked about in the media. Although the matter is not within my responsibility—it is a reserved matter—I would be happy to consider anything that I can do to encourage Royal Mail to resolve the dispute in the interests of postal workers across the country.

My approach to industrial disputes is simple: it is always to get round the table to try to find resolution. That is why, although I acknowledge the many concerns that I know that national health service workers continue to have about the pay deal that is on offer in Scotland, the approach that I and this Government take to these kinds of disputes is what has resulted in Scotland being the only part of the United Kingdom today that does not have strikes in its NHS. So, yes, I will always look to see what I can do to bring resolution to such disputes.

Points of Order

12:47

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. In the past, you have been clear that it is a matter of courtesy to the chamber that major Government announcements are made first to this chamber and not to the media.

At 2.25 this afternoon, we expect a budget statement from the Deputy First Minister to this chamber. However, currently, the BBC Scotland website is reporting in detail tax changes that will be brought forward in that budget statement, including increasing the higher rate of tax from 41p to 42p, increasing the additional rate from 46p to 47p and reducing the tax threshold for the top rate from £150,000 to £125,000.

I am sure that you share my concern and dismay that that has apparently been communicated to the media first rather than to the chamber. Will you therefore institute an immediate investigation into the source of that leak to the BBC and ensure that proper courtesy is shown to the members of this chamber by the Government?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I thank Mr Fraser for his point of order. He is quite right: I have made it clear on many occasions that it is my expectation that significant announcements are made to the Parliament in the first instance.

I have not yet had an opportunity to examine the circumstances that Mr Fraser describes. I will do so and report to the chamber in due course.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Mr Kerr, but Mr Bibby, who is online, raised a point of order before you, so I will take him first.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer—it is a similar one to the point that Mr Fraser raised.

During First Minister's question time, the BBC's website has reported the Scottish Government's plans on income tax. If the information is accurate, it should have been provided to Parliament. Therefore, I also ask that you use your time before the proposed statement to make contact with the Scottish Government to assess the accuracy of those reports and whether the information has been briefed by the Scottish Government, and to consider the implications for the statement this afternoon.

The Presiding Officer: I thank Neil Bibby. As I previously said, I will look into the circumstances and report back to the Parliament.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. On the same issue—

Members: Oh!

Stephen Kerr: Members may say, “Oh!”, but this is a matter of fundamental respect to the Scottish Parliament. If the very specific details that the BBC reported at 12.39 pm about the contents of the budget are indeed accurate, as colleagues have said, will the Presiding Officer insist, among other things, that the temporary Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy—the Deputy First Minister—apologises to the Parliament?

The Presiding Officer: I thank Stephen Kerr for his point of order. As you will appreciate, I have been otherwise engaged and have not yet apprised myself of the detail, but I will certainly look into the matter.

There will be a brief pause before we move on to members’ business.

Year of Disabled Workers 2022

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S6M-06755, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on the Unison year of disabled workers 2022. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament celebrates UNISON and its recognition of 2022 as the Year of Disabled Workers; understands that UNISON is using these 12 months to promote disability in the workplace by highlighting the experiences of its disabled members as well as the value and insight that they bring to the union and workplace; notes that, with 200,000 disabled members, UNISON calls for a greater enforcement of legal rights, including the fundamental right to reasonable adjustments at work; recognises that the main aims of the Year of Disabled Workers include raising awareness of the social model of disability and the importance of changes to the workplace and working practices, explaining the implications of the disability pay gap as well as how it may be addressed, increasing members’ confidence to self-define as disabled, and increasing the number of disabled activists in the union, and thanks UNISON for its continued representation of disabled workers, including in the Glasgow region.

12:52

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I start by thanking Unison for designating 2022 as the year of disabled workers. It has been a fantastic opportunity to highlight the value that disabled people bring to the workplace, and I am honoured to be able to use my platform to highlight their contribution in the chamber, and to do so in front of Unison members in the gallery.

Over the past 12 months, Unison and its 200,000 disabled members have campaigned to raise awareness of the importance of changes in the workplace to support disabled workers. They have highlighted the disability pay gap, employment gaps and increased confidence in an individual’s right to self-define as disabled. Their continued efforts to support, represent and empower disabled workers across Scotland, including in the Glasgow region, which I represent, are important for the more than 1 million disabled people across our country.

This year has not only been about celebrating the contribution that disabled people make; it has also shone a light into the dark place of the stark inequalities that disabled people face in the workplace. Disabled people are half as likely to get into the workplace in the first place—only 46 per cent of disabled people in Scotland are in work, compared with 81 per cent of their non-disabled peers. Let me be absolutely clear: that gap is not down to a lack of skill or talent or a lack of desire to work; it is down to a fundamental lack of support and failures in the systems and structures that

should take account of disabled people's rights and make reasonable adjustments. Quite frankly, it is down to discrimination.

Disabled people are being failed from the off. The inequality starts when we are young. At the age of 16, disabled people have the same aspirations as their non-disabled peers, but by the time that they reach the age of 26, they believe that nothing that they can do will change their life. We are failing young people at the time when they should be building the blocks to meet their dreams and aspirations. My Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill seeks to address that, and I hope to have the support of Parliament at stage 1 next year.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Is the true tragedy not that, when the able-bodied community fails to see the imagination, intelligence and wisdom of disabled people and the unique contribution that they can make, we do a great disservice to all our communities?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I whole-heartedly agree with that statement. I have said often—and possibly once or twice in the chamber—that disabled people are innovative by design, because just getting up in the morning requires innovation. We should not lose that in the workplace or in society.

The older that disabled people get, the longer the list of the ways in which we fail them gets and the more we damage their ability to realise their full potential. If we are to have a fighting chance, we need to end the in-built discrimination that exists in our systems and structures that holds disabled people back.

We also need trade unions, because, as is the case with all workers' rights, it is trade unions that are at the forefront of the fight of disabled workers, and it is unions such as Unison that fight the injustices that disabled people face every day. This campaign is a shining example of that. It is essential that all employers, colleagues and workplaces know what support must be in place for disabled employees.

We need more workplaces to engage with the disability confident employer scheme, but we also need a scheme in Scotland that has teeth, as the voluntary nature of that scheme means that not enough is being done yet. Employers should not only work to make their workplaces better for their current disabled employees but actively seek to demonstrate inclusive practices in order to attract more disabled workers, so that they can benefit from the potential that such workers can bring.

That is why one of the key goals of the year of disabled workers is to increase disabled people's confidence in coming out in the workplace. For 43.6 per cent of the workforce, it is simply

unknown whether they have a disability, and declaration rates have fallen to 57.6 per cent. That means that almost half of disabled workers do not feel comfortable making their employer aware of their disability, and they are likely to miss out on reasonable adjustments as a result.

Just like anyone else, disabled workers have a right to a workplace and a right to access support. Thanks to a Labour Government, the Equality Act 2010 gives disabled people rights to support at work through the anticipatory duty on employers, and we should always uphold that principle.

We have all heard about fit-for-work assessments. Today, I ask that we use all the Parliament's powers—including in areas such as procurement, public sector contracting and business support—to ensure that employers are fit to employ. It is essential that Scotland's disabled workers know what support they are entitled to and what rights they have in the workplace.

Disabled people and their valuable contribution to the workplace have been overlooked for way too long, and that must change. If we are to truly reap the benefits of what Scotland's disabled workers have to offer, we need bold action that seeks to close the disability pay and employment gaps, that encourage workplaces to be more inclusive and that increases the confidence of disabled people to self-define and talk to their employers about their disability and the needs that come along with it. Above all, we need to do more to celebrate Scotland's hugely talented disabled workforce.

As I bring my speech to a close, I say this to employers: your workforce will be enriched immensely because of disabled people, so please do all that you can to empower them to tell you about their disability without fear of losing their job or being treated differently. It is your moral, economic and legal duty to do that and to make your workplace open and welcoming for all.

To disabled people across the country, I say this: be proud and be vocal. You have rights, you are innovative by design and employers must not miss out on that. Be proud of your diversity, claim your rights and—yes—join a union.

Finally, I reiterate my thanks to Unison and all its members, and I congratulate them on all the work that they have done so far this year to keep a focus on disabled workers. I make a plea to colleagues in the chamber that we should listen and take note. It is on all of us to work relentlessly to carry on the great work that has started this year and to ensure that disabled workers are employed not just this year but for every year to come.

12:59

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for lodging the motion for debate. Her work on disability and social justice is never anything short of impressive, and although the two of us will have ideological disagreements, I am always sure that she makes points that she genuinely believes in, and that she does so for the right reasons. I am glad to have the opportunity to support her motion today.

I am glad that the motion refers to the social model of disability and that it encourages disabled people to self-identify as disabled and to reach out, get support and join their communities. Sadly, there is a current campaign that is trying to claw back progress and promote a regressive medical model, which is completely contrary to what disabled people have been fighting for for decades. There is no register of disabled people, and no disability is experienced in the same way by every person who has the diagnosis. Everyone's needs and aspirations are different, which is why the social model is important. We need to empower people to know what they need and then ask for it. Importantly, they should do so with the confidence that any adjustments will be made by their employer.

I often think that being disabled should be recognised as some sort of qualification, because the sheer amount of advocacy that is involved just to exist and the life admin that they have to take on would shock and appall those who are unfamiliar with it.

This week, I had the pleasure of visiting L'Arche Highland in Inverness, where people with and without learning disabilities live and work together. My visit took place on Monday, and I still feel really uplifted by the morning that I spent there with people who were so welcoming and unapologetically and passionately proud of the work that they do and the community that they have built together. We know that many—or even most—employers are hesitant to hire disabled people, but I saw disabled people making beautiful candles and woodwork and growing house plants to sell. Other people in the life skills workshop were doing accountancy work and planning more parties this year than I have been to in my whole life. I am grateful to them for letting me into their community and talking openly to me as one of their MSPs.

A while ago, there was the #BeingDisabledDoesDefineMe campaign on Twitter, and I loved the stories that were being shared. A lot of the time, people talk about disability as something that needs to be overcome and that takes away dignity, or they treat disability as inspiration porn. However, many disabled people recognise that being disabled has not

shaped them in a bad way; often, it has given them an understanding of issues, has created community or has given them skills that they might not otherwise have picked up in life. Disability can be a strength, and we should be able to celebrate that.

The Scottish Government is a disability confident employer. Within the Scottish Government, reasonable adjustments are called workplace adjustments, because the Government is committed to going further than legal compliance. I hope that more employers will consider the benefits of becoming more progressive and inclusive. Workplaces can benefit from diversity, varied experiences in the workforce and disabled people's input and ideas. If we make a workplace accessible, we not only make it safe for disabled people—although that should be enough for everyone—but create a flexible workplace for everybody who works there. A workplace that is willing to make adjustments for disability will be more resilient and able to make adjustments for people who have caring responsibilities or other time conflicts.

Once again, I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for raising the issue.

13:03

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I thank my friend Pam Duncan-Glancy for securing the debate, and I commend Unison for running the important campaign. I welcome its representatives to the chamber.

Disability employment is not an issue that can be wished away. It will take assertive action to bring about positive change, and all members of Parliament have a role to play to ensure that there are no barriers to disability inclusion in the workplace. There is a danger that we all pat ourselves on the back and then head off for lunch. However, we do not need just words; we need cross-party working and the Scottish and Westminster Governments need to do more about the issue.

With the Presiding Officer's permission, I will make three brief points relating to disabled workers. First, we need to ensure that there are as few barriers as possible to entering the workplace. Less than 50 per cent of working-age disabled people in Scotland are in employment, which signals that there is something seriously wrong with the way that we are approaching the issue. That needs to be addressed at various levels by employers, the Government and local government.

We need to make sure that no one is missing out on vital education that helps disabled people to get into employment, and we must ensure that everyone has access to support that develops

their employability skills, such as CV building. That, of course, is over and above ensuring that everyone—whether they are disabled or not—has access to the highest level of education that is suitable and available. If we want to encourage disabled people into work, we must give them the tools that are required.

We are living in a potential golden age of flexible working. One of the few positives to come out of the pandemic is that employers are much more comfortable with accommodating, and able to accommodate, working patterns that deviate from the traditional 9-to-5 working day in a centralised office. Working from home or with a hybrid model is becoming the norm, which means that commuting and/or timing constraints can be overcome with little difficulty. That is a perfect opportunity for business to work with the disabled communities to adopt working practices for a lifetime that will encourage them into the workforce, which would benefit both sides.

That brings me to my final point, which is that tackling disabled employment is not a handout to disabled people. There is a massive amount of benefit for business to be gained from the wealth of experience and fresh perspective that disabled people have and that they bring to the employment market. I have found that, often, our society can severely underestimate those who are disabled and assume that a disability of any kind leads to an inability to contribute.

In reality, disabled people are more than capable, and I am sure that all of us will assert that they bring benefits to any place of work—as demonstrated by Pam Duncan-Glancy. No one can disagree that the Parliament benefits greatly from her contributions. I will leave it to others to judge my contribution, but I say that any of my shortcomings—which are many—exist independently of my disability.

I again thank Unison for running its important campaign. I hope that we will go into next year with not only warm words but positive action from all of us.

13:07

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy on securing the debate in recognition and celebration of Unison’s year of disabled workers campaign. Throughout 2022, Unison has campaigned to highlight the experience of disabled members and the value that they bring to their workplaces and call for better enforcement of their legal rights, particularly the right to reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

That campaign is one of many examples in which trade unions are standing up at the

moment—as they have done throughout their history—to advocate for good working conditions in the form of accessible, comfortable and safe workplaces for all workers including, most importantly for the debate, disabled workers. It fundamentally shows the value and importance of our trade unions and the trade union movement that they stand for all workers and, even more so, for workers who face significant barriers to making their contribution in the workplace and our society—shattering glass ceilings and glass staircases, as Pam Duncan-Glancy is fond of saying.

We have already heard that the pandemic has fast tracked the need to prioritise accessibility and adaptability in the workplace and brought many of those issues into sharp focus. Sadly, it is still the reality that disabled people face a unique set of challenges in accessing not only employment but education and training that can lead to further employment. The lack of access that disabled people experience means that they can be less likely to have a degree or equivalent qualification and are more likely to be unemployed or in part-time employment due to the barriers that they might face when seeking employment.

In my working life before coming to the Parliament—or, as I sometimes refer to it, my previous life—I worked for Enable Scotland and saw at first hand the extraordinary work that organisations can do to support disabled people into meaningful work. We all have to reflect on the work that is being done in concert with trade unions and organisations such as Enable Scotland to deliver on real and meaningful job support. The reality is that it takes finance, funding and the will of organisations to be able to make the changes that are required, support someone on every step of the journey and ensure that the jobs that they are given are meaningful and suitable for them as a person, not just any job or a job that was considered to be suitable for them by someone who does not have that lived experience.

It is beyond time that we made a clear commitment that work should be truly accessible for all. We have to support and empower employers to make their working practices inclusive for all, irrespective of the barriers that individual employees may face.

We also have to consider going further in order to speed up the process of making workplaces accessible and supportive spaces for disabled workers. We all know that the stark reality is that it is harder for a disabled person to get a job in Scotland than it is elsewhere in the UK. Figures reported by the Office for National Statistics in 2022 noted that Scotland had the widest disability pay gap of any UK nation, which rose to 18.5 per cent earlier this year. We would all agree that that

figure is unacceptable, and I am confident that members from all parties across the chamber will want to commit to redoubling efforts to reduce those figures.

That is also why I am pleased that we can make other interventions. I highlight at this stage my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy's Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill. It is a very important bill that could play a crucial role in tackling the disparity experienced in employment between able-bodied and disabled workers. We have to ensure that future generations do not fall into a system with cracks that prevent them from transitioning out of the school system and into education, training or work. I hope that colleagues will look at that bill in great detail when it comes to Parliament.

I encourage the minister, after listening to today's contributions, to commit to reassessing what specific actions the Scottish Government can take to eradicate the discrimination and inequality experienced by disabled people when they are in the labour market and looking for work and when they are in the workplace. We can and must do better. I put on record once again my thanks to Unison and all our trade unions for the work that they do to support disabled workers day in, day out.

13:11

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Together with my Scottish Green colleagues, and as a trade unionist, I wholeheartedly welcome the Unison campaign of the year of disabled workers. I am proud that the campaign originated in Scotland and that my committee colleague, Pam Duncan-Glancy, has played such a leading role in making it a powerful reality—thank you for bringing this debate to the chamber. I also pay tribute to the work of Unison Scotland disabled members, and thank them for the engaging and informative question-and-answer session that they organised a few weeks ago.

The campaign is of course primarily about improving the working lives of disabled people. In view of the yawning education, employment, and especially pay gaps that the campaign highlights, nothing could be more important. Unison rightly calls upon employers and Governments to do much more, particularly with regard to the collection and publication of data. Without accurate measurement, it is all too easy to be complacent and imagine that we are doing much better than we really are.

Another vital strand of the campaign is about education: educating us all about the realities of disability, of experience, and of policy.

Jeremy Balfour: On that point, does Maggie Chapman agree that a disabled commissioner, which I am proposing, would give that voice to the disabled community? Would she like to sign my proposal so that it can come before Parliament next year?

Maggie Chapman: As Jeremy Balfour knows, I have discussed with him previously how it would be best to take that forward. I look forward to further discussions and pledge to engage with him on that over the coming weeks.

We need to focus on education in order to educate us all about the realities of disability, experience, policy and how we can be better colleagues, neighbours and allies. Central to that understanding is an appreciation of the social model of disability. We need to recognise, and remind ourselves and others, that disability does not reside in any impairment itself, but in negative social responses to it: in embedded barriers, in discrimination and prejudice, and in ableist attitudes and structural exclusions. Individualised, medical and welfare models of disability still predominate in many contexts and still represent—as uncomfortable as it may be to admit it—a social oppression as real as any other.

Along with the social model comes the concept of independent living: the recognition that, with the removal of barriers and appropriate personal support, both of which are eminently achievable, disabled people can exercise their full and equal rights to live and work and love and play. Those two understandings—of the social model of disability and of independent living—are, I believe, transformative for not only disabled people but all of us. Inclusion is good for everyone. Those two things also have significant implications for how we see the past, the present and the future.

Crucially, those revolutionary realisations came not from mainstream organisations for disabled people but from groups of disabled people and from grass-roots initiatives that came about in circumstances of great suffering, of extreme oppression and of extraordinary, yet normalised, exclusion. We must not forget that incremental change to a fundamentally cruel status quo brings neither liberation nor justice.

Those insights, which paternalistic agencies were quite unable to achieve, have had a groundbreaking effect on how the rights of disabled people are protected, not least in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which we look forward to seeing incorporated into Scottish law.

That has, or can have, similar effects on how other forms of discrimination and marginalisation are identified and challenged. None of us, however privileged, is entirely independent or able to exercise our rights and freedoms without the support of others. In the intersection between disability and feminist activism, we can recognise and celebrate our universal interdependence, our shared vulnerability and the new spaces that we can fill with hope and creativity.

That knowledge should—and must—inform how we in this Parliament develop policy, enact legislation and do implementation. Educated by the past and present, we need, for our shared future, participation that is wide, deep and serious. We need to acknowledge, with humility and sorrow, the ways in which people who know most about the issue are excluded from decision making. People know about their own lives. We need co-operation, integrity and solidarity in shared struggles, and I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy and Unison once again for the opportunity to remember that.

13:17

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank my colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I know that she has worked tirelessly throughout her career on this cause, and that she will continue to fight for disabled workers and alongside the trade unions that represent them. If there is one thing that I know about working in this place, it is that Pam Duncan-Glancy has plenty of fight.

Unison's year of disabled workers is a year-long campaign across the UK to improve the working lives of disabled people. As we have heard, the campaign was developed in Scotland following a motion from a Scottish branch, which was then rolled out as a national campaign and supported by the wider trade union movement. That is a real achievement by the Scottish branch. I congratulate Unison on its initiative and on its work throughout the year. Its work to find ways to support and celebrate the diversity of workers in the workplace shows unions at their best.

Before moving on, I must mention the scale of the problem, which my colleague Paul O'Kane spoke about. Unison has provided us with a briefing on the detail, and it is important to know the detail to understand the changes that we need to make. The situation is clear: in Scotland today, disabled people are less likely to be in employment, education or training; they are more likely to have low or no qualifications at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 4; they are less likely to have a degree or equivalent qualification; they are more likely to be in part-time

employment; they are more likely to face additional barriers; they are less likely to work in higher managerial positions; and they are less likely to work in professional occupations. I do not think that any of us is shocked by that, but we should be, because it is absolutely unacceptable.

In my life before coming to the Parliament, I was lucky enough to have a job that allowed me to support and work with many disabled people, the bulk of which was working with adults with learning disability. That group of people inspired me, motivated me and taught me a lot about life, and I am ever grateful for the time that I spent working in that area. I mention that because, looking back, it strikes me just how few of the people who I supported had paid work. That is a sad and unnecessary situation, when I consider how capable, reliable and keen to work those people were.

I am saddened that the employment rate for people with learning disability across the UK has fallen to a low of just 4.8 per cent. It is shocking that only 4.8 per cent of a group of people who are motivated, reliable and want to work are in employment. People with disability have the right to work and it is incumbent on the Government to ensure that the world of work is a welcoming and suitably adjusted environment. The Equality Act 2010 offers a range of protections to disabled people, but workplace discrimination still affects many people across the UK. We must all do more.

I recently visited an impressive social enterprise in my region called the Usual Place. When I clicked on its website, a message said:

"Did you know ... we are a Disability Confident Leader with 70% of our staff force having a disability".

That is a claim to be proud of. I invite everyone to visit the Usual Place, which provides a cafe, shop and conference facilities that are truly excellent. I recommend a visit. It is in a beautiful setting and has excellent staff and tasty food. The preparations there are about providing real experiences for people.

Emma Harper (South Scotland (SNP) rose—

Carol Mochan: I will take an intervention from Emma Harper.

Emma Harper: [*Inaudible.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms Harper, your card is not in, so your microphone was not on. As generous as that compliment was, it will not be on the record.

Emma Harper: My absolute apologies, Presiding Officer.

