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Tuesday 19 December 2023

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Scottish Parliament

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, and our leader today is the Rev Dan Robertson, the minister of Davidson's Mains parish church.

The Rev Dan Robertson (Davidson's Mains Parish Church): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

I wonder what your earliest memory of the nativity story is. Maybe you got to play a part at school. If you did, I wonder what part you played and what you thought of that part, because there was a definite pecking order, and, even at that young age, we knew that. Top billing went to Mary and Joseph, then came the angel Gabriel and the wise men. Below them were the angels in the choir and then the lowly shepherds. The higher the billing, the more important you were and the closer you got to Jesus.

I remember the Joseph of my nativity feeling that being Joseph made him a somebody rather than a nobody. Some of that came out in less-than-good ways, because thinking that you are somebody and that others are nobodies has a habit of coming out in less-than-good ways.

I know about Joseph because that was me. What I missed as a five-year-old, and for many years afterwards, was that the Christmas story turns the whole pecking order on its head. It speaks of a teenage mother, a carpenter stepdad, outsiders and those looked-down-upon shepherds being invited to get up close and personal with Jesus, who Christianity claims is actually God. It speaks of self-important King Herod being repelled. The Christmas story speaks of a loving down-to-earth God who comes into this beautiful and broken world to save us from our "I'm a somebody and they're a nobody" inclinations.

At Christmas, Christ calls us to reconsider the pecking order way of living, which either sinks us when we fail to live up to other people's standards, or our own, or puffs us up with pride and leaves us looking down on others.

The Christmas story calls us to consider that we are all more fragile, insecure and self-centred than we care to think, and that we are more loved, welcomed and wanted than we dare to believe. It

goes on to deliver the good news that, in Christ, we have a God who is dying to love us, dying to forgive us and dying to be our friend, and that he is one whose love is stronger than death, if he rose from the dead as is claimed.

Jesus invites us to consider our value, the value of others and how close to him we want to get.

Merry Christmas and happy new year.
[Applause.]

Topical Question Time

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is topical question time. In order to get in as many questions as possible, succinct questions and responses would be appreciated.

Police Scotland (Building Closures)

1. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Presiding Officer, on behalf of members, I take the opportunity to welcome you back to your post.

To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that Police Scotland is considering closing more than 40 police buildings. (S6T-01702)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Responsibility for the police estate is a matter for the chief constable and is subject to regular Scottish Police Authority scrutiny. The proposals are now subject to consultation, and I know that Police Scotland is keen to hear any local concerns.

The Police Scotland estate strategy, which was published in 2019, recognised that much of the police estate was outdated and underused. In delivering the strategy, Police Scotland has prioritised co-location with partner organisations in modern well-equipped accommodation, and more than 60 co-locations have, thus far, been delivered across the country.

Liam Kerr: In Aberdeen, it is reported that five stations—in Mastrick, Rosemount, Seaton, Whinhill and Torry—might close. Scottish Police Federation general secretary David Kennedy says that the closures, which will be devastating to community policing, are due to a lack of funding from the Scottish Government. Does the cabinet secretary agree with the police? Has she demanded that today's Scottish National Party budget avoid inflicting yet more pain on our police, our communities and Scotland?

Angela Constance: I will, of course, leave it to the Deputy First Minister to outline this Government's budget, which will prioritise public services, in the not-too-distant future. As Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, I am aware that the number 1 priority of any Government is to protect the public.

The proposals are a matter for consultation. Mr Kerr and other colleagues in the north-east will want to feed in their specific comments about any proposed closures in Aberdeen or elsewhere, and I know that Police Scotland stands ready to engage on the detail of any local concerns.

With respect to funding, I advise Mr Kerr that, through capital receipts, Police Scotland has reinvested in the police estate £31 million from the relinquishing of disused or old buildings. I also remind him that this Government has continued to make year-on-year investment in policing, including through the doubling of the capital budget since 2016-17.

Liam Kerr: The police do well with what they are given by this Government. However, in September, Aberdeen was chosen as the guinea pig for a pilot scheme in which some crimes in the city will not be investigated due to slashed police budgets. What criteria will be used to judge whether that pilot has been a success? What impact has it had on Aberdeen's communities? Is it the cabinet secretary's intention that the pilot will be rolled out across Scotland?

Angela Constance: Mr Kerr once again refers to operational matters for Police Scotland. I remind him that, in the current financial year, the Government has increased the police budget by more than 6 per cent, which is equivalent to an additional £80 million. No one would demur for a minute from the consequences of more than a decade of Tory austerity, but this Government will stand proud on the decisions that we have made. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if members would refrain—*[Interruption.]* Members, let us not have speaking from a sedentary position.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): As the consultation is undertaken and the chief constable and the Scottish Police Authority give the matter careful consideration, does the cabinet secretary agree that it is important that we consider that there are high maintenance costs and environmental inefficiencies in much of our policing estate, including in my constituency? Does she agree that there are potential benefits for the public in rationalising the police estate to enable 21st-century policing and opportunities for collaboration and co-location with local partners?