I just wanted to highlight that the Usual Place is in Dumfries, and I have been there on several

occasions. Does Carol Mochan agree that we should encourage people to visit it?

Carol Mochan: Absolutely. I knew that the member would have visited the Usual Place, which is an experience that all members should have. It has a very high success rate and it should be supported.

The value of Unison's initiative is clear and it shows the power of a union to raise such important issues up and down the country. I thank Unison and other unions for their support and work to preserve and protect disabled workers. I join Pam Duncan-Glancy in asking disabled workers to join a union. Finally, I repeat my thanks to Pam Duncan-Glancy for allowing us to debate the issue and keep fighting.

13:22

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to congratulate Pam Duncan-Glancy on securing the debate and to thank her for all the work that she does on the issue. It is also a pleasure to speak in the debate as a member and former employee of Unison. I worked as a lawyer for Unison for several years and therefore I am very aware of the work that Unison does to promote and fight for the improvement of the rights of its disabled members. Unison is quite an unusual union in that it was created in the 1990s, which means that equalities have always been at the heart of its work and are seen as a core part of the culture of the union.

I congratulate Unison on making 2022 the year of disabled workers and on using the year to highlight the experience of its 200,000 disabled members. As Emma Roddick said, one of the aims of the year of disabled workers is to raise awareness of the social model of disability and for that model to be used rather than the traditional medical model of disability. Another aim is to raise the importance of the changes that are necessary in workplace and working practices to enable disabled people to work. We know that it is more difficult for disabled people to get employment and that, as the motion says, there is a considerable disability pay gap, with disabled people earning less than others. As Paul O'Kane said, the situation is worse in Scotland. As a Parliament, we need to focus on that.

Paul O'Kane also spoke about barriers that disabled people face in getting access to education. It is more difficult for them to obtain good employment if they do not have the right qualifications and skills. There remains a considerable amount of discrimination against disabled people in our society, particularly in the workplace. More support is needed to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made.

In yesterday's debate on free rail travel for blind and partially sighted people and companions, members highlighted the importance of public transport in enabling people to get to work and accessing employment and other social connections. That debate was specifically about the 180,000 people living with sight loss in Scotland, but the accessibility of public transport for many disabled people is a key factor in the ability to get to work.

We need to listen to what disabled people—those who have been able to obtain work and those who have not—say about their experiences, so that we can ensure that we take every action necessary to support and enable as many disabled people as possible. We need to include the trade unions in that work on our policy and practice. Organisations such as Unison represent in the region of 200,000 disabled workers, and the other unions also work with their disabled members.

We have heard clearly that Scotland has much to do to rise to the challenge. I look forward to hearing from the minister about the actions that the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that the situation improves.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister to respond to the debate.

13:26

The Minister for Just Transition, Employment and Fair Work (Richard Lochhead): I thank all speakers for their thoughtful contributions to the debate, particularly Pam Duncan-Glancy, who is the sponsor of the motion and who had powerful insights on the challenges faced by disabled people in Scotland who want to work. Of course, as she and other members have said, there is a loss to Scotland from not making it easy or practicable for disabled people to work and contribute to Scotland's economy. Those contributions have been very important indeed.

I thank Carol Mochan for reminding me of my excellent visit to the Usual Place in Dumfries, where I met the remarkable staff and workers along with those on placements and others, as well as having a very tasty lunch and meeting members of the public. It was a memorable visit. Many members mentioned various organisations across the country and said that they are doing great work on this agenda.

I congratulate Unison on its work in the year of disabled workers in 2022. Unison undertakes important work in the area, and the Government will continue working with it and other trade unions to achieve our shared objective of improving disabled people's employment. As members have

said, it is important to recognise that disabled people make a hugely significant contribution to Scotland's economy. It is the morally right thing to do to support more disabled people into and in work.

Our latest statistics on the disability employment gap show that, between 2016, when it was 37.4 per cent, and 2021, the gap has reduced by 6.2 per cent to 31.2 per cent. That reduction was due to a larger rise in the employment rate of disabled people relative to the increase in the employment rate of non-disabled people. That means, we hope, that we are on track to achieve our ambition to halve the gap to 18.7 per cent by 2038.

Last week, as members will be aware, we published our refreshed fair work action plan, which sets out in further detail how we will go about progressing that work. The plan incorporates actions to meet our commitment to at least halve the disability employment gap and enhance disabled workers' access to and experience of the labour market. The refreshed action plan brings together our original fair work plan, our gender pay gap and disabled people's employment action plans, and actions from our new anti-racist employment strategy.

There are other strategies—Paul O'Kane challenged me to refer to a couple. I should say that the Scottish Government is working closely with disabled people's organisations and their members to develop a new disability equality strategy that will build on "A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People".

We have allocated £5 million of our equality and human rights fund to support disabled people's organisations, deliver work that is focused on tackling inequality and discrimination, further equality and advance the realisation of human rights in Scotland overall. We are also working with Disability Information Scotland, which is currently creating a step-by-step employment guide that sets out what action disabled people can take if they have problems or issues at any stage of their employment, including recruitment, the interview stages and onwards to employment. That organisation is funded through the Scottish Government. I wanted to give a couple of examples in the light of some of the points that members have raised.

As was the case with our original plan, "A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People: Employment Action Plan", which we published back in 2018, the refreshed plan endorses the social model of disability, which many members have mentioned. In that model, it is not the disabled person's impairment or disability that creates barriers; rather, barriers are created by society. We recognise that opinions about self-identifying as disabled can vary; however, employers have a

clear legal requirement not to discriminate against disabled people and to ensure that they make reasonable adjustments.

The creation of diverse and inclusive workplaces in this country is central to our fair work first approach. Disabled people should always feel safe to share, where they wish to do so, that they are disabled and whether they require any adjustments that can assist them in their workplace. The fair work action plan also focuses on issues that Jeremy Balfour and others mentioned, including flexible and hybrid working, which was mentioned specifically. Our vision for fair work is shared by the Fair Work Convention, and we want Scotland to be a leading fair work nation by 2025. Of course, we do not have responsibility for employment powers—they lie with the UK Government—but the fair work agenda has an important role to play in the context of today's discussion.

Alongside our fair work action plan, we share Ms Duncan-Glancy's ambition to improve the experiences of disabled young people as they make the transition to adulthood. We will introduce Scotland's first national transitions to adulthood strategy in the current session of Parliament. The member mentioned that she has introduced her own member's bill. We want to ensure that there is a joined-up approach to supporting our disabled young people as they make the transition to adult life.

The importance of lived experience is reflected in our policies, and members have mentioned how important that is. We very much recognise the importance of drawing on the voice of lived experience in order to listen to what disabled people have told us about the challenges that they face, and so that we can work together to find deliverable solutions.

We developed the new fair work action plan in conjunction with disabled people and representative organisations as well as the other stakeholder groups that we spoke to. Similarly, disabled people informed the development of our charter for our no one left behind approach to employability support.

I will mention a couple of final measures before I close. We are currently reviewing the public sector equality duty in Scotland. Results from our consultation earlier this year showed wide support for the publication of information on the disability pay gap, which is an issue that many members have mentioned today. We will take forward work on the review of the duty in the new year. Back in 2019, the Scottish Government, as an employer, published our "Scottish Government Recruitment and Retention Plan for Disabled People 2019". As part of the delivery of that plan, we established a dedicated workplace adjustments team for the

Scottish Government workforce in January this year.

We have also developed an employee passport, which facilitates conversations between employees and line managers about any circumstances that may impact them at work, including disability. As the Scottish Government, we hope to go above and beyond our legal requirements as an employer. I look forward to working with our trade union movement, which we also support with £2.3 million-worth of funding through Scottish Union Learning; with members on all sides of the chamber; and with all parties, as we try to address the very serious issues that Unison has highlighted during its year of disabled workers, and which Pam Duncan-Glancy has raised in her members' business debate today. The need to address those issues is supported by members on all sides of the chamber, and I look forward to working with them all to deliver a better deal for Scotland's disabled people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:33

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Net Zero, Energy and Transport

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is portfolio question time. On this occasion, the portfolio is net zero, energy and transport. I remind members that questions 2 and 6 are grouped together, so I will take supplementaries on those questions once they have both been answered. Members who wish to ask a supplementary question should press their request-to-speak button or type "RTS" in the chat function during the relevant question.

Heat in Homes (Hydrogen)

1. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it considers hydrogen, as an alternative to natural gas, to be a viable solution to decarbonising heat in homes. (S6O-01692)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): Across the wider economy, we expect hydrogen to play an important role in achieving net zero ambitions, particularly in sectors that are otherwise hard to decarbonise. Although it is possible that hydrogen might play some role in reducing emissions from heating buildings in Scotland, we do not expect that to be a central role. If demonstration and safety trials prove successful, blending of hydrogen and the conversion and repurposing of parts of the network to carry 100 per cent hydrogen might take place. However, at present, those are decisions for the United Kingdom Government, and we urge it to make those decisions soon.

Liam Kerr: The very trial that the minister mentioned—the H100 project, which aims to showcase hydrogen as a green alternative to natural gas—has failed to entice enough Levenmouth residents to meet its target of 300 households, despite it offering residents £1,000 worth of free hydrogen appliances and promising the same bills as those for gas. I am sure that the minister will agree that only through effective trials can we ascertain whether new technologies can truly help our journey to net zero. What has the minister done in response to the reports? What action will he take to ensure that the possibilities of hydrogen as an alternative to gas are fully explored?

Patrick Harvie: We are working with the operator that is taking forward the trial and we will

continue to liaise with it in response to the reports that have been cited.

However, I go back to my first answer: we are very clear that, although hydrogen might play some role in decarbonising emissions from heating buildings, it is not likely to play a central role. That is in the context of the anticipated rise in demand for export and the significant demand for green hydrogen from other industries, which do not have ready alternatives for decarbonising. In short, we think that the promise of hydrogen tomorrow must not stop us from taking action now with technologies such as heat pumps and heat networks, which are much more likely to play a central role.

Deposit Return Scheme (Drinks Producers)

2. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on how many drinks producers have registered with Circularity Scotland for the new deposit return scheme. (S6O-01693)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): The window for drinks producers to register with Circularity Scotland for the new DRS opened this week. The Scottish Government does not hold information on producer registrations, but the DRS regulations require that the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, as the independent regulator, maintain and publish a list of all currently registered producers. The first version of that list will be published in March 2023.

Marie McNair: The DRS will be the first scheme of its kind in the United Kingdom and one of the most environmentally ambitious in Europe, but some businesses in my constituency have expressed concerns about the costs of participation at a time when the Westminster-imposed cost of living crisis is hitting hard. Can the minister advise on the action that the Scottish Government is taking to support businesses, especially smaller businesses, to help address their concerns?

Màiri McAllan: As the DRS administrator, Circularity Scotland is responsible for implementation, but the Scottish Government has been engaging closely with industry to ensure that a pragmatic and efficient approach is taken to implementation.

For example, in direct response to feedback from businesses, we have now published updated guidance and support for those who are applying for exemption from the DRS. In turn, that has allowed Circularity Scotland to revise the producer fees. This week, it announced that producer fees will be 8 per cent, 30 per cent and 40 per cent

lower, respectively, for glass, polyethylene terephthalate—PET—plastic and metal containers. Day 1 payments for producers that are using UK-wide barcodes will also be reduced by two thirds. That has been welcomed, particularly by the British Beer and Pub Association. We have also recently announced proposals to bring forward amendments to the DRS regulations, so that only the largest supermarkets will be obliged to provide online take-back. All others will be exempted and, even for the large supermarkets, there will be a phased approach. Lorna Slater communicated all of that to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee this week. Those are all examples of how the Scottish Government is determined to proceed with that environmentally ambitious scheme but, equally, to implement it in a pragmatic way.

Deposit Return Scheme (Launch Date)

6. Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the open letter signed by over 500 businesses asking for the deposit return scheme to be delayed beyond next summer. (S6O-01697)

The Minister for Environment and Land Reform (Màiri McAllan): The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity responded directly to the letter that the member refers to, addressed concerns raised and confirmed that there would be no change to the launch date of the scheme.

As I said in my previous answer, to Marie McNair, the Scottish Government continues to engage closely with industry to ensure a pragmatic and efficient approach to implementation. I mentioned the updated guidance for retailers and the intended changes to online take-back. We are keen to make the scheme work. We know the benefits that come from DRS. We are committed to the date of August next year for implementation and will work with industry and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency to achieve that.

Sue Webber: The smaller drinks producers are especially worried. Earlier this week, I met Own Label Company Scotland Ltd, which is based in Edinburgh and, incidentally, produces whisky for the Parliament. The company wants the deposit return scheme to succeed but faces costs and administration that threaten its survival.

With only nine months until the supposed launch, small firms are still awaiting key information. Furthermore, the Scottish Government's review team found that a

"fully functioning and compliant DRS cannot be in operation for the revised August 2023 schedule."

Does the minister not see that, despite her stating that no change in the launch date is planned, it

makes sense to let the large firms, which can manage the launch first, resolve the problems and then launch for smaller firms? Should August 2023 be the timeline to which businesses are working?

Màiri McAllan: I recognise a lot of what the member narrated. In fact, some of the actions that the Government has taken over the piece and, in particular, this week—as communicated to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee—have been about recognising that much of the action should fall on the larger bodies initially. That is inherent in the fact that exemption is available for certain small outlets and the changes that will be made to our regulations for online take-back. That is about targeting the measure at large supermarkets, and even then with a phased approach.

All that demonstrates that the Government is listening. We are committed to August 2023. We are committed to that because the scheme presents the opportunity to collect 90 per cent of containers for recycling, reduce the £46 million of public money that is currently spent on cleaning up litter and reduce CO₂ emissions to the equivalent of taking 83,000 cars off the road in the United Kingdom. That is why we must pursue the scheme but, as I have said, we will do so pragmatically, working with industry.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a number of members wishing to ask supplementaries. I will be able to take only some of them.

I call Maurice Golden, who joins us remotely.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): Today, it was confirmed that key parts of the flagship deposit return scheme are being scaled back ahead of the launch. The Scottish Government's approach to the secretive and scandal-hit scheme is shocking. It turns out that the Scottish National Party and Greens already knew that a fully functioning scheme was not possible by next August. They were told seven months ago in a report that they kept secret until they were forced to climb down.

Given that other countries have far more quickly launched successful schemes that are cheaper for producers, will the minister confirm how many people with experience of those systems the scheme administrator employs and whether the gateway reviews routinely interview international DRS experts?

Màiri McAllan: Maurice Golden mentioned reviews. The Scottish Government commissions regular reviews of major projects to ensure that issues are identified and addressed. Those of us who are accustomed to delivery are used to that.

The gateway review was undertaken more than six months ago. Since then, significant progress has been made by industry. That, of course, is reflected in the improved position of the assurance of action report in October. Although the most recent report confirms that there are challenges to overcome, it demonstrates an improving picture and confirms the feasibility of the scheme being implemented and in place for August 2023.

Maurice Golden mentioned successful schemes elsewhere that have been implemented more quickly. Perhaps he should have a word with his colleagues in the United Kingdom Government whose scheme is not as ambitious as ours and will not be implemented as quickly as ours. In the meantime, we will get on with delivering this scheme.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I think that the minister has to recognise that the sector's confidence in the Government's ability to deliver this scheme is at rock bottom. People in the sector are really concerned about the expense and about whether it can still be done in August. What steps will the minister take to build that confidence back up when they are convinced that, far from being pragmatic and efficient, the scheme is in fact expensive and the Government is intransigent with the date? What is the minister going to do to improve confidence so the scheme can actually work?

Màiri McAllan: I said in response to Maurice Golden that our most recent report confirmed that there are still challenges—nobody is denying that—but it demonstrates an improving picture and confirms the feasibility of the scheme being in place for August 2023.

In the meantime, we are committed to continuing to work with industry, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Circularity Scotland, not least in the ways that I have narrated a number of times this afternoon and as Lorna Slater set out to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee this week.

There is updated guidance supporting those who are seeking an exemption in whole to the scheme. In turn, there has been a substantial reduction in producer fees—8 per cent, 30 per cent and 40 per cent reductions across the different container types—and a reduction in day 1 fees, which have been welcomed by the British Beer and Pub Association. There is also, of course, the significant commitment by Lorna Slater to look again at online take-back, to restrict it to the largest supermarkets only, and to introduce it on a phased basis.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take a brief supplementary from Colin Smyth, and a brief answer please, minister.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The gateway report is utterly damning. It makes clear that a fully functioning scheme cannot be introduced by the date of August 2023. If the minister is saying that a scheme will be introduced on that date, will it be fully functioning? If not, what will be missing that was in the original proposals?

Màiri McAllan: In the spirit of brevity, I will just reiterate that our most recent report confirms that there are challenges to be overcome but demonstrates an improving picture and confirms the feasibility of a scheme being in place for August 2023.

Heat in Buildings Strategy

3. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made on the delivery of its heat in buildings strategy, including decarbonising homes and workplaces. (S6O-01694)

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): We published a report in October setting out our progress against the heat in buildings strategy. Since publication of the strategy, we have published our heat networks delivery plan and legislation requiring all local authorities to produce a local heat and energy efficiency strategy in 2023. We have also introduced a grant to replace the cashback element of Home Energy Scotland loans for homeowners.

We intend in 2023 to publish a consultation on our proposals for a heat in buildings bill and to launch our public engagement strategy, to raise awareness and support among the public for this vital transition.

Roz McCall: The latest report from the United Kingdom Climate Change Committee issued a stark warning about the Scottish Government's plans to deliver low-carbon heating sources and improve the energy efficiency of buildings, calling them "wholly inadequate". That criticism comes at a time when we also learn that the Scottish Government has cut £45 million from the heat in buildings capital grant scheme.

Given that the cost of what is in the Scottish Government's heat and buildings strategy is estimated to be in the region of £33 billion, what impact does the minister think those cuts will have on the delivery of sustainable homes, and will that be reversed in today's budget?

Patrick Harvie: We continue to invest substantially in the energy interventions that we are making, including everything under the heat in buildings agenda.

In the climate change plan update that was published in 2020, it was acknowledged, including

by the Government, that we have to go further and faster as we develop the new climate change plan; it is currently under development. In fact, the welcome acknowledgement in the Climate Change Committee's report demonstrates the need for us to bring to that area the added ambition that we are bringing.

I refer Roz McCall to comments by the British Energy Efficiency Federation, which said in response to our work:

"My advice to Whitehall is simple. Whether you take the high road or you take the low road, you had best be copying Scotland's initiatives."

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I have previously raised with the minister the option of modifying rule 3 of the Tenements (Scotland) Act 2004 to the effect that factors and people living in multi-owner properties—which describes 95 per cent of the housing in my Glasgow Kelvin constituency—be empowered to introduce, with the agreement of a simple majority of tenants, energy saving measures such as electric vehicle charging points, solar panels or anything else that is proven to have an impact on CO₂ emissions. That simple modification would produce immediate economic and environmental benefits, and there are no obvious downsides to there being no further delay. Would the minister give serious consideration to making that very simple modification, as a matter of urgency?

Patrick Harvie: I am not sure whether I need to declare an interest as a resident in one of the tenements in Kaukab Stewart's constituency that she referred to.

We are, of course, aware that stakeholders have raised valid concerns about the existing tenant management scheme, which is set out in the Tenements (Scotland) Act 2004. The independently chaired tenement short-life working group has been empowered to consider the issue and, as the member mentioned, we await its recommendations. I am sure that Kaukab Stewart will be keen to discuss that with the Government once the recommendations are available.

To meet what is in our ambitious heat and buildings strategy and in "Housing to 2040" we need communal work in tenements to be carried out in a way that is fair and effective. We will, therefore, fully consider any changes to the TMS before making legislative change.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4 is from Rhoda Grant, who joins us remotely.

Off-gas-grid Households (Support)

4. Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what steps

it is taking to support off-gas-grid households during the cost of living crisis. (S6O-01695)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, I am sure that you have the question in writing before you; it was a wee bit unclear.

The Minister for Zero Carbon Buildings, Active Travel and Tenants' Rights (Patrick Harvie): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I have a note of the question.

The Scottish Government recognises that households, especially in rural and island areas that rely on unregulated fuels for their heating instead of gas, need both general and targeted assistance. Although the powers to support off-gas-grid consumers as regards the price that they pay for higher alternative fuel costs are primarily reserved, we are taking every action that we can with the powers that are available to us, including doubling our fuel insecurity fund to £20 million for the financial year 2022-23 and introducing the new £1.4 million islands cost crisis emergency fund.

Rhoda Grant: People who live off the gas grid can access air-source heat pumps only through Government schemes for boiler replacement. The cost of retrofitting installation makes that unaffordable for the average household, and far less so for those that are in fuel poverty. Will the Scottish Government reconsider funding BioLPG boilers under the Home Energy Scotland grants for those properties, which will help in reaching net zero while ensuring that those households have adequate heating systems?

Patrick Harvie: I think that the current economic circumstances justify the Government's intention to move away from fossil fuels, because overreliance on fossil fuels is part of the problem for the very consumers whom Rhoda Grant is rightly concerned about.

The Government has also recently made the package of grants and loans that are available to people much more flexible and attractive, including by a specific rural and islands uplift for the energy efficiency and zero-emission heating elements of that package of grants and loans. I encourage the member to make her constituents aware of that and to encourage them to visit the Home Energy Scotland website for further information.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): According to heating oil supplier J R Rix and Sons Limited, the average price of heating oil has seen a year-on-year increase of 60.5 per cent in 2022. Households that rely on alternative fuels including heating oil and LPG to heat their homes will receive only a one-off £200 payment as part of the alternative fuel payments scheme.

Does the minister share my concern that the United Kingdom Minister of State for Energy and

Climate recently informed the Scottish Parliament's Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee that the UK Government has no plans to regulate the alternative fuels market in the UK?

Patrick Harvie: I agree with the member, and I share her concerns. The UK Government's unwillingness to regulate the alternative fuels market will lead to more Scottish households—especially in rural and island communities—being at risk of moving into fuel poverty. It is also of concern that the alternative fuel payment, which does not come close to meeting the rising cost of alternative fuels over recent months, has not even reached consumers yet, despite having been announced four months ago.

I say again that the whole issue highlights our overreliance on fossil fuels and why it remains absolutely essential that we accelerate our transition to zero-carbon alternatives for heating our homes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a supplementary from Beatrice Wishart, who joins us remotely.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): What pressure can the Scottish Government continue to place on the UK Government to support off-grid customers such as those in my constituency, where the market is less competitive? Will the Scottish Government join Liberal Democrats in calling for a price cap on heating oil to support households through the cost of living crisis and in the longer term?

Patrick Harvie: As I said in answer to the original question, we call on the UK Government to regulate the alternative fuels market and to ensure that the support that has been committed to is actually made available to people.

However, given our experience over a number of years of trying to get the UK Government even to sit down and talk to us about the added flexibility that we could build in through schemes such as the energy company obligation—ECO—scheme, and given its refusal to negotiate and find better ways of doing things, I think that we will all share the member's frustration at the UK Government's unwillingness to work with us on those matters.

Rail Services (North-east Scotland)

5. **Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it is giving to reinstating rail services to the north east, in particular to Peterhead and Fraserburgh in the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency. (S6O-01696)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): An option for a new rail line between Aberdeen

and Ellon and onwards to Peterhead and Fraserburgh was assessed as part of the second strategic transport projects review but did not form part of the final strategic transport investment recommendations. However, I welcome the news that the Campaign for North East Rail recently secured just transition funding to conduct a regional study into the viability of a passenger and freight railway connecting Ellon, Peterhead, St Fergus and Fraserburgh.

Karen Adam: The Scottish Government has an exemplary record in this area, having reconnected numerous communities throughout the country to the rail network. I am extremely passionate about the Campaign for North East Rail, and it has my full support, but I recognise the challenges that the current situation of extreme financial pressures poses to such a project. The campaign is currently working on getting its feasibility study up and running. What advice can the minister give the group to ensure that it can develop as strong a business case as possible?

Jenny Gilruth: Back in June, I travelled to Dyce with Karen Adam and members for other local constituencies to see for myself the difference that extending the rail link back to the north-east would make. It is worth reflecting that the historic Beeching proposals cut off many of Scotland's communities from direct access to rail, including Levenmouth in my constituency, which in 2024 will be reconnected to the network for the first time in more than 50 years.

Because of the Levenmouth case, I very much recognise the role of rail campaigners and admire their commitment to improving transport connections in their local communities. The collaborative approach that was successfully undertaken on Levenmouth rail link is a good exemplar of building community support. I worked closely with that group as a constituency member, and Ms Adam might wish to meet it to understand the approach taken to build the momentum for its railway. Of course, the CNER is a well-established campaign group and works with local businesses, community organisations and local schools, which will be vital to developing the strong business case that the member speaks of.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The Aberdeen to Laurencekirk multimodal corridor study, which was published earlier this year by the north-east of Scotland transport partnership—Nestrans—shows significant public interest in reopening two local train stations in my north-east constituency. That would be a positive development for the local economy, the environment and our emerging renewables sector. What action is the Scottish Government taking in response to the study's findings, given the commitment in the recently

announced STPR2 delivery plan to enhance choice and access to public transport?

Jenny Gilruth: Transport Scotland officials are meeting Nestrans and its consultants this afternoon as part of the on-going appraisal process to inform its study, which is being funded through the local rail development fund. We will carefully consider the emerging outcomes of the appraisal in the context of our wider investment in Scotland's rail network. The strategic priorities for rail, as set out in the recently published STPR2, are to decarbonise the remainder of the network, increase the amount of freight that travels by rail and improve connectivity between our major cities.

Strategic Transport Projects Review 2

7. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when the final recommendations of the strategic transport projects review 2 will be published. (S6O-01698)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): The final recommendations of STPR2 were published, along with a full suite of reports, on 8 December. It represents a key milestone for transport planning in Scotland, setting out a 20-year framework for capital investment to drive the change that we need to meet our ambitious and essential net zero goals.

A delivery plan to provide further insight on prioritisation of the STPR2 recommendations will follow next year, when there is more clarity and greater certainty on the available capital budget and fiscal policy for the coming year.

Finlay Carson: To say that the final STPR2 report is a damp squib would be an understatement. It is simply a regurgitation of what we already know.

This week, more than 70 Crocketford residents attended a meeting to voice their fears and anger that no firm commitment has yet been given to road improvements, particularly in the light of a recent accident that could have caused multiple fatalities. Will the cabinet secretary let the good people of Crocketford and Springholm know when the construction of bypasses is likely to begin, because I know that, despite the cabinet secretary's rhetoric to the contrary, positive talks between the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments are on-going to find a way for the UK to invest in the A75, which is a route of significant importance to the whole of the UK? Will he commit to exploring the option of installing, as a matter of urgency, average-speed cameras to protect the communities from speeding drivers?

Michael Matheson: I recognise the concerns of Finlay Carson's constituents, given the recent

incident, and my thoughts are with the people who were involved in it. It is important that we take forward the process through the STPR2 mechanism, which has identified improvements to the A75. It builds on the south-west Scotland transport corridor study that was carried out, which identifies a number of areas in which improvements need to be made.

As we have already stated, that will have to fit into our capital spending programme, and we must recognise that capital investment in public sector infrastructure is under considerable pressure for a number of reasons. One of the major reasons for it being under significant pressure is that the UK Government has not kept up with the inflation that it has caused in capital budgets, which means, in effect, that our capital budgets are cut.

If Finlay Carson is really keen to ensure that there is greater investment in the Scottish trunk road network, he should be speaking to his bosses in London and asking them for more capital budget to allow us to do that. I assure him that, if the UK Government, after it has finished wrecking the economy and pushing up inflation, gets round to providing additional capital expenditure to invest in our trunk road network, the Scottish Government will be able to do exactly that across the whole of Scotland.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The STPR2 makes commitments to realign the roads around Springholm and Crocketford and to realign the Cuckoo Bridge roundabout. It is a huge issue for us in the south-west of Scotland, and those are welcome commitments, but I press the cabinet secretary on whether it is likely that the Scottish Government's budget will include funding for work on those recommendations to be carried out in the coming financial year. When can we see shovels in the ground?

Michael Matheson: The challenge has been the delayed budget from the UK Government, which has a direct impact on our ability to manage our own budget. We had intended to publish a delivery plan alongside STPR2 but, because of the economic and political chaos that was created by the UK Government, the whole process has been delayed, and it will be next year before we can publish the delivery plan that goes with STPR2. The delivery plan will set out the areas in which investment will be made, including areas such as the A75 and other parts of the trunk road network across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in question 8 if we have brief questions and answers to match.

CalMac Ferries (Meetings)

8. Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport last met with CalMac representatives. (S6O-01699)

The Minister for Transport (Jenny Gilruth): As ferries sit in the Minister for Transport's portfolio, I regularly meet CalMac representatives. I will next meet them this afternoon.

Jamie Greene: I thank the minister for that answer, and I put on record my thanks to CalMac staff, who are working incredibly hard in the toughest of conditions, with creaking infrastructure.

Through no fault of their own, CalMac staff are employed, through a very peculiar arrangement, as part of a subsidiary on Guernsey. Given that CalMac is a Scottish-owned company that is funded by the Scottish Government and the Scottish taxpayer, which is subsidised by the Scottish taxpayer and which operates in Scotland, the reasons for such peculiar arrangements are not entirely clear. In her response, will the minister please enlighten the chamber as to why CalMac staff are employed through a company in Guernsey and what financial benefit the company may be receiving from doing so?

Jenny Gilruth: I think that the arrangements in question are historical arrangements.

With regard to the specifics of the governance arrangements, Mr Greene will be aware that, in September, I published the project Neptune report. A few weeks ago, members from across the Parliament met Ernst & Young to talk about some of the changes that were proposed in that report. That report looks at a potential restructuring of the current governance arrangements, and I am sure that the issues that Mr Greene has raised will be addressed in due consultation with local communities, to ensure that they receive the services that they should expect to receive in relation to the delivery of CalMac's services on the west coast of Scotland.

Budget 2023-24

14:30

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. Members will be aware of my response to the points of order that were raised at the end of First Minister's question time regarding information related to this afternoon's budget statement. I said at that point that I would investigate the matter. I have been unable to conclude my deliberations in the time available, so I suspend the meeting for 30 minutes.

14:31

Meeting suspended.

15:11

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I cannot express strongly enough my disappointment at information about this afternoon's statement appearing in the media before being given to the Parliament. I have spoken to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to express my concern in the strongest possible terms, and they have given me a categorical assurance that that information was not shared by the Government. In the interests—*[Interruption.]* Excuse me, members. Thank you.

In the interests of parliamentary scrutiny and so that members are not disadvantaged, I will allow the statement to be made so that full information about the budget is available to members, public services and the public.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am grateful to you for your ruling on the matter, but you may not be aware that, in the past few moments, yet more information has been released by the BBC in relation to the content of the budget statement. The BBC is advising us that the additional dwelling supplement of the land and buildings transaction tax is to be increased from 4 per cent to 6 per cent. It is also advising that there could be £500 million extra for local government.

It is clear that there has been a comprehensive briefing from the Government to the BBC on the contents of the budget. This is now beyond a joke. This is not the first time that the Government has been caught spreading information to the media in advance of bringing it to the Parliament, and disrespecting the Parliament and its procedures.

Presiding Officer, I ask you to consider what further action might be taken against the Government in the light of the further information that has now come to light.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Fraser. It is extremely important that we continue with the business in front of us, given the delay that we have already experienced. I will look into the matters that Mr Fraser has raised at a later point.

The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on the Scottish budget 2023-24. *[Interruption.]* I am simply not going to speak if members will not give me the courtesy and respect of being quiet while I do so. Each and every member deserves that courtesy and respect.

The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:14

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery (John Swinney): Presiding Officer, I will say openly to Parliament what I have said to you privately in the welcome conversation that we have had: at no stage has anybody been authorised on my behalf to brief information—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members. It is extremely important that we hear one another.

John Swinney: Presiding Officer, I will reiterate what I have said to you privately: at no stage has anybody been authorised to disclose any information that is contained in the budget statement on my behalf.

Inevitably, a large number of people have to be involved in the preparation of a Government statement, from the many officials who are involved to people from a range of organisations. I give you my categorical assurance, as a member of this Parliament since its foundation in 1999, that no individual was authorised on my behalf to disclose any information. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members! Excuse me, Mr Swinney.

I simply will not have members shouting discourteous comments to one another across the chamber. Please remember that we are elected representatives, who are elected by the people of Scotland. I ask all members to bear that in mind and think about that with regard to their conduct in this chamber.

John Swinney: Presiding Officer, in the light of your understandable concern about this matter, I unreservedly apologise to you for the situation in which you find yourself, in protecting the integrity of Parliament and the ability of Government to explain its policy position to Parliament, which it is in the interests of ministers to make sure that we are able to do.

Before I come to the statement, I will point out that, in relation to the detail that Mr Fraser has just put into the public domain, some of that information was contained in the embargoed statements that I make available in advance to other political parties. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Members. Thank you.

John Swinney: I simply point out that those factors need to be considered in this whole process.

The Scottish Government budget for 2023-24 takes place in the most turbulent economic and financial context that most people can remember. War is taking place in Europe, which is leading to the suffering and displacement of millions of Ukrainians. As a result of the conflict, energy and fuel prices are surging. Inflation is now corroding our economy, having reached a 40-year high. If those challenges, which are faced by countries around the globe, were not enough, the United Kingdom has added to the turmoil with a disastrous approach to Brexit, which has damaged labour supply, through the loss of free movement of people, and undermined frictionless trade with our nearest markets.

All of those difficulties have been compounded by the utterly catastrophic decisions of the United Kingdom Government in the September mini-budget, which have driven increases in interest rates, saddled the country with much higher debt and undermined the public finances for generations to come.

In short, these are spectacularly difficult times in which to manage the public finances. These times require Governments to lead, make choices and decide what matters, and that is what this Government has resolved to do.

As Parliament knows, those hard realities are not just about future years—I am wrestling with those challenges right now. Before I set out our financial plans for the forthcoming year, I must provide Parliament with an update on this financial year, given the extreme pressure that the Scottish Government budget faces at the present moment.

As a result of soaring inflation, we have faced significant and entirely understandable pay demands from public sector workers. In response, we reallocated over £700 million more than was originally budgeted, in order to enhance pay uplifts to better reflect the increased cost of living and, especially, to tackle low pay.

We continue to deal with the unforeseen, but accepted, costs of resettling refugees who are fleeing the illegal war in Ukraine. We have seen thousands of people in Scotland open their homes in response to war, which is an example of our country at its very best. Scotland will always play

our part in supporting those fleeing conflict and persecution. We have made, and are continuing to make, financial provision to support Ukrainian resettlement costs.

The public sector is not in any way immune from the rising costs of energy and inflation, which place additional, real pressures on the value of our budget.

As a result of those factors, in the autumn, the Scottish Government had to make unprecedented reductions to our spending plans, totalling £1.2 billion, midway through the current financial year. We had to do that because, once a financial year commences and in the absence of borrowing powers to address in-year volatility or the ability to alter income tax rates midway through a financial year, we operate a largely fixed total budget unless the United Kingdom Government allocates any additional resources to Scotland. Despite repeated requests, no additional resources have been forthcoming for this year.

The emergency budget review allowed us to meet the costs of increased public sector pay and provide further help to those most impacted by the cost of living crisis. Taken together, in 2022-23, the Scottish Government has allocated almost £3 billion to help to mitigate the cost of living crisis in these difficult days. However, there are two key points that I must advise Parliament about in relation to the budget for this current financial year.

First, despite reductions in spending of £1.2 billion, the financial pressures are so great that I am still working to find a path to fully balance this year's budget. Secondly, as a consequence of that issue, for the first time since this Government took power, I am announcing a budget today for the next financial year assuming that we will not carry forward any fiscal resources from this year into next. For comparison, our budget for this year was underpinned by £450 million of resources that were carried over from the previous year. The absence of that carryover increases the scale of the financial challenges that we face in the next financial year.

Our budget decisions take place against assessments of deterioration in the economy. I am grateful to the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Scottish Fiscal Commission for their engagement in our budget process. I am, of course, incorporating into the budget the projections made by the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

The UK economy has already begun to contract. The OBR estimates that the UK has entered a recession that will last for more than a year and see gross domestic product fall by 2 per cent. The Scottish Fiscal Commission is expecting the

Scottish economy to follow the UK into recession in 2022, with GDP falling 1.8 per cent between quarter 1 of 2022 and quarter 3 of 2023. The commission forecast the recession in Scotland to be similar to that in the rest of the UK. According to the latest data, which was published yesterday, inflation now stands at 10.7 per cent. Last month, we saw inflation in the UK at its highest since 1981. Businesses and households are facing additional pressures from rising interest rates, with the Bank of England base rate reaching 3.5 per cent today following the largest increase since 1989.

Real household disposable incomes are estimated to fall back to 2013 levels, which is the largest fall since records began. To compound matters, our labour market has been experiencing shortages—in part driven by Brexit—as the economy has reopened from the pandemic. As the recession takes hold, unemployment is projected to gradually rise to reach a peak of 4.7 per cent at the end of 2024. In its November economic outlook, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development forecast that the UK will see the worst economic performance in the G20 other than Russia's in both 2023 and 2024.

The calamitous choices made by successive UK Governments have made our economy weaker and put the public finances under tremendous strain. In November, the UK Government set out revised tax and spending plans in its autumn statement, which was an urgent attempt to repair the damage of the mini-budget. Although that brought some improvements to our resource position for 2023-24 compared with the UK Government's published plans, our budget will still be lower in real terms than it was in 2021. The outlook for future years is looking particularly bleak in 2025-26 and 2026-27, being the latter two years of the Scottish Government's resource spending review period.

That is the economic and fiscal context in which the Scottish Government must make our choices for the forthcoming financial year. In formulating this budget, I have reached out to all political parties in this Parliament, to our partners in local government, to trade unions and to many stakeholders in the private, third and public sectors to hear their views. I am grateful to our partners in the Scottish Green Party for their constructive and collaborative approach as we have developed these tax and spending plans in line with our shared commitments in the Bute house agreement.

Four important factors are relevant in considering our decisions. First, the enormous pressures on the public finances mean that, in some cases, it will take the Government longer to

deliver on our plans. We will work with partners to minimise that effect.

Secondly, the requirements for public sector reform, which were set out in the medium-term financial strategy and the resource spending review, will be ever more required in this context, and the Government will set out further plans for it in due course. We will take forward an agenda that is consistent with the principles of the Christie commission, with a significant emphasis on early intervention and prevention, as we work to create person-centred public services.

Thirdly, the significant increases in input prices and energy costs mean that our capital budget will be unable to deliver as much as would have been judged possible just a few months ago. The Government will keep these factors under constant review as we take forward the capital programme.

Fourthly, given the uncertain inflation outlook and the need to still conclude some pay deals for the current year, I am not publishing a public sector pay policy for 2023-24 at this stage. We will, of course, continue to collaborate with trade unions and public sector employers on fair and sustainable pay, and will look to say more on our approach for 2023-24 in the new year.

The Scottish Government, like Governments all over the world, is faced with a difficult set of choices. Through this budget, we are facing up to our responsibilities while being open with the people of Scotland about the challenges that lie ahead. To govern is to choose, and the Scottish Government has made its choice. We have chosen not to follow the path of austerity that is the hallmark of the United Kingdom Government—but let me be clear: the choices that we face are all the starker because of the United Kingdom Government.

Within the powers available to us, we will choose a different path—one that sees the Scottish Government commit substantial resources to protect the most vulnerable people of Scotland from the impacts of decisions and policies that are made by the UK Government.

We choose to do everything in our power to eliminate child poverty, because in doing so we improve the lives of children and families in Scotland today while also laying the foundations for a more equal and prosperous country in the future.

We choose to prioritise the transition to net zero, because it is precisely through that transition that Scotland will realise its economic potential, not in spite of it. A stronger, fairer, greener economy benefits everyone.

We choose to stand firmly alongside the Scottish people, investing in our public services and doing everything possible to ensure that no one is left behind. All of us need to know that our public services will be there to meet our needs, and we must invest in them to make sure that that promise can be fulfilled. In particular, we must target investment towards our national health service, which is facing unprecedented pressure following the pandemic.

We do that by choosing a different, more progressive path for Scotland. That is why this budget strengthens the social contract between the Scottish Government and every citizen of Scotland, for the wider benefit of society. That social contract means that people in Scotland will continue to enjoy many benefits that are not available throughout the United Kingdom, including free prescriptions, free access to higher education and the Scottish child payment. It also means that in Scotland families are shielded, as far as possible, from the welfare cuts and austerity policies of the UK Government.

Because we know that this progressive model works, we choose the path where people are asked to pay their fair share, in the knowledge that in so doing, they help to create the fairer society in which we all want to live.

The limited powers that we won after the independence referendum in 2014 enable Scotland to make different choices on tax and on some elements of social security. The Scottish Government has made use of those powers in the past. In total, the decisions that we have taken since the devolution of tax powers and the proposals that I am putting forward today will raise around £1 billion more next year than if we had followed UK tax decisions.

We have also used those powers in creating a social security system that is based on the values of dignity, compassion and respect. This year, we introduced the Scottish child payment—the only measure of its kind available in the United Kingdom—to support children who are living in poverty. It was first introduced at a rate of £10 per week per eligible child under the age of six and it was then doubled to £20 per week from April 2022. In November 2022, it was extended to eligible children under the age of 16 and increased to £25 per week, meaning that the payment has increased by 150 per cent in just eight months. The Scottish child payment is now available to around 387,000 children in Scotland, and I confirm that the payment will remain at that increased level of £25 per child per week.

I am also pleased to announce that all other social security benefits under the control of the Scottish Government will be increased by the rate of inflation in September of 10.1 per cent.

In the face of the extraordinary challenges that we face, we have chosen to use our tax powers again, to protect our country from the harm that is being caused by the turmoil of these times and from the damaging decisions of the United Kingdom Government. Our approach to taxation continues to be guided by our values and by the principle that the tax burden should be proportionate to the ability to pay. That commitment to fairness underpins the choices that we have made throughout this budget, and it underpins our whole approach to taxation.

In this budget, we are asking people on higher incomes to contribute more in taxation than those on lower incomes. The majority of people in Scotland will still pay less in taxation than if they lived in the rest of the United Kingdom. By these decisions, everyone in Scotland will be able to enjoy the benefits of strong public services and a comprehensive social contract.

On income tax, I intend to maintain the thresholds for the starter and basic-rate bands at their current levels. I confirm that I will maintain the higher-rate threshold at its current level and that I will lower the top-rate threshold from £150,000 to £125,140. I also intend to make no changes to the starter, basic and intermediate rates, to protect those on lower incomes.

I have decided to increase the higher and top rates of tax by 1p each to 42p and 47p. As a result, we are asking all those earning more than £43,662 to pay an extra penny in the pound on income tax. I want to be clear that that extra penny is being raised for a specific purpose. We have taken the decision to enable us to exceed the health resource Barnett consequentials from the UK Government with substantial additional investment in the national health service—an investment that will benefit us all. It is, in short, an extra penny to enable spending on patient care in our national health service.

On land and buildings transaction tax, there will be no changes to the main residential and non-residential rates and bands next year. Today, legislation will be introduced to increase the rate of the additional dwelling supplement from 4 per cent to 6 per cent, raising much-needed additional revenue while protecting opportunities for first-time buyers. That change will apply with effect from 16 December to address any potential for forestalling, with a transitional provision in place.

I can also announce today that we will increase the standard and lower Scottish landfill tax rates from 1 April, maintaining consistency across the United Kingdom, guarding against waste tourism and supporting our ambitions for a more circular economy.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts that the income tax policy changes that I have outlined today will raise £129 million in 2023-24. In addition to that, the Scottish Government estimates that freezing the higher-rate threshold has added £390 million when compared with inflation.

The SFC also forecasts that the changes to the additional dwelling supplement will raise an additional £34 million in revenue in 2023-24. We estimate that, taken together, those changes will provide £553 million in 2023-24 for investment in public services in Scotland.