Angela Constance: I very much agree with that. We all want our public services to be efficient, effective and accessible. Co-location with suitable partners makes best use of the public sector estate and, importantly, offers opportunities for increased visibility, closer working and increased collaboration between Police Scotland and partners.

Police Scotland now has over 60 examples of successful co-locations, and one of the best examples is in my constituency. The West Lothian civic centre sees Police Scotland working alongside the local authority, the Crown Office, the

Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service, the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. To me, that seems to represent the best use of public resources in the straitened times that we are in at the hands of the Tory Government elsewhere.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To close 29 stations is unprecedented and will impact on communities across Scotland at a time when confidence in the police is falling. Stations such as Leith, in Edinburgh, and Stewart Street, in Glasgow, have high usage. The Stewart Street station, in Glasgow city centre, is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and it is difficult to see how the city centre of Glasgow could be adequately policed without that station. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the source of the issue is a poor capital budget settlement for Police Scotland? Specifically, what representations has the cabinet secretary made to prevent what is a mass closure of police stations?

Angela Constance: It is important to recognise that the police's presence in our communities is defined not solely by buildings but by the nature of their work and engagement. The roll-out of mobile technology has changed the way in which police officers work.

Pauline McNeill has raised specific matters in relation to police stations in the centre of Glasgow. I am sure that she will make her feelings known through the public consultation.

As we all know, capital funding has not been inflation-proofed by the United Kingdom Government. Nonetheless, since 2017-18, the Scottish Government has more than doubled the capital budget for policing.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): The issue is not co-location but the risk that, if the new facilities are not true like-for-like replacements, facilities such as holding cells may be lost. For example, Greenock officers may have to go to Govan or Clydebank with arrested or accused people. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that modernisation, or so-called rationalisation, must never come at the expense of public safety or officer productivity?

Angela Constance: If Jamie Greene was aware of the publication of the news release by Police Scotland last week, he would have seen that the safety and wellbeing of its officers and staff are very much paramount. That is not the only reason, but it is one reason that drives Police Scotland forward to implement an estate strategy that ensures that not only the public but officers and staff have fit-for-purpose facilities.

Police Scotland (Taser Use)

2. The Deputy Presiding Officer: To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the roll-out and use of tasers within Police Scotland, in light of reports that they have been used 131 times, and discharged nine times, against children since 2018. (S6T-01709)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): The provision of tasers and the deployment of specially trained officers—STOs—is an operational matter for Police Scotland. Since the initial deployment of STOs in June 2018, Police Scotland received approval from the Scottish Police Authority's policing performance committee in September 2021 to enhance its taser capability to around 2,000 STOs. That additional roll-out is expected to be completed by April 2024.

The use of, or presence of, a taser provides officers with an option for de-escalating a situation more quickly, ensuring the safety of the public and police officers. Every incident that is attended is judged on its own merits, and every discharge of a taser is reported to the independent Police Investigations and Review Commissioner. Of the nine times that a taser was discharged against a child under the age of 18, seven were judged proportionate and two remain under investigation by the commissioner.

Liam McArthur: When tasers were rolled out to police divisions across Scotland in 2018, the public were assured that a large rise in discharges of weapons was not expected. Since then, 20 people have been left with injuries, and now we hear that tasers have been used 131 times against children, with a taser actually being discharged against a child on nine separate occasions, as the cabinet secretary acknowledged. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that points to a slide towards an enforcement model of policing, and will she consider scaling back the deployment of tasers in Scotland?

Angela Constance: I stress to Mr McArthur that no one wants to use a taser on anybody, particularly a child. The discharge of a taser is always a last resort. Each incident must be treated on its own merits, and it is vital that the threat or risk that is posed to the wider population or to the police officer, as well as to the child or young person, is the primary consideration. Each officer is trained and aware of their responsibilities.

As I have said, since 2018, there have been nine occasions when an individual under the age of 18 has been involved in the actual use or discharge of a taser. On each occasion, the incident was referred to the independent Police Investigations and Review Commissioner.

Liam McArthur: I thank the cabinet secretary for that response. As she acknowledges, the use of tasers on children gives rise to particular concerns. Not only are children at increased risk of long-term physical injury from high-voltage shocks, but sustained psychological trauma can also result from such encounters with police. Last week, this Parliament unanimously agreed legislation incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law. With UN representatives, Scottish children's rights campaigners and others calling for a complete ban on the use of tasers against children, will the cabinet secretary now give that proposal proper consideration?

Angela Constance: I hope to give some reassurance to Mr McArthur. Two pieces of legislation are highly relevant in that regard. Tasers are prohibited weapons under the Firearms Act 1968, which is reserved. Any police force that wishes to deploy tasers can do so only with approval from the Home Secretary.

Mr McArthur is also right to point to the Parliament's unanimous passing of the UNCRC legislation, and we hope that royal assent will be achieved at the start of next year. That legislation will require all public authorities to report regularly on how they are complying with the requirements of UNCRC with respect to devolved duties.

I am happy to write to Mr McArthur in detail, but it might be of some reassurance to him that the training in the deployment of tasers is robust, rigorous and scenario-based. Also, the national taser advisory group, which includes advocacy organisations, has a