In the current challenging economic context, I recognise the pressures that businesses face and the difficult conditions that they are working in to create employment and growth in our economy. Sixteen business organisations came together to ask me to take one particular step to support businesses through these tough times. Their number 1 ask was that I freeze the non-domestic rates poundage at 2022-23 levels.

On non-domestic rates, I can confirm that we will protect businesses from the full impact of inflation by delivering a freeze to the basic property rate. That will ensure that Scotland has the lowest poundage in the United Kingdom for the fifth year in a row, and the measure is forecast to save business rate payers £308 million compared with the level of an inflationary increase.

We will reform and extend the small business bonus scheme to improve the progressivity of the relief, while ensuring that it remains the most generous small business relief in the United Kingdom and that it delivers our manifesto commitment that 100,000 properties will be taken out of rates altogether.

By introducing transitional reliefs, we will help to ensure that those properties that see their rates liabilities increase significantly following the revaluation do so in a phased manner. We will use our approach to non-domestic rates to assist the transition to net zero as we incentivise investment in renewables through the introduction of new prescribed plant and machinery exemptions for on-site renewable energy generation and storage.

Investment—whether it be in the low-carbon economy or more broadly—is central to building a strong economy and the fairer and more equal country in which we all want to live. I now turn to that investment.

In formulating a budget in this period of huge challenge, it is vital that the Government sets out its clearest priorities. That is necessary to give clarity to our partners in local government, the private and third sectors and public bodies about our direction—about what matters to the Government.

Through our programme for government and the budget, we are focused on eradicating child poverty, transforming the economy to net zero and creating sustainable public services. We do not view those as three competing objectives; we view them as linked priorities that are a means of supporting families, creating new economic opportunities, protecting our environment, and offering protection and support to every citizen in Scotland through our public services.

Much of what the Government wishes to achieve for Scotland aligns with what local authorities wish to achieve for their communities. However, too often, valuable time and energy are taken up in fractious debates about resources and accountability for spending them. The Government will invite our partners in local government to work with us in building on our jointly produced Covid recovery strategy to create a more effective way of working together that will focus on the outcomes that matter to people, with more flexibility, reduced reporting and greater assurance. We want to enable that new partnership by giving our commitment to the financing of local government, so instead of providing the flat-cash position that is set out in the resource spending review, we are now increasing the resources that are available to local government next year by more than £550 million.

Furthermore, I confirm that the Scottish Government will not seek to agree any phase or cap in locally determined increases to council tax, as requested by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and council leaders. That means that each council will have full flexibility to set the council tax rate that is appropriate for its local authority area. I encourage councils, when setting future rates, to consider carefully the cost pressures that members of the public face.

Earlier this year, the Government set out its plan to tackle child poverty in “Best Start, Bright Futures”. The title of the plan says it all. We want to ensure that children get the best start in life and that they are able to fulfil their potential. In this budget, that means: sustaining investment in the baby box; providing 1,140 hours of early learning and childcare to all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year olds; committing £200 million to Scottish attainment challenge funding to deliver excellence and equity in education; and tackling school holiday hunger with investment of £22 million to provide meals during school holidays to children who need them most.

That builds on our on-going expansion of free school meals to all primary 6 and 7 pupils who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment, and is the next step in fulfilling our commitment to universal provision in primary schools from August 2024.

We recognise that some of the children in poverty whose life chances face the greatest challenges are those who have experience of care. The budget will deliver a further £30 million investment to keep the Promise, and £50 million investment in a whole-family wellbeing programme to provide holistic preventative family support to give our children who face the greatest challenges the greatest opportunity to realise their potential.

A crucial element of helping families out of poverty is provision of the opportunities and integrated support that parents need in order to access, sustain and progress in work. We recognise that some people face greater challenges than others in entering the labour market, so we are increasing investment in the no one left behind strategy and the fair start Scotland programme.

Employment opportunities are crucial, particularly in these difficult economic times, so the transition of our economy to net zero must be undertaken in a just and fair way that enables people, communities and businesses in Scotland to thrive and prosper. Those opportunities must exist in every single part of Scotland. The approach will be delivered through initiatives including the £366 million planned investment in the heat in buildings programme to decarbonise heating, the £34 million Scottish industrial energy transformation fund and the £26 million low-carbon manufacturing challenge fund.

Investment in our natural environment will support the journey to net zero with a £26 million programme of peatland restoration, £77 million for woodland planting and £44 million to help Scotland to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

We will support the transition to net zero by investing a further £244 million in the Scottish National Investment Bank; by investing £50 million to deliver the next phase of the just transition fund for the north-east and Moray, which will more than double this year's allocation; and by investing in the tech scaler programme throughout Scotland to support our efforts in innovation.

As the Climate Change Committee recently highlighted, decarbonisation of transport remains one of the key challenges that we face in reaching net zero. We will support those efforts by working with the private sector to extend Scotland's electric vehicle charging infrastructure with investment of £60 million; with expenditure of £1.4 billion to maintain, operate and decarbonise our rail infrastructure; by investing nearly £200 million in active and sustainable travel; and by providing £15 million as part of our fair fares review for a six-month pilot that will remove peak-time rail fares as a way of making rail travel more affordable and attractive to travellers.

Ferry services are vital in sustaining connectivity with our island communities, so the budget includes £440 million to support lifeline services. I am also allocating £15 million in this financial year and £57 million in the next financial year to support the completion of vessels 801 and 802 at Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Ltd, along with the resources that are required to build the two new Islay class vessels that are under construction, and a further two vessels of the same type that are currently in procurement.

We must have a skills, training and research environment that enables our people and businesses to realise their potential. For that reason, we have increased the resources that are available to the college and university sectors by £26 million and £20 million to support that.

Many of our public services are on a journey to recovery following the acute phase of the pandemic—none more than the justice system. We want people to live in safe communities in which we act early to reduce the potential for harm, support victims of crime and act swiftly to bring the perpetrators of crime and violence to justice. As part of the budget, I intend to increase the resources that are available to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service by £13 million, and to our wider justice system by £165 million. That will provide resources to tackle court backlogs, to strengthen legal aid provision and to increase funding of police services by £80 million.

The most precious of our public services—the one on which all of us depend—is our national health service. We recognise the challenges that the NHS faces, and the pressures that are borne by the outstanding public servants who work in the NHS. That is why we have offered a formidable pay settlement to staff in the NHS.

Supporting our NHS boards remains a top priority and, in the year ahead, we will invest more than £13 billion to allow them to continue to drive forward the five-year recovery plan. The reform of key services will continue. That will be backed by £2 billion to establish and improve primary healthcare services in the community. In parallel, we will provide £1.7 billion for social care and integration to improve services, while paving the way for the introduction of the national care service.

An additional £100 million will be made available to support delivery of the £10.90 real living wage for adult social care, which will build on the increase that was provided in 2022-23. Social care is vital work, and it is important that people on the front line are supported.

We remain committed to addressing the ongoing public health emergencies and reducing the avoidable harms that are associated with drugs

and alcohol. By investing £160 million, we will ensure that that important work continues. That is part of our commitment to provide £250 million of additional funding over the course of the parliamentary session to address the drug deaths emergency.

If we want to be able to depend on the national health service, we must be prepared to pay for it. When the UK Government set out its autumn statement, that gave rise to consequential funding for the NHS in Scotland of £291 million. I intend to pass on that funding consequential, but I do not believe that it is nearly enough for the crucial task that we ask our staff in the NHS to do. As a result of the choices that I have made on income tax, I am in a position, in one year, to increase the amount that we spend on health and social care in Scotland by more than £1 billion.

In the resource spending review, the Scottish Government committed to making £20 million available to fund the cost of a referendum on Scottish independence. The Government believed that to be a necessary investment to ensure that the people of Scotland would have the opportunity to express their democratic right to self-government. The Scottish Government respects the decision of the Supreme Court, but it still believes that the people of Scotland must have the opportunity to have their say in a democratic referendum, in line with our clear mandate. When that opportunity is available, the Scottish Government will make financial provisions for that to happen. However, at this moment, I must make full use of the resources that are available to me.

One of the reasons for my believing that Scotland will be a successful independent country is the energy wealth that we enjoy. Scotland is a country with an abundance of renewable energy opportunities, but the travesty is that, despite that strength, too many of our people languish in fuel poverty. In order to help our most vulnerable citizens, I intend to utilise the finance that was earmarked for a referendum on independence to make provision to extend our fuel insecurity fund into next year. That will mean that a further £20 million will be available to address yet another failure of the United Kingdom Government and its policies.

This budget takes place at a time of enormous challenge and difficulty for people and business, due to volatility in the economy and the corrosive effect of inflation. Many people in our communities—the people who send us here—are suffering real and enduring hardship, and all that is happening at a time when our country needs to adapt to the challenges of net zero and face the hard reality of severe constraints in the public finances.

In that context, the Government has decided to use our scope to take distinctive decisions to the greatest extent that we believe is possible at this time. We have chosen to reject the path of austerity. We have chosen a progressive path instead: to invest in our people, to invest in our economy and to invest in our public services. Those are the choices that we have made—the choices for our future—and I commend the budget to Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 60 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. Members who wish to ask a question should press their request-to-speak buttons.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Rather unusually, Presiding Officer, I begin by thanking you for taking the matter of the leaking of the budget to the press very seriously. There is no doubt that it was a very considerable discourtesy to Parliament, and one that I have never come across before in my time in this place. As a result of that, it has been extremely difficult for Opposition members to view the budget. I am sure that there are members across the chamber who will want you to fully investigate why that was allowed to happen.

I again acknowledge the very tight fiscal circumstances confronting the cabinet secretary as he has embarked upon making the tough decisions that he has outlined, but it is about time that John Swinney stopped blaming the UK Government for every single predicament in which he finds himself. He has had more money at his disposal than he has been prepared to admit and, as the Fraser of Allander Institute reminded us at the weekend, the block grant money from the UK Government more or less covered the inflationary pressures on him.

Mr Swinney also knows that—discounting all the additional Covid spend from the UK Government in the previous two years—he has had record block grant funding from the UK Government for the current financial year and that the Scottish Government will receive an additional £1.6 billion of resource spending in the next two financial years, which will give direct support to our schools and hospitals.

Mr Swinney tells us today that the Scottish Government has been forced into using its own powers to the greatest extent. Those powers have been there throughout the whole time that the SNP has been in government, but it has not been using them to deliver on the clear priorities of the Scottish people: supporting household incomes and jobs; sustained and consistent support for our business and high streets; and the delivery of our

public services. Many of those services are delivered by local government, which we know recently wrote a very strong letter to John Swinney outlining the extent of the huge pressures that it is under as a result of the SNP cutting funding over several years.

If Mr Swinney raises taxes, the public will want to know why they see only cuts and a deterioration in the delivery of public services. If he widens the tax gap for middle and higher earners in Scotland in comparison with their UK counterparts, he risks undermining the potential for economic growth that this country so desperately needs.

The Scottish Conservatives very much look forward to the forthcoming stage 1 process, in which we will set out where Mr Swinney can further reprioritise money to front-line services, including local government, policing and net zero. That is a re-prioritisation that means withdrawing the huge spending commitment to the national care service, which very few stakeholders want at all, and removing the commitment to a bogus referendum.

In the meantime, what analysis has Mr Swinney undertaken of the likely impact on tax revenues and on economic growth in Scotland that will result from middle and higher-income earners paying more tax per head than their counterparts in the rest of the UK, given that we know from the Scottish Fiscal Commission that the devolved tax powers used so far by the Scottish Government have not delivered any more tax revenue than would have been the case had taxes been set by Westminster?

Secondly, I note that the total budget for education and skills has been increased for the coming year by just under £100 million. As I understand it, that is not the full extent of the Barnett consequential delivered to the Scottish Government for education. Will Mr Swinney confirm where the rest of that money is? It may be in local government budgets, but it is important that that is spent on education.

It is obviously very good news indeed that the Scottish Government has finally withdrawn the £20 million that was to be spent on an independence referendum. As well as reprioritising that money, has Mr Swinney also reprioritised the activities of the 25 civil servants who were working on it?

John Swinney: That was a very confused contribution from Liz Smith. Let me work my way through it.

Just a few months ago, Liz Smith wanted me to follow the budget of Kwasi Kwarteng and cut tax immediately. Look at the carnage that has been created in the UK economy. At the weekend, Kwasi Kwarteng told us that they all got carried away. They blew it. Well, that lot over there on the

Conservative benches wanted me to follow their stupid and foolish example. Thank goodness I never did it.

When I look at some of the points that Liz Smith put to me, I note that, on business support, she did not welcome the fact that I have frozen business rates, despite the fact that 16 business organisations asked me to do that. That might have merited a welcome. She said that we have not put in place support for business. We have the best small business scheme in the United Kingdom.

When it comes to the tax forecasts, Liz Smith will be able to read the Scottish Fiscal Commission's report. It has given us projections about growth in income tax on earnings in the years to come as the Scottish economy strengthens. That is another thing that Liz Smith might get round to welcoming.

Then we come to education consequentials. How on earth am I supposed to boost the budget of local government, which provides education in our country, if I do not use the consequentials that are set out for that purpose?

Lastly, on the obsession that Liz Smith has with the £20 million for the independence referendum—*[Interruption.]* She is absolutely and completely obsessed by the whole thing. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

John Swinney: I am beginning to get worried about her obsession with it. I confirmed that, in order to deal with the fuel poverty that exists in our country, the punishing inflation that people are wrestling with and the sky-high energy costs that have been fuelled by the mismanagement of the United Kingdom's energy and economic policies by Liz Smith's allies in the United Kingdom, I am allocating that resource to support those who are in fuel poverty. Surely the Tories could welcome that.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Presiding Officer, I, too, thank you for your investigations into this afternoon's incidents. Given the comments that the Deputy First Minister made at the beginning of his statement, I note that the details that were laid bare by Murdo Fraser were news to me, particularly and most prominently the rate of land and buildings transaction tax. I confirm that they were not in my copy of the statement. They were in the embargoed sections. It was an impossibility for Opposition parties to see them. I consider the Deputy First Minister's comments to be a smear. I ask him to withdraw them and investigate who leaked the statement from the Government, even if it was without his authorisation.

Budgets are about priorities, and the need to deliver on the priorities of the Scottish people could not be greater at this time, but this Government has a delivery problem. We know that there was an underspend of half a billion pounds from the finance and economy budget last year because the Government could not get Covid support grants out the door. This year, the emergency budget saw a cut to building energy efficiency funding, apparently because there was a lack of demand—a lack of demand in the middle of a cost of living crisis caused by increases in gas and electricity costs. It beggars belief.

The budget must deliver for those who are in most need. Can the Deputy First Minister set out how the budget will tackle the Government's clear deficiencies in delivery by assisting those who are in urgent need?

Inflation is robbing people of their security, their dignity and their ability to provide for their families, so the budget must pay particular attention to pay in the public sector. Almost 300,000 people in the public sector are on less than £15 an hour. The ONS data is clear that 23,000 people in the public sector earn less than the national living wage. That is a scandal. Will the Deputy First Minister clarify what those figures will look like, as a result of the budget, at the end of this financial year?

In recent years, Scottish Labour has been consistent about social care pay. Last year, the minimum wage for social care rose by just 50p. This year, it has risen by even less: 40p—an increase of 3.8 per cent. That is an insult. There is a direct and real cost to the NHS of delayed discharge. That has got worse because those who carry out social care have left for jobs with better pay. What is the cost to the health service of failing to increase pay to £12 an hour? Has an assessment of that been carried out?

I also ask the Deputy First Minister to concede that the Scottish Fiscal Commission has been clear that Scottish growth in wages and jobs has lagged behind the UK average and behind every other devolved nation. Does the Deputy First Minister acknowledge the Government's failure to deliver a growth plan that is worthy of the name, and its failure to grow jobs and people? How will this budget help that?

Finally, Scottish Labour will always support progressive taxation, but we are also clear that, if progressive tax measures are to be taken, clear improvements to public services must be demonstrated. Today's statement, with its manifesto-busting measure, does not do that. People will not accept a rise in tax bills if all they see is a further decline in their services after 15 years of the Scottish National Party's mismanagement of those. Neither will they tolerate such a tax hike if they see the ranks of spin

doctors, quangos and civil servants swelling. Will the Deputy First Minister bring forward a clear plan that sets out how the money will improve the NHS—not just the amount of the funding—and will he pledge to cut Government waste, to justify the rise in tax?

John Swinney: The focus of the budget is on eradicating child poverty, on making practical and possible the transition of the economy to net zero, and on ensuring that we have sustainable public services. That is the approach that I have put into the budget, to ensure that the delivery challenge that Daniel Johnson puts to me can be addressed.

On public sector pay, as Mr Johnson knows—he and I have rehearsed the issue a few times—we ministers have spent much time over the past few months trying to get to a position whereby we secure deals that increase the pay of public sector workers, and we have made significant progress. At First Minister's question time, the First Minister made the point that, today, there is industrial action in the national health service in every other part of the United Kingdom. That is not happening in Scotland, because of the dialogue that we have taken forward.

I welcome very much the trade union support for the pay deals that we have put forward. Each of those deals—whether for local government or for the health service—has been specifically focused and targeted on improving the position on low pay. Those on lower pay have had higher increases than those who are on higher pay. Those investments and priorities of the Government are designed to strengthen the position of people who are on low pay.

Daniel Johnson talked about delayed discharge. The Government accepts the undesirability of delayed discharge. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and I, and other ministers, spend a huge amount of time working with local government and partners to secure reductions in that. However, we keep being told that the key thing is the challenge of being able to recruit staff. The challenge of recruiting staff is about the folly of Brexit and the loss of the freedom of movement of the population. Through our work to improve pay, we are taking the necessary steps to overcome that disadvantage.

Mr Johnson asked me about wage growth in the Scottish economy. He will not have had time to see what is in the Scottish Fiscal Commission report today. It says that the commission predicts

“a period of catch-up in Scottish earnings over the next five years”

relative to the rest of the United Kingdom. I hope that that gives Mr Johnson some reassurance. That will be driven by the implementation and delivery of the national strategy for economic

transformation, which was set out earlier this year by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy and is now being taken forward in order to deliver that improvement in economic performance.

We come to the question of tax. I have never in my puff heard such an equivocal explanation of the Labour Party's position on tax. Throughout his question to me, Daniel Johnson was sat well and truly on top of the fence on the issue of taxation. The Labour Party must decide whose side it is on—is it on the side of investing in public services or on the side of trying to have it both ways, which is what Daniel Johnson tried to do today?

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): This is a bleak day for our country. External factors have certainly played their part, but their effect has been compounded by the Government's manifest failure on mental health waiting times, educational attainment, ferries and energy generation.

On top of all that, the Government has failed to grow our economy, despite the extensive levers that are available to it. As such, there is a lot of pain in the budget—for mental health services and for a voluntary sector that is on its knees and which will now face another £4 million cut. The local government uplift is barely half of what COSLA asked for simply to keep the lights on.

I presented to the Deputy First Minister options for further savings, so I am disappointed that there still appears to be a £17 million contract for national testing of children who are as young as four and five and that there still appears to be the vast and unnecessary billion-pound bureaucracy that is the ministerial takeover of social care. If the Deputy First Minister cancels those plans, there is still time to turn this round—perhaps that would allow him to offer hope and comfort to the 200,000 sufferers of long Covid, on whom the budget is entirely silent.

The Government had the opportunity to be transformative on the climate emergency and the rising cost of living by instructing—right now, today—an immediate programme of public works to insulate every home in Scotland. The Deputy First Minister even had a photo opportunity. However, it appears from interrogating the figures that he is reannouncing large portions of the energy efficiency budget. How much of this is actually new money?

John Swinney: I will explore some of the points that Mr Cole-Hamilton put to me about the position on mental health, health expenditure and local government, because that is where we get into dilemmas and into the choices that Parliament must make. In the letter that I received from local government directors of finance, who asked for an

uplift of £1 billion for local government—Mr Cole-Hamilton reinforced that figure—they asked for all consequential from the UK Government to be allocated to local government. That would mean that I could not allocate those consequential to health, but Mr Cole-Hamilton just made a plea to me to support mental health expenditure and health expenditure.

I have chosen to increase taxation to enable me to invest an extra £1 billion in the national health service, which will ensure that the very priorities that Mr Cole-Hamilton raised with me can be taken forward. I assure him—this comes out of my dialogue with my colleagues in the Scottish Green Party—of the sustained investment that the Government is making in renewable energy, energy efficiency and home insulation. Those programmes are for the long term and must be supported by Government funding. We have made our choices and supported such programmes, which we expect to have an impact on the lives of people in Scotland as a consequence.

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if we had short and succinct questions and responses because—unsurprisingly—there is a great deal of interest in the item.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I welcome the Deputy First Minister's statement, which has been delivered in the most challenging circumstances. Last year, Scottish Enterprise approved £120 million in grant funding and equity investment for innovation activities, which is expected to generate a further £502 million from the private sector and £86 million from public sector partners.

We need to innovate, grow our economy and boost productivity to generate further tax revenues that will support our public services and reduce poverty. Will the Deputy First Minister expand on how the measures that he has announced, such as the tech scaler programme, will help to achieve those goals?

John Swinney: The measures that Mr Gibson sets out are encapsulated in the national strategy for economic transformation. The tech scaler programme, which a very successful organisation called CodeBase is taking forward, is part of that, and it will enable a network of tech scalers to assist in the development of new business concepts and ideas in a thriving innovation environment. Those opportunities will be available in all parts of the country, because one of the key points of the national strategy for economic transformation is the necessity for regional economic policy to thrive as a consequence of it.

I also point out that we have given the enterprise agencies stronger settlements than they might have expected in the resource spending

review to support that process of economic development.

Murdo Fraser: The Deputy First Minister claims that the budget prioritises the transition to net zero, and he talked about using the non-domestic rates system to increase investment in renewable energy, which is a worthwhile objective. However, right now—as the acting finance secretary, he should know this—small-scale hydro schemes across Scotland are facing an increase in their business rates of up to nearly 600 per cent. One scheme has seen its rateable value increase from £81,500 in 2017 to a draft valuation of £439,500 in 2023. The executive director of Alba Energy has described that as “madness without a method”. How on earth can the Deputy First Minister reconcile what is happening on the ground with the rhetoric that we have just heard in his statement?

John Swinney: There are a number of points there. First, the Government has expanded the reliefs that are available to renewable energy projects as part of the non-domestic rates regime.

Secondly, as Mr Fraser knows, valuations for non-domestic rates are undertaken by assessors, who are acting independently of Government and come to their judgments on the basis of the structure of non-domestic rates. Individual organisations who do not agree with the assessors’ decisions have the opportunity to appeal against those valuations, and a due statutory process is in place for those appeals to be undertaken.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Deputy First Minister for his statement, which prioritises Scotland’s national health service. How will the increases in the Scottish Government’s front-line health budget compare to any increase in the UK Government’s front-line health spend?

John Swinney: The decisions that I have taken today have been about ensuring that our health service has available to it resources to recover from the pandemic and ensure that patient care can be properly addressed. That billion-pound, single-year increase is the largest contribution that the Government can make to help the national health service. It exceeds the Barnett consequential that are available to us, so it demonstrates our commitment to recovery in the national health service.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Will the Deputy First Minister pause the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill to release money to spend on ending non-residential care charges, which are in effect a care tax on the vulnerable during a cost of living crisis?

The Deputy First Minister will be aware that increasing wages to £10.90 an hour means that

people who work in Lidl earn more than social care staff do. That increase will not be enough to tackle the increasing level of vacancies in social care and will not take the pressure off the NHS with regard to delayed discharge.

The Deputy First Minister is creating a two-tier workforce in care by paying children social care staff less. Will he pay all social care staff £15 an hour, which is what they so richly deserve?

John Swinney: Parliament is currently considering the legislation on the national care service. A scrutiny process will be undertaken and it is for Parliament to consider all those issues through the proper process.

On the care sector, I recognise the financial challenges that individuals face, which is why the Government has put so much effort and energy—and resource, I might add—into strengthening the pay deals that are available to individuals in employment in the care service. We will continue to do as much as we possibly can, but the scale of the change that Jackie Baillie talks about would rather force her front bench to get off the fence a little bit about where the money would come from to enable that change to take place.

I am happy to participate in discussion and dialogue with Opposition parties about the budget’s priorities. I have already engaged with Mr Johnson on this question—indeed, I have engaged with all political parties—but we have to establish the ground rule that when people come forward with suggestions that will increase costs in the budget, they also have to tell us where the savings will come from.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): As we progress with our just transition to net zero, it is vital that we prepare our workforce to be able to take advantage of the opportunities that it will bring. Can the Deputy First Minister provide any further information on how the measures in the budget will support the creation of new green jobs in Scotland? What assessment has been made of the progress so far in creating jobs?

John Swinney: The steps that have been taken in the budget are designed to ensure that we take a very focused approach to the delivery of new employment in the green economy and the journey to net zero. It will take place across a range of programmes; indeed, as I said in my statement, we need to see the interrelationship of public services, the journey to net zero and the attack on child poverty as part of a journey in which all these different themes are joined together to ensure that we are creating employment opportunities that help families get out of poverty.

The measures in the budget with regard to the investment in our colleges and universities and the investment in employability programmes such as no one left behind and fair start Scotland are all designed to support that journey for individuals, and the investment funds for the low-carbon economy will support companies in creating those new opportunities as our economy changes. Through that combination of effort, I am confident that we will be able to stimulate employment in the green economy.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): The claim that there will be £550 million more for local government is clearly smoke and mirrors and all about more ring fencing, and the huge real-terms cut to core services through the general revenue grant will be disastrous, coming on top of the house-building budget being slashed by £176 million.

Last week, SNP councillors in COSLA—not, I should say, councillors from any other party—talked about

“services”

being

“either significantly reduced, cut or stopped altogether”

and said:

“When councils can’t focus spend on prevention ... the NHS will end up spending significantly more money”.

Has the cabinet secretary assessed the additional costs that will be borne by the NHS and the impact on care and people needing emergency interventions when councils are left with no option but to scrap preventative services?

John Swinney: Local government’s expectation from the resource spending review was of a flat cash settlement, which would have meant no more money next year compared with this year. I have just announced £550 million of additional expenditure. Is it impossible for anybody in here to welcome the fact that that is a departure from the resource spending review and that it addresses in a significant way the issues that local government has put to me?

I said in my statement that we would work with local government on addressing its concerns about ring fencing and the level of reporting in certain programmes, but Parliament also expects to hear from local government about the performance and delivery of certain issues that really matter to members of Parliament. Indeed, Mr Griffin and his colleagues ask these very questions. We will take forward that discussion with local government to create a partnership in which we can work together, and that approach will be greatly assisted by the fact that we have just allocated £550 million of new additional resources to local government.

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): As the Deputy First Minister has outlined, the Scottish child payment will increase by 150 per cent, which should help to lift 50,000 children out of poverty. As we try to reach targets for reducing child poverty, the UK Government is taking action to push more people into poverty by causing inflation rises, by failing to act on soaring energy costs and much more. Can the Deputy First Minister expand on the action that is being taken in the budget to eradicate poverty and will he contrast that with the damage being done by the UK Government?

John Swinney: Research work undertaken by the Government earlier this year indicated that, if the UK Government had reversed its measures to restrict benefits, it would have put £780 million into the pockets of people in Scotland. That is a measure of the scale of the erosion of the financial support that is available for people on low incomes.

The Scottish Government has brought forward measures that substantively address some of those issues, in addition to the measures that we have already brought forward to, for example, mitigate the effects of the bedroom tax. We are doing as much as we possibly can do to address those issues, within the resources that we have and the powers that are available to us, but the scale of the challenge gets greater as a result of the negative actions of the UK Government.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The Deputy First Minister mentioned the Bute house agreement, which states that the SNP-Green Government will deliver 110,000 affordable homes. Today’s budget cuts the housing budget by £215 million in real terms, which comes on the back of last year’s cut to the housing budget. That decision will undermine jobs in the construction sector. The SNP Government is now driving a housing crisis in Scotland. Why has the Government today ripped up its housing policies, and what is it going to do to make sure that affordable homes are actually delivered?

John Swinney: I can tell Miles Briggs what is driving the housing crisis: the increases in interest rates that have been fuelled by the economic mismanagement of the United Kingdom Government.

The Scottish Government is supporting sustained investment in our housing infrastructure over the long term. Very good progress has been made—indeed, in previous sessions of Parliament, the Scottish Government has delivered on all of our housing targets. We are determined to ensure that we do that. I have been candid with Parliament about the challenges in our capital programme. Capital projects and anything that relies on input prices will be more difficult in

terms of cost because of the energy crisis, energy prices, the rise in interest rates and the effect of inflation. Those are all substantive issues that have been fuelled by the actions of the United Kingdom Government.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome the announcement of the £60.9 million for Ferguson Marine in my constituency, which will safeguard shipbuilding jobs and opportunities. The Deputy First Minister spoke of his frustration with the UK Government for not providing additional funding. Will he provide an update on the Scottish Government's latest engagement with the UK Government regarding funding, and will he continue to press the UK Government for additional resource?

John Swinney: I have set out what the perspective looks like in relation to the spending available from the UK Government in future years. It becomes extremely challenging in the later years of the spending review. I have engaged with the UK Government and set out the perspective of the Scottish Government, and we will continue to do that.

In relation to this financial year, I have encouraged the UK Government to recognise the extraordinary inflationary pressures with which we are wrestling. The UK Government has decided not to change the financial position this year, which increases the financial strain with which we are wrestling. I appeal to the UK Government to revisit these issues, which must be causing significant difficulties in UK departments. That call has been echoed by my colleague in the Welsh Government, who has made a similar plea to the UK Government.

The Presiding Officer: I again ask for short and succinct questions and responses.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to the Deputy First Minister for his engagement on tax policy and his consideration of the proposals that I made on behalf of the Scottish Greens, which build on the changes that were already made by the Government and the Greens in 2018.

What is the overall benefit to our public services as a result of the changes that our parties have agreed since income tax powers were devolved a few years ago?

John Swinney: The figure that I can give Mr Greer is that, in the next financial year, the combined effect of all of the tax changes that have been made over the past few years will be to increase the resources that are available to us to the tune of £1 billion. That is the consequence of opting for the progressive measures that we have put in place. That money has been generated to

the advantage of Scottish public finances as a consequence of our dialogue.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): The director of the Fraser of Allander Institute, Mairi Spowage, recently said that the inflexibility of the Scottish Government's budget meant that a "strong case" could be made for enhancing fiscal powers. She said:

"The lack of any real ability on the part of the Scottish Government to be able to flex its budget within year in response to unanticipated shocks remains a real limitation of the existing fiscal settlement."

Does the Deputy First Minister agree with that assessment? What response has he had from the UK Government in that respect?

John Swinney: I have been very open with the Parliament about the enormous constraints with which we are wrestling in this financial year, which is the first financial year in the history of the Parliament in which inflation has been a particularly significant factor. We have learned about the acute difficulty created by the limitations of our resource borrowing powers, and we have no ability to address the volatility other than by redirecting spending from one programme to another. Obviously, I have had to do that on two occasions.

As I indicated in my statement, I have not yet found a sustainable path for this financial year to fully balance the Scottish Government's budget. Those are real practical issues. The UK Government has not indicated a willingness to address those questions, but I will continue to make that case to it.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Last month, I was at an emergency summit to look at the issue of empty shop units on Aberdeen's Union Street. Our town centres are desperate for help. Can the Deputy First Minister tell us how the cuts to the city's investment and strategy and the regeneration budget of £66.4 million will help the situation? That feels like the kiss of death to our high streets.

John Swinney: Those budgets reflect the pattern of expenditure for city deals around the country. A variety of factors affect those budget lines on an annual basis, and they will vary because of the profile of the deals around the country. Therefore, I encourage Mr Lumsden not to read too much into that particular factor. After all, the city deals that have been put in place are sometimes for 10 or 20 years.

Obviously, I have acceded to the request of business organisations to freeze the business rates poundage. I have done that, and that provides substantive assistance and, indeed, significant savings, because those business rates should ordinarily have increased in line with

inflation. I have opted not to do that in the budget statement.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Brexit continues to hamper Scotland's efforts to establish a wellbeing economy and maintain parity with the wealth and prosperity of our small northern European neighbours. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that the fiscal damage as a result of being ripped from the European Union has made the budget more challenging than it had to be? Does he look forward, as I do, to the transformative economic opportunities to come when Scotland re-enters the European single market?

John Swinney: The Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that the effect of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union has been to depress GDP by 4 per cent. That is simply an act of total economic vandalism. We did not have to leave the European Union in the fashion that we did. We could have maintained membership of the single market. However, the Conservatives were determined to ensure that that was not the case, and that was disastrous.

The only route for Scotland to gain access to European markets with the degree of freedom that we previously enjoyed is through its being an independent country. In my view, the sooner that happens, the better.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I commend the cabinet secretary for his uplift of more than £140 million in spending on ferry services on top of the £60 million allocation to Ferguson Marine. I am sure that the Turkish shipyard that has been awarded the latest CalMac Ferries contract for the Islay class ferries will be incredibly thankful for his generosity. Indeed, the GMB trade union has calculated that every pound of capital spending on a shipbuilding project in a Scottish shipyard generates an extra 35p in the local economy for wage and supplier payments. I will press the cabinet secretary. Does he think that the capital spending that he has allocated is value for money for the Scottish taxpayer and Scottish economic growth, or are the real winners the people of Turkey?

John Swinney: The Government is focused on ensuring that we take forward the construction of ferry vessels to meet the needs of island communities. We are taking decisions that are consistent with the approach that is necessary for public procurement projects. We are committed to the investment, and I am glad that, at least in some measure, Mr Sweeney was able to welcome it.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): Although the groundwork has been laid, there remains much to do to fully address the poverty-related

attainment gap. Can the Deputy First Minister outline how the Scottish budget will support that essential mission?

John Swinney: We are taking steps in the budget to ensure that our expenditure focuses on delivering the outcomes that Mr Dey wants to secure. That will be a constant focus of the Government in taking forward the budget and ensuring that the agenda, on which we are making progress, can be intensified in the years to come.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The budget for Scotland's motorways and trunk roads in 2023-24 has been cut by £76 million. Will the cabinet secretary finally admit what my Highlands and Islands constituents and his Perthshire constituents know, which is that the promised dualling of the A9 between Inverness and Perth will not be completed in 2025 or, indeed, any time soon?

John Swinney: The Government's position on the completion of the dualling of the A9 remains intact. We are taking forward steps in the budget in that regard, and there is provision in the budget to do exactly that. I have made the point openly to Parliament about the hard realities with which we are wrestling. Capital projects will be more challenging because of the effect of input prices. That situation has been caused by all the circumstances with which we are familiar, which have been fuelled by the mistakes of the United Kingdom Government. All of those factors are making capital projects more difficult to deliver. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

John Swinney: The Government will address the implications of that on a constant basis, as we take forward our policy and capital programmes, to ensure that we can deliver on the expectations of people around the country.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Last week, when I was speaking to councillors from Glasgow City Council, one of their main requests was for more money. Therefore, I very much welcome the extra £550 million for local government. Can the Deputy First Minister say more about the flexibility that he mentioned in his statement? Local authorities, including Glasgow City Council, would like more flexibility, but I accept that, at the same time, we have national programmes.

John Swinney: That is the dilemma with which we have to wrestle. I aired that matter in a conversation with COSLA leaders a couple of weeks ago, and I returned to it in a conversation with the COSLA leadership last night. There is very close parliamentary interest in the implementation of a number of key programmes and policy commitments, but, equally, there will be

a local desire to have some degree of flexibility about how those priorities are taken forward. We have to create a climate of assurance as we address issues of flexibility, which local authorities are seeking. We have to strike that balance in those discussions and, along with the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government, I will take those forward as we advance such issues with local government.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Our schools in Scotland have lost nearly 100 teachers in the past year, before this real-terms cut to core local government budgets. Pay for teachers currently accounts for one third of council net revenue expenditure. What modelling has the Deputy First Minister undertaken on the number of teachers who will be lost as a result of his budget?

John Swinney: That is a practical illustration of the point that I have just been addressing with Mr Mason. The Government does not employ teachers; they are employed by local authorities, but Mr Marra, of course, wants to hold the Government to account for the employment of those teachers. I have come to Parliament today to set out a £550 million increase to the budget for local government. That is higher than this year's budget and is higher than local government could have expected. Local government has the opportunity to take forward the employment of teachers and investment in public services, because the Government has delivered a funding settlement that is higher, greater and more emphatic than the arrangements that are in place and than local government could have expected.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): The Deputy First Minister might be aware of calls from Marie Curie Scotland to use Scotland's social security system to provide enhanced support for those who are terminally ill. I appreciate that that would be a new and additional cost in our challenging financial climate, but will the Deputy First Minister work with the palliative care community to see what additional support can be provided and, more specifically, what support will be allocated to palliative care services in this Scottish budget, given the increased number of deaths in community settings?

John Swinney: The health secretary would be very happy to meet palliative care organisations to address those questions. Obviously, we are giving a very significant generic increase to the health and care budget in Scotland. There will be opportunities for organisations to interact with the health system with regard to how the matter can be taken forward, and I am sure that the issues that Mr Doris raises on behalf of that sector, which plays an invaluable role in the quality of life of our citizens, can be properly and fully considered as part of the budget implementation.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): It will come as a shock to the public that the Deputy First Minister, as the man who had to check that there were no banana skins in the Ferguson Marine deal, is allocating a further £60 million to deliver the two ferries, when they should have already been serving our island communities. Will the Deputy First Minister tell us which budget he had to cut in order to fund that further spending on ferries that should have been delivered by now?

John Swinney: As Mr Kerr will know, the Government looks at its entire capital programme on an on-going basis. We look at the phasing of, and the delivery arrangements for, projects in order to allocate resources accordingly. I thought that, on behalf of the public, Mr Kerr would have said that they expect us to complete the vessels and ensure that the needs of island communities are met, which is precisely what the Government is doing.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Peak-time fares on trains are a huge drain on household budgets. Extortionate prices prevent many from choosing rail over the private car, which damages our climate and drives down passenger numbers at a time when they need to build back up. How will the budget deliver fair fares for people while boosting the climate and our newly nationalised ScotRail?

John Swinney: We have agreed to put £15 million into the fair fares review, which will specifically focus on taking forward an exercise to reduce peak rail fares. It will operate over a six-month period in the course of the next financial year, and the Government will consider carefully the impact of that measure and the long-term sustainability of such a proposition. If it is successful, the Government will wish to continue it for a longer period.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Between us, the Deputy First Minister and I have represented for nearly 50 years people who use daily and who rely on the A9. I know that he is as aware as I and other members are of the tragic death toll that we have seen on that road this year, almost all on single-carriageway sections.

In the budget, I heard no reference at all to any new or additional funding for delivery of dualling of the A9, or the A96 in my constituency. I am afraid that that will be disappointing to my, and I suspect his, constituents. When will we deliver on our pledges that were first made 14 years ago? Will the Deputy First Minister commit to publish early in the new year—because I fully understand the commercial and other pressures that he described and that we face—a revised timetable for delivery of our now somewhat aged pledges?

John Swinney: As Mr Ewing knows, significant progress has been made on dualling the A9. In my constituency, relatively recently, the section between Luncarty and Pass of Birnam was opened and it is making a significant impact. I also recognise the tragedy of the death toll on the A9, which, as a consequence of many road safety measures that have been taken for a considerable time, has been avoided for many years. However, the issue has reached an intense level in the past 12 months, which causes enormous distress to the individuals affected. I welcome the work, which Mr Ewing will be aware of, that the Minister for Transport is taking forward to set out measures to improve road safety on the A9. That has a constant part of her attention.

I reassure Mr Ewing that resources are available in the budget to continue the programme of dualling the A9. Ministers are reviewing the capital programme to ensure that we can support the financial commitments in the light of the commercial pressures that are prevalent in capital programmes because of the increase in input prices.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The statement confirms the position that was set out in the resource spending review, in which an increase of more than £550 million was allocated. In a recent letter, COSLA indicated that there is a black hole of around £1 billion. Council leaders have already indicated that, if that amount is not provided, they will struggle to provide even the basic essential services that communities rely on. Therefore, what services does the Deputy First Minister suggest that councils further cut back on due to the lack of funding that he is providing in the budget?

John Swinney: I just want to point out the argument that has been marshalled in front of me by Mr Stewart. His front bench has attacked me for increasing tax in order to increase the resources going into the public purse. If I did not do that, we would have less money. If we have less money available—*[Interruption.]* I hear the Tories saying no—they are even more economically illiterate than I thought.

Mr Stewart then asked me to increase the money to local government. I just want to give the Tories a warning, and it is given with all the kindness that I can generate for the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party. Every single time a Conservative comes here asking the Government to spend more money on any aspect of policy, we will remind them of their hostility to increasing tax and their support for starving the public purse of the resources that we require.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): We know that local businesses in town centres across Scotland will be

facing increased costs due to inflation, and that will compound pre-existing issues that they have been facing due to changing shopping habits. Can the Deputy First Minister say any more about how the budget will support our local high streets and town centres in this very difficult time?

John Swinney: The principal thing to which I can refer Audrey Nicoll is the decision that I have taken on freezing the business rate poundage, which is designed to help those who are in the sectors to which she refers, operating in town centres. Obviously, the Government takes forward other work through our regeneration activity, which is designed to assist the development of town centres. The dialogue will continue around the country to support communities that are affected by the difficulties and challenges that are faced.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The Government sets water charges for a year ahead based on the consumer prices index. In October, that was 11.1 per cent. As the Deputy First Minister has said, that is soaring inflation. At a time when the Government is telling people to settle for pay deals below the inflation rate, why, in the middle of a cost of living crisis, is the Government hammering families—including those on low incomes, who all pay water charges—with such an eye-watering hike in their bills?

John Swinney: As a matter of fact, the Government does not set water rates. They are set by the board of Scottish Water, and the directors of Scottish Water have a responsibility to take forward that decision. I am quite certain that the board of Scottish Water will be aware of the cost of living challenge that people are facing around the country and will consider those issues when it takes a decision about the level of water rates in Scotland.

Fiona Hyslop (Linlithgow) (SNP): In all the big budget figure announcements, it might be possible to forget a smaller number that is more significant in its importance—the number of young people who most need our continued support. What will the budget do for our care-experienced young people, and how will the Scottish Government, and the Deputy First Minister personally, deliver on their commitment to keep the Promise of continuing support for Scotland's care-experienced young people?

John Swinney: There are two elements of the budget that are relevant in answering the very important question that Fiona Hyslop puts to me. The first is the investment that the Government is making of £50 million to further develop whole-family wellbeing, which is a holistic family-based support programme. We have also allocated £30 million in the budget to support our on-going commitment to the Promise. I hope that those two commitments give Fiona Hyslop, and the care-

experienced community in Scotland, confidence in the sustained commitment of the Government to ensuring that we improve the opportunities and life chances of young people who have experience of care in Scotland.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The Deputy First Minister acknowledged that

“Ferry services are vital in sustaining connectivity with our island communities”,

yet, in the face of massively increasing fuel and maintenance costs, Mr Swinney is delivering a real-terms cut to funding for Orkney’s lifeline internal ferry services. How does he believe that that will help to sustain connectivity for island communities in Orkney and how much of the £440 million capital spend will go towards helping with the urgently needed replacement of the ageing internal ferry fleet in Orkney?

John Swinney: I discussed those issues recently with Councillor James Stockan, as I recorded in the exchanges that I had with Mr McArthur yesterday. I am keen to take forward further detailed discussions with Orkney Islands Council on the ferry replacement issue. I recognise the scale of the issue for that relatively small authority, and the Government will engage constructively and actively with Orkney Islands Council on how we can work together to address that challenge.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): We all support the third sector, but we are seeing a cut in its budget again this year. At last year’s budget statement, the finance secretary said that the Government would meet voluntary organisations to look for a three-year deal. The Social Justice and Social Security Committee recently had evidence that neither the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government nor the Deputy First Minister has met with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations. Will he make that pledge again and, this time, will the Government follow through on it?

John Swinney: I am very happy to confirm the Government’s support for such an approach. That reflects the decisions and discussions that we have taken in Cabinet about the way in which we wish to proceed on that. I had extensive discussions with the third sector in the preparation of the budget in advance of today’s announcements and I know that the cabinet secretary regularly meets with the third sector, so I am happy to confirm our desire to take forward those discussions.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Despite our not being able to hold the referendum next year that the people of Scotland asked us to hold, I am glad to hear that the £20 million that was earmarked for it will be used for a

good cause, in mitigating one of the worst effects of remaining in the union by tackling fuel poverty. The Deputy First Minister will be aware that, in my Highlands and Islands region, folk are often hardest hit by that and other rises in the cost of goods and services and that they face some of the highest levels of fuel poverty in the country. Will he expand on how the extra cost of living in the Highlands and Islands has been taken into account when designing the budget?

John Swinney: We want to make sure, with the fuel insecurity fund, that we support those who face the greatest challenge and assist them in every respect that we can. The learning that we have had from the fuel insecurity fund this year, which has provided very welcome assistance to individuals, will be replicated in the fund that we take forward in the next financial year.

I agree with Emma Roddick that the issue that we are dealing with is a consequence of the energy frameworks within the United Kingdom, which do such damage to householders in all parts of Scotland, but particularly in the north of Scotland and particularly to people in remote areas and on low incomes. One of the arguments as to why Scotland should be an independent country is so that it can design a more appropriate energy policy that meets the needs of our people, particularly those with vulnerability.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): What provisions will be made in the budget to support the life-saving services provided by Rape Crisis Scotland centres right across the country, amid fears that 28 jobs are at risk due to uncertainty over Scottish Government funding for that trusted and vital charity?

John Swinney: I am aware of the concerns that have been raised. I very much value the services that Rape Crisis Scotland provides. The Scottish Government has made financial commitments that provide funding that will continue into the latter part of 2023, but I understand that there are earlier challenges to that. I assure Monica Lennon that the Government will engage constructively in addressing that issue. It is not all about next year; some of it is about this year, which, as I have recounted to Parliament, is particularly challenging for us. However, I come at it from a sympathetic point of view and will try to address those issues.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): How can this be a budget for skills when it cuts Skills Development Scotland’s budget? There is already a freeze on additional apprenticeship places. So says the Scottish Training Federation, which states that

“The current freeze on Apprenticeship places will see ... training providers going out of business”,

that there will be redundancies, and that

“Apprentice training will be disrupted.”

Will the Deputy First Minister confirm that the SNP has abandoned its target of 25,000 apprenticeship places, as seems to be the case? Does he recognise that common sense should tell us that this particular cut to SDS is the very last thing that our economy needs at this time?

John Swinney: Here we go again. Here we have another Conservative who does not believe in our raising tax to increase the size of the public purse, and who wants us to spend more money on a particular issue however important that policy commitment might be. Let me just—

Stephen Kerr: You have cut the budget.

John Swinney: I am afraid that there is going to have to be an awful lot of basic arithmetic here. I know that Liz Smith is a great fan of basic arithmetic, because she was always telling me that when I was education secretary. I say to her that Mr Kerr needs some assistance with basic arithmetic. He is asking me to increase the budget for Skills Development Scotland at the same time as members on his party’s front bench are telling me not to increase public expenditure as a whole. Just to reassure Mr Kerr—

Stephen Kerr: You have cut the budget.

John Swinney: I have just addressed that point, Mr Kerr. No amount of waving papers at me, shouting and all the rest of it will change that.

I will just repeat it all, although I am being encouraged to be brief. The Government is absolutely committed to the target of 25,000 apprenticeship places. Indeed, before the pandemic, the Government was on the verge of achieving its target of 30,000 modern apprenticeship places. There is capacity in the modern apprenticeships programme at this stage, and we are confident that those targets can be achieved.

I also point out to Mr Kerr that, as part of the budget—he did not welcome this bit—more resources have been allocated to universities and colleges, which obviously contribute to the skills opportunities and capacities of our country.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on the Scottish budget 2023-24.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Further to Daniel Johnson’s earlier comments, I am disappointed, but not surprised, by the Deputy First Minister’s attempt to shift blame for the shameful leak of the Scottish Government’s budget away from him and his party when the details could only have come from his office. He has made some very serious accusations. That is right out of the Deputy First

Minister’s playbook, and I am afraid that it confirms my view of the party in government’s disrespect for this Parliament.

Presiding Officer, may I ask whether you have a commitment from the Scottish Government that it will properly investigate and report on the leak? Given the deceitful tactic that was employed earlier by the Deputy First Minister, what confidence do you have that the categorical assurance that the leak was not from the Scottish Government is in any way dependable?

The Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order, Mr Kerr. I addressed the earlier points of order in earlier business today, and I have had a thorough discussion with the Scottish Government on the matter.

Asset Transfers and Community Empowerment

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-07247, in the name of Tom Arthur, on asset transfers and community empowerment—five years on. I invite members who wish to participate to press their request-to-speak button now or as soon as possible.

16:56

The Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth (Tom Arthur): I am grateful for the opportunity to secure this debate for the Parliament, providing us with an opportunity to reflect on the progress that we have made in five years since introducing landmark asset transfer legislation that has empowered our communities to take on many of our public places and spaces.

Today's debate provides us with a chance to hear about the difference that asset transfers have made locally in Scotland, enabling community organisations to take over management and ownership of many public spaces. It also creates an opportunity to consider some of the challenges that we face, such as in supporting our most vulnerable communities to engage with asset transfers.

Community asset transfer is not new. Our communities have a long history of owning and managing land and buildings. Local authorities have worked with community organisations for many years, agreeing the transfer of assets that, often, have been surplus and where the benefits of community management have been recognised. I acknowledge the hard work that has been carried out across the country by local authorities and other public service partners to develop community asset management and ownership strategies.

Since the introduction of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, that initial good work has been strengthened by introducing new rights for community organisations that submit asset transfers, including a right of appeal, and by placing new responsibilities on public authorities to decide on applications by set timescales, to do so transparently and to publish details of their assets and asset transfer activity annually.

Much has happened since asset transfer legislation came into force in January 2017. The Scottish Government has worked directly with the 95 public authorities—known as relevant authorities—to establish and support annual

reporting processes, including by developing an annual reporting template to capture the necessary data. We also commissioned researchers at Glasgow Caledonian University to carry out an evaluation of the first three years of asset transfer activity, which reported in July 2020. We set up a national asset transfer action group of partners and community representatives to consider the Glasgow evaluation and any challenges in embedding asset transfer. In addition, we hosted two national events for asset transfer in 2021; one was for the relevant authorities and the other was for community organisations.

Through those actions, we have learned a lot about how the legislation is working on the ground. For example, we know that local authorities currently receive most requests but that there are signs that that is changing as other relevant authorities come on board and help community groups to take on their assets.

In 2017-18, 85 per cent of the total number of asset transfer requests were made to local authorities, with only 15 per cent made to other public bodies. However, by 2021-22, 46 per cent of the total number of requests were made to other public authorities, including NHS Lanarkshire, NHS Dumfries and Galloway, NHS Fife, NHS Grampian, NHS Highland and NHS Western Isles. Scottish Government agencies such as Scottish Water and Forestry and Land Scotland received requests, too.

Those figures are about more than just numbers and data; they represent a tangible change to the way in which communities now control their own place. For example, Forestry and Land Scotland transferred the Fairy Pools car park in Skye to the Minginish Community Hall Association, which went on to provide better facilities at the site. In another example, NHS Lanarkshire transferred Croy clinic to Croy Community Hub on an initial lease, with the view of transferring full ownership, to create local jobs and to enable a local community space for the development of community groups.

Since 2017, more than 350 asset transfer requests have been made using asset transfer legislation; more than 200 have been granted and many more are in progress. That has played a significant role in maintaining the upward trajectory of overall community land use in Scotland.

Of course, asset transfer sits within a wider community land use setting, in which other mechanisms are available for communities to take on land or buildings. We know from the latest report—the “Community Ownership in Scotland 2021” report, which the Scottish Government published in September 2022—that there has been a steady upward trend in community ownership, with an increase from a known 84

community-owned assets in 2000 to 711 in 2021. Over the same period, there has been more than a sixfold jump in community groups owning assets, with an increase from 74 to 484.

Our work with partners plays a vital role in embedding asset transfer policy. We fund the community ownership support service—COSS—which provides expert support and advice on the asset transfer process to community groups and to relevant authorities. We established the aforementioned national asset transfer action group in October 2020 to help us to respond to the recommendations of the Glasgow Caledonian University report, and it also helped to inform the annual reporting template that we developed to support relevant authorities to meet their statutory duty to publish asset transfer data annually.

The group also supported our work in response to the findings of the Local Government and Communities Committee in the previous session of Parliament, which made recommendations on asset transfer. We have listened to advice and, working with the national group and our partners, we have acted on those recommendations, including through our launch in September 2021 of guidance titled “Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015: Asset Transfer Guidance for Considering Social Value”.

Although we rightly celebrate the success of asset transfer, we are now working to better understand the detail of the data and learning that have been gathered over the past five years. Work is under way to learn from those authorities that are promoting and embracing asset transfer, as well as to understand the cold spots of little or no activity, and why those cold spots exist. In addition, we are listening to our community organisations and acting on their feedback and experiences.

That work will form part of the wider review of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, which I launched in the summer at the Loch Ness community hub in Glenurquhart. There, I saw at first hand the achievements of Glenurquhart Rural Community Association, the local community organisation that, through an asset transfer in 2018, took on a former tourist information centre, which it has, by working with partners, turned it into a vibrant community hub that employs local people and operates a green transport business.

As we progress the review, learning such as that will be explored with partners and communities, which are being asked for their views on what is working and what needs to change.

I want to take a few moments to speak about some of the other key developments that the

Scottish Government backs that will support communities to take on the running and ownership of more land and assets, as well as supporting wider community empowerment objectives.

Community wealth building provides national and local government, the third sector, the private sector and communities with an opportunity to approach economic development in a new way, thereby creating conditions for the people of Scotland to own a greater stake in local economies and shared wealth. Significant progress has been made in the pilot areas of Clackmannanshire, the south of Scotland, the Western Isles, and the Tay cities and Fife and Glasgow city regions, all of which are developing and embedding bespoke community wealth building action plans, with the support of the Scottish Government.

In addition, the £3 million Ayrshire growth deal community wealth building fund, which commenced delivery last April, is supporting local businesses and community organisations to grow local wealth.

Through partnerships with local communities, businesses and anchor organisations, local authorities are taking collective action to implement community wealth building by helping to create fairer local economies that tackle poverty and inequality; by focusing on wellbeing and inclusion; and by maximising the benefits of public spend and strategic decision making. Locally, that could involve small businesses or social enterprises winning procurement contracts for the first time, the creation of new local jobs or the protection of existing jobs, or communities owning and managing more local assets.

The review of the 2015 act provides an opportunity to build on those successes. We have an opportunity to progress that work further through a more comprehensive place-focused model of economic development at the local and regional levels.

To further support the implementation of community wealth building, we have committed to developing legislation and to holding a consultation to help us to gather a wide range of views on the changes that are required to grow local wealth and give communities a greater stake in the economy.

Although asset transfer is an important tool in providing opportunities to communities throughout Scotland to acquire assets and take over services, there are other options for acquisition—for example, through the various right to buy requests that are available under the Land Reform Act (Scotland) 2003 and the Land Reform Act (Scotland) 2016.

The Scottish Government also provides £10 million a year to support communities to acquire assets through the Scottish land fund. In the past five years, the fund has given grants of more than £39 million to more than 230 projects across Scotland. In 2020-21, our programme for government committed to a new five-year SLF that commenced in April 2021, and we will seek to double the SLF to £20 million by the end of this session of Parliament, enabling many more community groups to engage with public land ownership.

Our place-based investment programme embeds, at its core, community empowerment and equality, backed with an initial £325 million capital investment over the next five years to support community-led regeneration and to accelerate our ambitions for place, 20-minute neighbourhoods and town centres, helping to create the conditions that support community wealth building.

The place-based investment programme builds on the successful impact of the regeneration capital grant fund, the town centre action plans, and the partnerships and networks that have been built over a number of years. It aims to link and align all place-based funding initiatives to ensure that we have a coherent approach that will build resilient communities and promote inclusive growth and wellbeing. It is complemented by our empowering communities programme, which provides support to develop and build the capacity, resilience and sustainability of our communities, of which community ownership is a key part in helping to create more resilient and sustainable communities.

Local government is a key partner in delivering the place-based investment programme and it will receive an allocation of £140 million in capital funding during this session of Parliament. In addition to accelerating our shared ambitions for place, the funding will also contribute to net zero, wellbeing and inclusive economic development, tackling inequality and disadvantage and promoting community involvement and ownership. To complement that work, we will also support participatory budgeting and participation requests, as covered in the 2015 act.

I very much look forward to members' contributions to the debate, as we recognise the tremendous impact that asset transfer is having in Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the progress that has been made to date in implementing Part 5 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015; recognises that ownership, lease or management of land and buildings are powerful tools for communities to drive change and achieve their shared ambitions; acknowledges the programme of support for participatory budgeting that has

given communities a stronger voice in decisions on how public money is spent, and agrees that place-based, community-led regeneration can help local areas, individuals and businesses to tackle poverty and inequality, and build community wealth, on their own terms.

17:06

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland)
(Con): I will try not to speak as quickly as the minister.

I thank the Government for the debate, which highlights the fantastic organisations that are doing so much across Scotland to improve our communities and bring buildings and spaces back into public use.

As a former councillor, I have seen at first hand the importance of empowering our communities. While this Scottish National Party Government has stepped back, our communities have stepped up. Following continued cuts to local authority funding, more responsibility has been passed to community groups. From planting flower beds to putting up our Christmas light displays, communities up and down the country have stepped up while the Government has failed.

Buildings that once stood proudly in our town and village centres have fallen into disrepair due to shrinking council budgets. However, thanks to the UK Government's community ownership fund, some of those buildings are now being brought back into community use.

We Conservatives believe that we must put communities first, and that empowering communities is absolutely critical to ensuring that our towns and villages can be the vibrant and thriving places that they ought to be. The reality is that no one knows better how to achieve that than the individuals and families who live in those communities. Centralisation simply does not work: we need to see power moving downward to local communities, not moving in the other direction.

From 2017 to 2021, I was the convener of Aberdeen City Council's finance committee, which dealt with the local authority's community transfer requests with varying degrees of success, depending on the asset and the group that was looking to acquire it.

I will start with some success stories. The Seaton depot was an old disused council property. In 2018, it was agreed that the depot would be sold to Seaton community church for just £1. The church subsequently spent more than £0.5 million demolishing the old building and constructing not only a church but a brand-new community facility. While doing my research for this debate, I found a press clipping from 2018 that quoted me saying that the church's work would

"make a real and lasting difference"

to the residents who live in the area, and that

“By using surplus council assets in new ways and supporting the goals of partners like the Seaton Community Church, we can make a real difference to people across the city”.

So, I do sometimes get things right. Today, the church has a full calendar of events from cage football to baby and toddler groups, and is proving to be a real asset for the community. I thank and commend Barry Douglas, who had the vision and determination to see the project through.

Another success story can be found in Footdee. Established in 2015, the Fittie Community Development Trust sought to secure the gospel hall with the aim of renovating it for the community through fundraising. It was successful in securing the hall back in 2018 and is now well on the way to achieving its goals.

Despite those positive stories, however, some challenging asset transfer projects have not yet been completed. One of those involves Westburn house, which is found in Aberdeen’s Westburn park. The house is a much-loved part of the city’s heritage but is, sadly, rapidly falling into disrepair, with the roof now having collapsed. The huge cost of making the building windtight and watertight appears to be the biggest hurdle to any revival. There is the will on the part of the local authority to transfer the asset, and the community supports the transfer and has a plan to use the building, but sources of funding are limited. About £7,000 has been raised, but that is a drop in the ocean compared with the sums that are required.

Those are a few rare examples of urban projects. Rural areas have been much more successful in implementing asset transfers. According to the Scottish Government’s figures, only 5 per cent of community buyouts have been in urban areas. The urban hub manager for Community Land Scotland has criticised the lack of progress in urban areas, saying:

“Community land ownership has been transformative in hundreds of communities across Scotland, but the potential in urban areas hasn’t been delivered yet. It should be a normal option in cities, like it is in the Highlands and Islands”.

Perhaps the minister would like to say in his summing-up how that is to be addressed.

The UK Government’s community ownership fund has significant financial benefits for Scotland. Venues that serve communities across Scotland are being supported by £2 million of investment from the fund. The levelling-up initiative sees Scotland benefiting from £2 billion of direct investment from the UK Government, and the UK Government community renewal fund provides additional financial support of £220 million to prepare the way for the UK shared prosperity fund.

However, more still needs to be done. The process of community asset transfer is hugely complicated, with unnecessary red tape before an asset transfer can be agreed. It requires, prior to transfer, a huge amount of legal knowledge and planning by community groups, which are often beyond the scope of smaller groups. Much more support is needed to enable groups to find their way through the process so that we see more buildings and assets that have fallen into disrepair being brought back to life in our communities.

The SNP says that it wants to empower local communities, but at the same time it is centralising services. It seems to be giving with one hand and taking away with the other. Much more clarity is required from the Government. Does it want local communities and councils to have more say about their destinies or does it want to centralise services, including adult and child social care?

Although I welcome the motion, I urge the Scottish Government not to rest on its laurels. Work still needs to be done. We need more community empowerment, not less. We need to cut the red tape for community groups and help them to make applications for asset transfers. We need to work with the UK Government to fund projects, and we need to stop centralisation of services away from our local communities.

I move amendment S6M-07247.1, to insert at end:

“; welcomes the UK Government’s Community Ownership Fund, which will allow communities to take ownership of local institutions that have fallen into disrepair or are under threat of closure, and further welcomes that there are projects in Scotland benefiting from this fund.”

17:13

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The Labour group and I commend the spirit of community empowerment and ownership endeavours in Scotland. It was Labour that established community land ownership in Scotland, so we welcome, in principle, all steps to empower communities to take greater control over their destinies under the principle of subsidiarity.

However, we have to look at the context in which the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 exists. We have seen increasing retrenchment of local government. In Glasgow, £1 has been cut from every £10 that was available to the city in the past decade, which has placed significant distress on delivery of local services.

Assets are increasingly being transferred in a distressed manner. Rather than being transferred in a productive or constructive way, the approach is almost akin to a fire sale. That major issue has characterised disposal of assets. As the Conservative spokesperson highlighted, only 5 per

cent of community asset transfers are taking place in urban areas, and even those are increasingly taking place in distressed situations.

An example in Glasgow is the Govanhill baths project, which has been going on for many years. The building was closed by Glasgow City Council more than 20 years ago. The community occupied the building in protest, but many years later it successfully won funding through the regeneration capital grant fund and the Heritage Lottery Fund to begin the process of restoring that community asset after a long-running battle with the council.

Even now, as the community is, ostensibly, succeeding in delivering the regeneration programme—I bought an engraved tile to help the community’s fundraising for the swimming pool—construction inflation has run away from the project to such an extent that it will now be difficult to deliver the regeneration outcomes that were originally envisaged. That puts in jeopardy the grant funding that supported the community asset transfer in the first place. I say to the minister that we are in a vicious cycle: we are transferring the assets, but delivering the intended outcomes is really difficult. Not only are councils seeing retrenchment of services, but the capacity of communities to rise to the challenge of taking on assets is frustrated not just by the paucity of available grant funding, but by the inflationary pressures that are being faced. Those are difficulties.

One of the first things that motivated me to get involved in politics was watching the on-going destruction and dilapidation of historic properties in Springburn, where I grew up. Every day, I saw the Springburn public halls—the once-proud centre of Springburn—lying boarded up and falling apart. I hoped that, one day, someone would come along and fix that building. Increasingly, I realised that the council was never going to do that—in fact, it wanted to knock the building down. Ten years ago, almost to the day—27 December 2012—the council demolished the building overnight, with no discussion with the community and no constructive attempt to find a solution that would save the building.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): The point that I will make is not party political. As an MSP for the city, I made many representations to the local authority at that time, but they seemed to fall on deaf ears. Sometimes, local authorities need to take more responsibility for pastoral care of traditional buildings in their communities. Right across Scotland, they just have to do better. I know that there are financial constraints, but councils have to be more imaginative and more innovative.

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

Paul Sweeney: Bob Doris has made a very astute point. There is so much risk aversion in local government when it comes to community asset transfers that transfers’ full potential cannot be reached. That is reflected in the Glasgow Caledonian University report.

The intended disposal of Springburn public halls was to a private property developer. Because of the 2008 credit crunch, that fell through. The next step was to clear the site in order to dispose of a clean site to a housing association. That B-listed property, which was a source of great pride and esteem in the community, was destroyed.

Only in the wake of that trauma, and the real and palpable disgust that was felt in Springburn, did we feel a stimulus for people to get involved. There was a realisation that the council was not going to be a white knight; it would not ride to our rescue, so we needed to form our own organisations.

That gave birth to the Springburn Winter Gardens Trust—of which Bob Doris will be aware—the Spirit of Springburn, and a rich tapestry of other organisations in Springburn. Increasingly, however, we are frustrated by lack of financial capacity. Only recently, the Springburn Winter Gardens Trust has been frustrated in its attempts to get UK Government levelling-up funding. It was also passed over by Glasgow City Council without any real explanation, and it was rejected from the Scottish Government’s regeneration capital grant fund.

I can see how demoralising it is for communities that are already at a low ebb and which lack capacity to be constantly hit in the face when they try to be constructive and proactive. The minister has to reflect on the fact that there is only so much frustration that people can take before they just give up. There needs to be more pastoral support and more functional support for communities when it comes to administration—helping to write bids and so on.

That is where the 2015 act is deficient, and why our amendment tries to address the issues. More resource is needed in order that we can look at things such as conservation deficits and availability of grant funding that does not just create a “ferrets in a sack” approach, whereby people scramble for funding. Most people will lose out and only a minority will win those funds in any given year, in a situation of increasing vulnerability.

In that regard, there are a number of deficiencies in how the 2015 act is currently managed. We need to go further to resource asset transfers, especially in urban areas where the greatest issues and need are, when it comes to deprivation.

I hope that the minister will address those points as the debate progresses.

I move amendment S6M-07247.2, to leave out from “welcomes” to end and insert:

“fully supports measures to empower communities and devolve power away from the Scottish Parliament, and considers that part 5 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 was a positive step, allowing local groups to take ownership of assets for the benefit of their community; believes that pushing power into the hands of local people is a key part of unlocking the potential that exists across the whole country; recognises that, in communities across Scotland, there are positive examples of local groups taking control of assets and helping their area to flourish; regrets that communities still face significant barriers in exercising the rights given to them under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015; believes that there is still much to be done to ensure that communities across Scotland are given the resources and support they need to benefit from the Act, and calls on the Scottish Government to take all necessary steps to remove remaining barriers and push more power into the hands of communities.”

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

17:19

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank the Scottish Government for bringing forward the debate. In my research for it, I looked at the Accounts Commission’s 2019 report “Principles for community empowerment”. It is important that we remember what those principles are.

The first principle is community control, as Paul Sweeney and the minister touched on: supporting communities to successfully take more control over decisions and assets. I have seen a couple of examples of that in my home town: Dunbar Community Bakery and the Community Carrot are successful businesses in their own right.

Another principle is clear public leadership. As the minister said, it is important to note that the situation differs in different parts of the country. We need strong and clear leadership on community empowerment, which sets the tone for organisations and communities. Local authorities need to send out a clear and consistent message.

Effective relationships are incredibly important. We need to build effective working relationships between public bodies, local communities and local partners. The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee has been talking about the local governance review and about how all that works and flows in.

A body that has not been mentioned but which has a key role to play is the third sector interface. It can support local groups to build capacity so that they can take on the challenges.

Improving outcomes is another aspect. We need to evaluate whether outcomes for communities are improving and whether inequalities are being reduced. Evaluation is a key measure, especially for social impacts. I ask the minister to talk about that when winding up.

Accountability is another principle—we need to be accountable and transparent. The report says:

“Public bodies are clear and open about their approach to community empowerment and provide regular information to communities that is understandable, jargon-free and accessible.”

All those elements are key as we look at community ownership and asset transfer. As the minister said, the “Community Ownership in Scotland 2021” report showed that 711 assets were in community ownership at this time last year, which is a more-than-sixfold increase since 2000. Just over half—395—were acquired after 2010; the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 were key drivers.

Promoting the community empowerment programme will be vital to sustain and accelerate the steady upward trend. The great thing about asset transfer is that it is benefiting rural and urban communities. A recent report by Community Land Scotland revealed that about 20 per cent of all community-owned assets are urban; such assets are not just rural. That change came about following the extension of the community right to buy to urban areas in 2016. As has been mentioned, the Scottish land fund provided almost £7 million of funding to enable buyouts.

Ailsa Raeburn of Community Land Scotland has said:

“In the five years since the introduction of the game-changing Community Empowerment Act and the extension of the Scottish Land Fund to all of Scotland’s communities, the energy, ambition and achievements of Scotland’s urban communities has been inspiring.”

That is the trick—we need to inspire communities to take on such projects.

All over Scotland, people have used the new powers and the funding that the Scottish Government has made available to them since 2016 to buy and run shops and redundant churches—as we heard from Douglas Lumsden—as well as community centres, high street buildings, woodland parks, pubs and bowling greens. Community Land Scotland has said that the struggles that many groups had to go through to save their local facility, bring back into use a derelict building or site or campaign for local regeneration have given them the strength and skills to respond to new challenges. Local communities know best in this regard.

Ailsa Raeburn of Community Land Scotland said:

“There are so many successes from the first five years of urban land reform in Scotland.”

This

“highlights the vision and tenacity of urban community owners and establishes the transformational impact of community ownership and community-led development in urban areas.”

What can we do in the next five years? In July, the planning minister launched a review of the 2015 act, which will provide a chance to further benefit communities. Local communities know their localities better than councils and the national Government do. We need to keep all power local and continue to shift the balance of power to our communities. Local people need to be able to have even more of a say in the things that matter to them.

The minister talked about the national asset transfer action group, which was set up in 2020 and will be incredibly important. The national planning framework has ensured that councils and communities retain a key role in planning our infrastructure. The place principle lies at the heart of NPF4, which is about building communities throughout Scotland.

The 2015 act and in particular asset transfer have proved a success in the past five years. In the next five years, our challenge is to ensure that our communities have capacity and have funding and support from local and national Government. Our rural and urban communities, as well as our town centres, will benefit from that.

17:23

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak and I will support the amendment in Douglas Lumsden’s name. A common feature across all communities in Scotland is the desire to be involved in decision making at all possible levels. Community empowerment is the responsibility of both local and central Government, so I welcome the opportunity to debate the subject.

The 2015 act was an attempt to promote local empowerment by enshrining it in law in several different contexts. As a member of the Local Government and Communities Committee in the previous parliamentary session, I contributed to the report that assessed how effective the act had been in the four years since it had become law.

On part 5 of the act, it was clear that there was still more to do to unlock the potential benefits of asset transfer requests. Although awareness of asset transfers is now high among community groups, there is still too much variation in practice

in how smoothly the process runs. For example, some groups are finding themselves being offered leases instead of ownership of an asset, and public authorities are sometimes reluctant to recognise that an effective asset transfer can be about more than just monetary value but instead be about the potential benefits to the community.

Paul Sweeney: The member makes an astute point about the issue of clawback clauses and lease arrangements, which can have a vicious effect—they can militate against qualifying for grants, which then frustrates the very delivery of the project that groups are trying to achieve.

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

Alexander Stewart: Thank you. The member makes a valid point. If there is no co-operation and understanding and if there is not a base of knowledge, projects will not progress, and that will frustrate the whole process in the community.

The public are well aware of the difficulties. Our committee was told that some communities were being put “through the wringer” during the transfer process. However, putting individuals and communities through a problematic process was never the intention of the act. The required culture shift has to take place, because the evidence in the report has shown that there is yet much more to achieve.

Further clarification is needed on how part 5 should work when it comes to arm’s-length organisations. Given the significant number of potential community assets that those organisations own or operate on behalf of councils, public authorities and community groups, there must be a clearer understanding of how the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 applies in those areas. True empowerment of our communities will depend not just on unlocking the potential of the act but on ensuring that the opportunity for support will be there.

Although the act aims to empower communities on certain issues, we know that communities are diminished in other ways. Since 2017, nearly half of all planning decisions that were appealed to ministers have been overturned, which translates to hundreds of decisions being overturned against the wishes of a community and its elected representatives.

In the face of decreasing local government budgets, funding issues will continue. Throughout my time in local government, I have learned that community empowerment requires improvement in several areas. Although I hope that the benefits of asset transfers can be realised over time, the process must take place to ensure that community empowerment is possible.

Paul Sweeney rose—

Alexander Stewart: I will happily take another intervention.

Paul Sweeney: I thank the member—he is being very generous indeed.

The member makes a very important point about planning appeals, particularly as they can be used to ride roughshod over local opinion. Does he think that a measure that could be considered is to give a right to make a final appeal to a committee of the Parliament, instead of that taking place in a bureaucracy at St Andrew's house?

Alexander Stewart: Paul Sweeney, again, makes a valid point: there should be more involvement with us here, instead of having ministers indicate what they require through the stroke of a pen.

The Government motion is right to talk about improvements and ensuring that assets and community-led regeneration are part of the wealth that we see in communities. The Parliament, COSLA and local authorities across Scotland are united in wishing to see communities empowered across the country.

Communities are all too willing to report that there are some goals that we are not quite achieving. The journey is still in its early stages, and the onus must be on all of us to keep pushing to ensure that people are truly able to have a greater say in how their communities are empowered.

17:28

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Today's debate allows us to celebrate and reflect on the first five years of the asset transfer legislation, which is an important tool for building a Scotland where everyone can play their full part in society.

As a successful part of Scotland's community empowerment agenda, the scheme allows communities to take control of local assets and use them to develop their own economies, enhance their wellbeing and nurture the environment.

At this point, I want to mention an excellent story from East Kilbride. Back in 2019, East Kilbride United took over the Kirktonholme playing fields and pavilion through an asset transfer. Since then, the area has been transformed and now has two of the best grass football pitches in the west of Scotland, four state-of-the-art changing rooms and a fully licensed clubroom and cafe. It has been great to see the input from the local community and local businesses, which have donated time

and materials to help the redevelopment. Kirktonholme is now home to several teams, from the four-year-olds right through to the Gerihatricks, a walking football group.

However, the positive contribution that has been made by the redevelopment goes beyond football. When local council halls closed during Covid, many community groups were left with nowhere to go. Thankfully, EK United stepped in and allowed the Special Needs Adventure Playground—or SNAP, as it is better known—to use its renovated facilities. As SNAP was recognised by the Care Inspectorate as an essential service, it was heartening to see the community-run facility at Kirktonholme being offered to that vital group. The redevelopment continues, with EK United receiving further funding of £185,000 earlier this year to modernise showers, ensuring that they are accessible to disabled people, and to build a new seven-a-side pitch. The development is building wealth in the community, particularly with the socially just use of land and property.

The only negative is that this is the only example of a community asset transfer in East Kilbride. Applications in South Lanarkshire have grown in the past year, but I would love to see more transfers taking place in East Kilbride itself. I look forward to hearing other members' contributions on how asset transfers are working in practice across the country.

I would also like councils to publish lists of the buildings and land that they own, including whether they are occupied or not—or even underoccupied—along with a condition report. Such a move could help people—and I know of a few in East Kilbride to whom this would apply—to see what assets might be available for transfer to ensure that buildings and land can be used by groups to serve the community.

The SNP in government is working to ensure that more people and local communities in Scotland have a greater stake in our economy through sharing ownership and building resilience to create a fairer and more secure economic future. The focus on place-based, community-led regeneration is welcome. With the recent news of East Kilbride shopping centre's owners going into administration, I want South Lanarkshire Council to do everything that it can to address the situation, including assessing the opportunity of buying the centre to ensure its survival. I have been in touch with the administrators, the council and other relevant parties, and I hope that we can all work together, along with local residents, to protect and enhance the town centre.

Through its use of a community wealth building approach to economic development, the Scottish Government has helped local businesses and communities have a greater stake in how their

local economy functions. A culture of community wealth building will help transform local places, including in East Kilbride, and will deliver a wellbeing economy, and I look forward to seeing that continue.

17:33

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): I am delighted to speak in this important debate and to support my party’s amendment.

I will focus on some experiences not just from my own working life but from asset transfers that have taken place in communities across the West Scotland region. There is a real sense in this debate that the general principles of the legislation are good and well intentioned in their devolution of power to local communities and in empowering local citizens to take ownership of community assets of strategic or historic importance. Indeed, many of the assets that colleagues have mentioned are often the anchors of communities, particularly in town and village centres. The legislation was necessary to equalise the process to some extent and to give more options to urban communities to take control of assets. Indeed, we have already heard how important some of that has been.

We in Labour are proud of establishing the right to own community land and assets in the very first years of the Parliament, and there are really positive examples of communities that have led the way in using the legislation. One such example that is well known to me and the minister can be found in the community of Neilston, where I am from: Neilston Development Trust led the way by using the community right to buy legislation to purchase the old bank, which is now a community hub in the village. In fact, the hub has become a real asset, providing a community cafe and a space where lots of different groups can meet; indeed, the Neilston & Uplawmoor First Responders service operates out of that base.

That shows what can be done when one asset leaves a place and is replaced by something that can fill the gap that has been created.

I agree with colleagues that the system perhaps needs to be simplified and made more accessible. When I worked in the voluntary sector, in the precursor to the third sector interfaces that were mentioned by Paul McLennan, we took part in the earliest consultations on the legislation, and I remember having conversations with colleagues and community groups in East Dunbartonshire about the need to build capacity in community groups to enable them to be upskilled so as to be ready to take on community assets, because that is not always an easy thing to do. Community groups and organisations in which the board and

the committee are simply trying to keep the lights on and the doors open and provide all the services that they provide find it quite challenging to be asked also to become legal experts who are knowledgeable about things like deeds and trusts and the funding that is available for these sorts of things. Capacity has always had to be built, and that has always been at the heart of what we are doing in this area. However, because of other decisions that have been taken on spending, there has not always been the necessary level of support for that capacity.

That is broadly true on the council side, too. Having been a councillor for 10 years, I have seen that, often, the departments that are set up to deal with the transfers have been depleted and do not have the necessary level of staffing to support communities that want an asset to be transferred.

Alongside the issue of physical buildings, I want to highlight the important issue of community spaces that can be supported and cared for through asset transfer. There are a number of excellent youth football clubs in my region that are keen to have asset transfers of old playing fields in their community, so that they can use them not only for their own benefit but for the benefit of the wider community. I know that they have had challenges in engaging with councils across the region in their attempts to secure those asset transfers. Port Glasgow Juniors, Bishopton Football Club, Neilston Football Club and St Cadoc’s Youth Club have all come to my door asking for help and support. Again, it comes down to having the necessary capacity built in.

I am conscious of time, so, to conclude, I say that I know that Màiri McAllan has committed to ensuring that community groups going through the community asset transfer system have a dedicated caseworker. That is important and is something that must be followed up. We have to offer a helping hand to people who want to improve their communities, and not put hurdles in their way. I hope that the minister who is here today will listen to some of the feedback and will be able to reflect in his closing speech on what we can do to make the process easier and more accessible.

17:37

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): It is a great honour to speak in the debate on asset transfer. My constituency has seen the policy utilised very effectively through a number of projects since the act was introduced, perhaps bucking the trend that Douglas Lumsden spoke about earlier, when he said that not many asset transfers happen in urban areas. I will take the opportunity to reference some of them in my speech.

At their heart, community asset transfers are about more people and communities across Scotland having a greater stake in our economy, sharing ownership and building resilience to create a fairer and more diverse economic future. Community asset transfers symbolise a Scotland where everyone can play their part and contribute to society at a local level.

A great example of that can be found in the Glenboig Development Trust, which took full advantage of the community asset transfer process to develop the life centre, which truly acts as the cornerstone of community life in the village of Glenboig for many people living in the area. In its capacity as the local community hub, the life centre promotes the health and wellbeing of the local community, and that is realised through schemes that encourage physical and mental wellbeing, combat isolation and foster a sense of community. The centre works with around 20 diligent volunteers on a regular basis. Those volunteers support the day-to-day running of the centre's community cafe, village post office, community transport service and other services and activities.

The SNP Government seeks to continue our long-running agenda of community regeneration through the empowering communities programme. The Glenboig Development Trust was able to avail itself of £1 million of Scottish Government funding from the regeneration capital grant fund. Further funding was also secured through the Scottish land fund. That underlines the Scottish Government's commitment to empowering such local community projects.

Elsewhere in my constituency, the Scottish land fund awarded a £68,000 grant to Kirkshaws Neighbourhood Centre. That investment allowed the centre to find a permanent home on the site of former tenement buildings. Like the life centre in Glenboig, Kirkshaws Neighbourhood Centre supports the community through a range of services and activities, including over-65s information technology training, an employment programme, community cooking classes and, most recently, a community fridge, which I had the pleasure of attending the opening for. The centre's good work continues to be recognised, and it continues to be awarded grants to further its community aims. Just last week, I circulated a motion that commended the centre on securing an amazing £150,000 grant from the National Lottery Community Fund. That will finance a three-year project that will benefit more than 3,000 people in Coatbridge, which is in my constituency.

As we have heard from others, local communities have a better knowledge of how their areas can be enriched. It is therefore vital, especially during the cost of living crisis and the

economic uncertainty, that local communities and organisations are given greater powers over their own future. The pandemic emphasised the necessity of strong community spirit and a sense of coming together. Indeed, during the summer of 2021, when restrictions were beginning to ease, the Cliftonville and Coatdyke community group utilised a mechanism to take over the Coatbridge indoor bowling club and transformed it into a vital community asset that contains a tearoom, a function room and an education centre. The group retained the bowling club, which is still based at the centre. I am happy to remind members that the club is the current holder of the Scottish senior singles title and the senior gents fours title. I wish it the best of luck in next year's British Isles championship.

I also wish the fantastic Deaf Services Lanarkshire good luck. It is at an early stage in the process for a potential community asset transfer.

Those are all good examples. As I said earlier, the area bucks the trend in being a very urban one. However, when community groups speak to me, they are still concerned about hurdles and delays, and they often talk about jumping through hoops and processes taking years from the first identification of a site that they would like to be transferred. A lot of those examples took quite a long time. The Government could look at that.

Let us consider Dunbeth Football Club, for instance. I should say, Presiding Officer—I know that you are a football fan—that my eldest son plays for the 2014s. I put on record my thanks for the tireless work of the head coach, Garry Bradley, and, indeed, the work of all the coaches, who give up so much of their own time. The club took over an old, simple pavilion for its games and training, and its work through the Kieran McDade festival. However, it is still in the prolonged process of having the asset transferred. It seems that that should be a lot simpler.

I also wanted to talk about Airdrie Harriers at Langloan sports centre, but I do not think that I will have time to do so. I see from the Presiding Officer that that is the case. I will speak separately and directly to the minister about Airdrie Harriers and its plans for an asset transfer at Langloan sports centre.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sure that Airdrie Harriers will forgive you, Mr MacGregor.

17:42

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Walking into the Rockfield centre in Oban, a person cannot help but be struck by the bright primary colours, the warmth of the welcome, and the creativity of the space. The Rockfield centre is a shining example of a community driving positive change

and achieving its ambitions through ownership and management of a building. It is in the centre of Oban. It was the town's response to the Education (Scotland) Act 1872, and it was built as a school to educate around 400 children in Oban. The grand opening of Rockfield primary school took place in 1877. Parents were asked to present their children

"with clean faces and hands and where possible, adequately clad".

Some 145 years later, in June this year, the refurbished building's doors were officially reopened by the minister. I am pleased to say that everyone had clean faces and hands and was adequately clad.

Oban Communities Trust was established in 2014 following a community campaign to purchase and save the building. The local community had identified a desire to establish a cultural hub that would support four themes determined through extensive community consultation. The former classrooms now host a programme of events, workshops and activities that cover those themes: arts and culture, history and heritage, community wellbeing, and education and enterprise. The Rockfield team works with local service providers—for example, Alzheimer Scotland, Dementia Scotland, Enable Scotland, Young Carers, and health and education services—to create activities that meet their needs.

In response to the cost of living crisis, the centre is part of the warm spaces initiative. In January, it is starting a free breakfast club for schoolchildren and a free after-school club three days a week. There are also plans to create a traditional skills hub, and funding has been sourced to create a purpose-built sensory room.

People at the heart of their community recognising what their community needs and being empowered to deliver it—in my opinion, that is the key to successfully growing community wealth, because those opportunities come in all shapes and sizes.

Ten years ago, slightly before this legislation, in south Kintyre, the Royal Air Force Machrihanish airbase was purchased by the community, which secured its lifeline air service and provided Machrihanish Airbase Community Company with 1,000 acres of opportunity.

There were watchtowers, military bunkers, military accommodation blocks and even a parachute drying tower, as well as a disused bowling alley, which is now home to the University of the Highlands and Islands Argyll Brewster construction and engineering centre. There is also a great deal of land.

Pre-Covid, employment peaked at 252. There are 125 tenancies, and direct spend on local

contractors from MACC sits at £2.42 million. In addition, £75,000 has been donated to local charities. MACC is also progressing environmental aims by installing a solar farm and, helped by six local schools, recently broke ground on the 10,000 trees project that will support the site's diverse wildlife.

I was pleased to host the Minister for Business, Trade, Tourism and Enterprise at MACC this summer. It is a success, but it could be so much more, because geography and perception hinder its development. MACC, its assets and Kintyre have significant potential, so continued—and, I suggest, enhanced—policy support to realise that is needed.

In preparing for the debate, I spoke to Argyll and Bute Council, which provided me with an outline of the work that the council is doing to support community wealth building. Argyll and Bute is strong in some areas, such as community empowerment, community assets, wealth generation and the circular economy, including procurement, but it is weaker in others, such as local skill developments and access to affordable finance. A study is being commissioned in partnership with HIE and the third sector interface, which will help to determine in greater detail strengths and weaknesses in relation to a wellbeing economy. I welcome that work from the council and look forward to analysing the report.

I have highlighted only two empowered organisations in my constituency, but there are so many more. Very quickly, I will mention South West Mull and Iona Development, South Islay Development and, of course, the hundreds of volunteers who support community wealth growing, empowerment and wellbeing across Argyll and Bute.

We must continue to have the courage to ensure that our empowered communities have the right tools and support to be the powerful force in community resilience building that Scotland deserves.

17:47

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands (Green)): I welcome this opportunity to champion the work that has taken place in our communities over the past five years to make community empowerment a reality. It has been a pleasure to hear from community groups across the Highlands and Islands about the successes of the 2015 act and wider land reform legislation to enable community-led regeneration. From playing fields to public toilets, and community halls to growing spaces, it is clear that our communities are just getting started in exercising those powers to reimagine underused local assets.

Community-led regeneration has huge potential to empower local communities to tackle poverty and inequality and build community wealth on their own terms. In Tomintoul, a derelict secondary school is currently being redeveloped into homes, a quarter of which will include workspaces for micro-enterprises, by the Tomintoul and Glenlivet Development Trust, with support from Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Communities Housing Trust.

Sadly, the story is not always one of success. Communities face significant barriers, some of which are structural—because, for example, of a lack of experienced and capable volunteers with the time and skills to dedicate to that work—but often they are financial. That is why the Bute house agreement commits us to increasing the Scottish land fund substantially—doubling it by £20 million by 2026.

Although we now have numerous examples, which we have heard about this evening, of how that approach can reinvigorate communities and provide a catalyst for investment and regeneration, we still need to address Scotland's concentrated pattern of rural land ownership, because 67 per cent of rural land holdings are owned by just one four-thousandth of the population. That is why the Scottish Greens welcomed the proposed public interest test for large land holdings and the presumption in favour of community buy-out in the recent consultation to update the land reform acts.

The concentration of private landownership in rural Scotland can stifle entrepreneurial ambition, reduce local aspirations and hamper the ability to address identified community need. It also places considerable power over jobs, housing and access to spaces in the hands of a few.

User-friendly data on implementation of legislation, such as part 5 of the 2015 act, and knowing exactly what is owned by whom in Scotland can help us to progress. I believe that the minister spoke to that to some degree.

Long-term success stories, such as that of the Isle of Eigg, have shown how conservation and sustainability can be central to community regeneration activities. From renewable energy generation to nature conservation and ecotourism, the community trust is pioneering the island's transition to carbon neutrality. However, we should acknowledge that some parts of Scotland benefit more than others from policy instruments. The Government can and should compensate for that by focusing public spending on communities that are most in need of support, so that every community can thrive.

We should take this opportunity to acknowledge the vital role that land plays in addressing climate change and that community ownership provides a

route to addressing that challenge. We need to put our money where our mouths are by ensuring that community councils and development trusts are financially supported and that the purpose of community planning partnerships is much better understood.

With increasing public and private sector investment in peatland restoration, woodland creation and carbon sequestration, part of ensuring a just transition must be about making sure that the benefits of investment in those areas are felt as widely as possible and that local communities are empowered to manage underused, unproductive and unoccupied land around them in the ways that address the climate emergency.

Whether it is through warm hubs, community growing spaces or community kitchens, deepening and accelerating the transfer of assets to communities can alleviate the cost of living crisis and the fiscal pressures that are currently being experienced by local authorities. I am keen to see this area develop as I work with the minister on the forthcoming community wealth building bill.

17:52

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): There is no more powerful illustration of community empowerment than a community coming together to take control of a local asset. I warmly welcome this opportunity to champion community asset transfers, particularly given the positive impact that they are having in communities in my constituency of Uddingston and Bellshill.

Taking control of assets involves local people attaching a part of themselves to their community, thereby driving local ambition and strengthening cohesion. Successfully achieving a CAT is a major undertaking for any community group, but the empowerment that it delivers cannot be overstated, as it ensures delivery of better, more tailored local services and tangibly builds community wealth.

Although the majority of community asset transfers have occurred in rural and island communities, I hope that Mr Sweeney will be pleased to hear that I will be sharing two examples of transfers in my urban constituency. The first is Bothwell Futures, which successfully took over the iconic Bothwell library building this summer, where it is now creating a multifunctional wellbeing hub for the benefit of all local residents.

When Bothwell Futures started, the CAT process was through South Lanarkshire Council and South Lanarkshire Leisure and Culture. Bothwell Futures was told that the process would take two years, but colleagues will be pleased to

hear that with a small, skilled and energetic team, an impressive 20-year strategic plan and, critically, great collaboration from council officials and local councillors, the transfer was completed in eight short months.

Although Bothwell is a vibrant village, it lacks community space to deliver the residents' exciting vision. Through the community asset transfer, the former library building is set to become the beating heart of Bothwell, breathing new life into the village and ensuring a sustainable future.

Viewpark Gardens Trust, which is also in my urban constituency, is a quite different but equally inspiring example of a community asset transfer. In this case, the trust applied to take over the much-loved Viewpark gardens site, which features in many wedding photos and in the cherished memories of local people. The pandemic lockdown was no match for the trust's creativity. Despite the huge community support throughout a very successful engagement process, the trust community asset transfer request was denied by North Lanarkshire Council.

Undaunted, the trust submitted an appeal to the Scottish Government, and it made history by winning on appeal the right to take the land into community hands. Once delivered, that community asset transfer will provide a safe, green, inclusive space for groups and individuals, and there are plans for a mix of mental health and wellbeing projects alongside community-led provision for local clubs and charities. I, for one, cannot wait to see the gardens returned to their former glory.

In contrast to Bothwell Futures, the timeline to achieve success has been lengthier for the trust, and I must pay tribute to the community ownership support service. Its advice and expertise was invaluable during the highly technical appeals process.

The commitment that was shown by Viewpark Gardens Trust and Bothwell Futures is inspiring. Although the trust's successful appeal is testament to the power and strength that underpin the Scottish Government's legislation, it would be good to hear the minister confirm that the current review will look for ways to make the processes easier.

As we have heard from the minister, positive collaboration among stakeholders is key. An independent evaluation by Glasgow Caledonian University sets out further action to support local authority and community transfer bodies and maximise the potential of community asset transfer requests.

We need to see many more local authorities and public bodies welcoming requests for community asset transfers. We need to see the remaining elements of resistance removed, because the

ability of community groups to consult local people, identify the complex challenges that they face and deliver effective support is unparalleled. As we emerge from the pandemic during a cost of living and climate crisis, empowered communities are exactly what Scotland needs.

We know that communities can pull together and work to make their dreams a reality. It is our job to help them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

17:56

Paul Sweeney: It has been an interesting and certainly insightful debate. I thank all members for the really interesting points that they have made. We have developed a clear understanding of where the act has done positive things but also of where we need to do much more to reinforce its intended outcomes for our communities across Scotland. That is in the spirit of the amendment that Labour has put forward.

I thank the member for Uddingston and Bellshill for offering two interesting examples—one that seems to be running very well in the old library building, but also one that has faced difficulties in going through a much more convoluted process. I have certainly seen that at first hand. I should declare an interest as a trustee of the Beatroute Arts centre in Barmulloch, which has recently acquired from Glasgow City Council the old building that it operates out of. The arts centre has been having a similarly difficult time in resolving the legal aspects of that.

Alexander Stewart mentioned the difficulty of dealing with the complex legal arrangements, which can often take a long time, cost a lot of money and exhaust a lot of good will among people who are usually doing the work pro bono and do not necessarily have the resilience that everyone needs to see through the process. We need to look carefully at what we are asking communities to do, because often people can lose the will to live trying to get these things sorted out. All power to Viewpark Gardens Trust for persevering, and all credit to Beatroute Arts in Barmulloch as well, for seeing that through and successfully achieving an outcome. Let us hope that we can make the process slicker in future as we learn more about how to do it.

We also need to support our local authorities to deliver those outcomes more efficiently. That issue has been reflected on throughout the debate. The member for East Lothian mentioned that capacity, funding and support are critical. We cannot simply divest assets and then say in the next funding round that those organisations have lost the budget for the coming year and they have to make

staff redundant and close their building. We need to make sure that we are not simply passing on to third parties the brutal reality of cuts in local authorities. We need to ensure that the process is properly reinforced with the financial security that will ensure resilience.

There have been references from across the piece to another issue. The member for Argyll and Bute mentioned that the Education (Scotland) Act 1872 led to buildings with some of the most amazing architecture being developed in our municipal authorities. More than 100 1872 school board schools were developed in Glasgow. Unfortunately, between 1919 when powers were handed to the Glasgow corporation and 2010, 60 of those schools were demolished. Today in Glasgow, about 15 of them are derelict. They are examples of amazing architectural artefacts; we can never build these things again.

However, in many cases, communities that are desperate to get in there and take over those buildings are frustrated. Although the will and desire are there in our communities, and the hope and pride—because people do not want to see such buildings blighting their local communities—they may not be equipped with the skill sets to do things such as quantity surveying, dealing with legal documents to convey property or settling complex legal arrangements with councils.

Those issues are focused in poorer districts in particular. If members will forgive me for being parochial in respect of Glasgow, I point out that 44 per cent of buildings in Glasgow that are currently at risk are in the areas with the highest levels of deprivation in the city, while only 7 per cent are in areas that are ranked as having the lowest levels of deprivation. That in itself tells a story. The areas of greatest need are often the places where communities have the least capacity. There is no lawyer or quantity surveyor living in the street, and people may not have the time or the energy—after dealing with the cost of living crisis, feeding the kids and so on—to get together, go to board meetings and do all that work pro bono.

We need to look at that issue carefully, and I hope that the minister will reflect on it in his closing remarks, because it can be really demoralising for community groups. Mr Doris made the point in his interventions, and other members, such as Ariane Burgess and my colleague Paul O’Kane from West Scotland, made it too. Communities face really difficult problems: they have done all the work and built up something that they think is important and which has a lot of community support, and then they go for funding and are given a cursory response that says, “Bad luck, it wasn’t up to scratch—see you next time.”

That needs to stop. We need to say, “Okay, you didn’t meet the criteria, so maybe you need to do

more on community outreach or on building partnerships locally.” The Government needs to provide resource—perhaps in the form of some sort of mentor or case worker—to work with the community to get the bid to the level of rigour required. There might clearly be potential, and a desire in a community to do something, but there may be professional deficiencies that need addressed. We need to work with communities on that, rather than simply cast them out.

The Government needs to do more with communities to make that work. I highlight Springburn as an example. I should declare an interest, as the chair of the Springburn Winter Gardens Trust. We have been working tirelessly for 10 years to get the A-listed building there—Scotland’s largest glass house—fixed up. At every occasion, we take two steps forward and one step back; it can feel like a war of attrition to try to save such amazing assets for our communities.

I am sure that there is good will among members on all sides of the chamber to see such attempts work, but we need to understand that the Government must do more to work with communities to get them to a place where they can be successful. Even I, as a member of the Scottish Parliament and a former member of Parliament, feel frustrated about it, so goodness knows what other community activists feel like when they have these constant hurdles to overcome.

We all want the delivery of the intentions of the 2015 act to be improved. I hope that, in that spirit, we can go forward and deliver a better public policy for this country.

18:02

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): The debate has given us an opportunity to celebrate the asset transfers in all our communities. Fulton MacGregor perhaps wins the award for the most thank yous delivered during a speech, although Jenni Minto gave him a run for his money on that. I am not going to be outdone, however, because I want to highlight some of the great projects here in my region.

In 2016, I was pleased to support the Bellfield project in Portobello, which was the first community right-to-buy asset transfer in Scotland. Bellfield is a community centre located in what was previously Portobello old parish church, which is a Georgian church of classical design on Bellfield Street in Portobello. The church was subject to a successful community buyout in 2017. It then reopened, following vital investment that was needed, in June 2018, and it has gone from strength to strength.

There seems to be something in the water in Portobello, because quite a lot of community buyouts have taken place since then. That includes the community buyout of Portobello town hall, which I know that locals were really determined not to see lost. That just shows that, when communities really use the legislation, it can deliver results. I think that we all want to see that, and to encourage it in future.

Paul Sweeney made important points in relation to distressed community assets, which is an important issue. Assets are becoming more and more difficult to take forward, so we need to consider additional support around that. Although Willie Coffey has not spoken in the debate, in the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, he often raises and highlights issues around individual buildings and ownership, and the lack of capacity that councils have to address issues with empty and condemned buildings. We need more work on that, as it can often become incredibly difficult to unpick and get to the heart of the ownership of a building.

Paul Sweeney: Does the member agree that it is perhaps all too easy for public bodies to simply put up the boards on windows and abandon public buildings, thus leaving them to become completely dilapidated, and thereby destroying the value that they might have to the public purse?

Miles Briggs: I agree, but I also think that councils' budgets do not allow them to do much else apart from look towards the health and safety concerns that affect such buildings, which is their duty at the end of the day.

Stephanie Callaghan: I make the point that asset transfers could help councils to save money on such properties. For example, a council might be paying £15,000 for upkeep of a property. If councils invest time and effort and have a CAT team helping communities to pursue asset transfers in a balanced way, that could be a great way forward.

Miles Briggs: I agree with Stephanie Callaghan's point. My colleague Alexander Stewart highlighted that the process around community asset transfers can often be complicated, and we need councils to be able to assist communities. In future we need more focus on the teams who will deliver that. We know that planning departments are having staffing problems anyway, but often people in councils are not being directly allocated to supporting such work. We need that situation to be improved.

Ariane Burgess made important points on making new and innovative uses of buildings on our high streets. I for one want many high streets to have opportunities to bring diverse former shops into housing use, which we need to look at.

I do not think that we necessarily captured that in the national planning framework that the Government introduced.

The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee recently undertook an inquiry on allotments. We cannot honestly say that we have given community empowerment to people who want to see more green space and more growing opportunities—that was certainly the conclusion that the committee drew. There is a specific issue about how land that is in public sector ownership and which could potentially be used for community growing is not being released. We need to examine that because, especially following the pandemic, there is an appetite for such projects to be pursued. I hope that we can see those being progressed. That is certainly what the committee tried to do.

Members from across the chamber have looked towards the future sustainability of projects. I am concerned that, for some time, some organisations that I work with are facing construction inflation, and I am also concerned about their ability to finance future projects. We are constantly returning to the Scottish Government and local government to ask for support. Planning departments and the organisations that often provide grants for such projects are becoming more and more difficult to access, so we need to consider how such support could be delivered in future.

Finally, I want to touch on a point that was put to me by representatives of one project about how we can ensure that, in the next five years, we will deliver projects that are harder to achieve. I put it to the minister that some schemes have involved the low-hanging fruit that such buildings can become, so that they are easily transferred. As Paul Sweeney outlined, there are more difficult cases, which is where the legislation will really be tested. Although we have had a welcome and positive debate, I hope that the Government will not rest on its laurels. There will be potential community assets that we all want to be saved and utilised but that will be the hard cases. Ministers should ensure that they are ready to run those hard miles, too.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the minister to respond to the debate. You have around eight minutes, Mr Arthur.

18:08

Tom Arthur: I am grateful to colleagues across the chamber who have participated in the debate, which has been excellent. It is of huge assistance to the Government to hear members' views as we undertake our review of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. I invite

members to engage with that process, which will be running into the autumn of next year. Information on it is provided on the Scottish Government's website, but I will be happy to engage directly with any member who has an interest.

I turn to a point that Miles Briggs raised in his contribution, about the need to scale up. I also note that Ariane Burgess said that communities are just getting started. Although we are taking the opportunity to celebrate the successes of the past five years and to recognise the challenges that we have to overcome, we should be incredibly ambitious, because our communities are ambitious. We have the advent of the community wealth building model, with land and property being one of its five pillars. That pillar is central, and Parliament perhaps has more influence in that regard than we do with regard to the other pillars.

I very much welcome the scaling up of community ownership through asset transfer and other modes, as well as its being given higher status and our being more ambitious with it.

The key point that I want to address is one that everyone has raised: the complexity of the process. We all recognise that the groups that have been successful in our communities have shown tenacity and, often, a capacity to pick themselves up after facing painful rejection, perhaps on funding, or after feeling that they are not making progress with the relevant public body.

There is work to do, part of which will be through learning and part of which will be culture change, in time. We must be ambitious if we want to realise the full potential of asset transfer and community ownership.

On the actions that the Scottish Government is taking, I note that we are, through our national asset transfer action group, working with partners including communities and other local, regional and national partners. One of the key roles that groups and others can play—that we can all play—is in ensuring use of best practice.

Paul Sweeney raised a point about the support that can be provided by public bodies. That is important; the Scottish Government provides support to the community ownership support service, which is delivered via the Development Trusts Association Scotland. There is a tremendous amount of learning to be found out there from community organisations that have successfully taken on ownership, so we want to pair up those that are at the start of their journey with those that already have considerable experience.

I want to highlight a hub and spoke project that we embarked on last year with COSS in Barmulloch in Glasgow. The project was jointly

funded by the Scottish Government and COSS, and was designed to explore whether an experienced and well-connected community anchor organisation could provide a different type of support to community groups in an area of disadvantage that were considering asset ownership or management. It utilised the local anchor organisation, Barmulloch Community Development Company, to support 13 local community groups—which might not otherwise have done this—to engage with the asset transfer process by helping them to develop their plans. BCDC staff offered free hands-on services, including early advice on organisational structure, board responsibilities, capacity requirements, indicative costs, revenue earnings, sustainability, legal requirements and forward planning.

That hub and spoke project has proved to be popular, and a proactive model is now being explored, whereby BCDC could approach groups with ideas for future use of assets, thereby enabling some of our most marginalised communities to take part. We will take the lessons from that on board as part of the review of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. It is a great example of communities that have been through the process providing first-hand peer support.

Paul Sweeney: I recognise the excellent work that BCDC is doing with the Government to build capacity. However, funds such as the regeneration capital grant fund simply reject or award, and that should be improved. There should be help for organisations so that they can be successful in the future, rather than the application simply being thrown back at them.

Tom Arthur: That is of concern to me, but I must be blunt: it is a capacity issue for the Scottish Government's planning, architecture and regeneration division. We do not have the means to engage directly with every organisation, so we encourage local authorities that partner with us to provide such support. However, I am happy to consider ways in which we can provide more feedback, because that is so important. In my experience as a constituency member and in this ministerial role, for community organisations it is often not the rejection that is most challenging or difficult; it is not knowing or not understanding what the issues are. I appreciate that there is a continuing drive to improve bids and then to bring them back. I am very happy to take that away and consider it more fully.

We are starting from a solid foundation that we can build on. As we move into the next year and begin the process of consulting on legislation around community wealth building—land and property are key pillars of that—one of the things that I will be hoping to obtain from the consultation

is identification of existing barriers to embedding and consolidating the community wealth building model and to expanding it. Although the review of the 2015 act will specifically consider part 5 of the act, there is an opportunity to look more widely.

One issue that has come up is that, when we provide capital support, capacity-building support is often required as well. That might involve provision of information and signposting, but it also requires resource revenue, which is where our empowering communities programme comes in, via the strengthening communities programme or the investing in communities fund.

That speaks to the point about the need for a coherent and joined-up approach. It is not enough just to award a pot of money; there has to be capacity building. That, in itself, can act as a catalyst and an inspiration for other groups to take on assets. Fundamentally, there is no more powerful motivator or fillip to action than seeing people just like ourselves take on an asset and make us think, "Our community can do that." That is fundamental to advancing the model and to realising the ambition to scale it up via community wealth building.

Mr Briggs touched on community growing. In that regard, there is some interesting work that we could do on community wealth building in relation to localising supply chains and partnering with community growers. We would be keen to take that forward.

Alexander Stewart raised a number of issues. We are very grateful for the work that the Local Government and Communities Committee did in the previous session, which is informing our approach. He touched on the challenging nature of the process and the importance of cultural change, which is significant. He referred to the issues around arm's-length external organisations, which I am alive to. We are engaging with COSS on that. Sometimes, the issues can be to do with transparency. Fundamentally, there should be nothing to stop ALEOs engaging in the asset transfer process. That needs to be explored further.

Planning appeals came up. The vast majority of planning appeals are decided by independent reporters. Of the total of fewer than 200 considerations last year, only a handful came to ministers directly. Less than half the decisions that went to reporters were overturned. We are talking about fewer than 200 out of 27,000 planning decisions, the vast majority of which are taken by planning authorities.

One of the key issues around community empowerment in the planning system is the need to get people involved far earlier in the process, so that they can shape the development plan. Local

place plans have a role to play in that. Early engagement at the beginning of the process, rather than people finding themselves in a situation in which a challenge is made at the end of the process when an application has been made, is a much more effective way of ensuring that communities' voices are heard.

Collette Stevenson highlighted examples from East Kilbride. I note that South Lanarkshire Council has been engaging with the Scottish Government and COSS on setting up a knowledge network, which is very welcome. I thank Collette Stevenson for her recognition of the community wealth building model.

I also recognise Mr O'Kane's contribution. We come from the same part of the world. We all recognise the tremendous work that has been done in Neilston. I could not possibly speak about asset transfer and not mention Linwood Community Development Trust, which has done a huge amount of work.

One of the issues that Mr O'Kane raised was one that Màiri McAllan referred to in a previous debate—the need for a specific case worker. We probably want a single point of contact for the 95 bodies, rather than people feeling that they have to speak to multiple individuals. A single point of contact could provide the information that people require.

How am I doing for time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are coming towards the end of it, I would say.

Tom Arthur: I had that feeling.

I will bring my remarks to a conclusion by saying that it has been a really helpful and stimulating debate. I am sorry that I cannot respond directly to everyone who has taken part. I am grateful to have had the opportunity, over the past 12 months, to get out and about, to see asset transfers in action and to see the fantastic work that is being done.

It has been a really positive debate. Unfortunately, I am not able to support either of the amendments. The Labour amendment would remove the entire Government motion and replace it with something else. As members of the Conservative Party will understand, the Scottish Government has deep reservations about the UK Government's approach to levelling up.

However, having said that, I recognise the contribution that has been made by members across the chamber, and I look forward to continued engagement in the future, as we work to empower our communities.

Business Motion

18:19

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-07271, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to next week's business. I invite George Adam to move the motion.

Motion moved,

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

(a) Tuesday 20 December 2022—

delete

followed by Members' Business

(a) Wednesday 21 December 2022—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Affairs and Islands; Health and Social Care;
Social Justice, Housing and Local Government

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Climate Change Committee's Review of Scottish Emissions Targets and Progress Report 2022

delete

5.15 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.45 pm Decision Time—[George Adam.]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

18:19

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-07247.1, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, which seeks to amend motion S6M-07247, in the name of Tom Arthur, on asset transfers and community empowerment—five years on, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a brief pause, to allow members to access the digital voting system.

18:19

Meeting suspended.

18:22

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S6M-07247.1, in the name of Douglas Lumsden. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My voting app did not work. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)

Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-07247.1, in the name of Douglas Lumsden, is: For 47, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-07247.2, in the name of Paul Sweeney, which seeks to amend motion S6M-07247, in the name of Tom Arthur, on asset transfers and community empowerment—five years on, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Neil Bibby: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app is not working. I would have voted yes.

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

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Apologies. My app would not load. I would have voted yes.

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

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)

Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)

Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-07247.2, in the name of Paul Sweeney, is: For 48, Against 65, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-07247, in the name of Tom Arthur, on asset transfers and community empowerment—five years on, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I did not manage to connect. I would have voted yes. Thank you.

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

Neil Bibby: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

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

Anas Sarwar: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

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

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-07247, in the name of Tom Arthur, on asset transfers and community empowerment—five years on, is: For 93, Against 20, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the progress that has been made to date in implementing Part 5 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015; recognises that ownership, lease or management of land and buildings are powerful tools for communities to drive change and achieve their shared ambitions; acknowledges the programme of support for participatory budgeting that has given communities a stronger voice in decisions on how public money is spent, and agrees that place-based, community-led regeneration can help local areas, individuals and businesses to tackle poverty and inequality, and build community wealth, on their own terms.

Meeting closed at 18:29.

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

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

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba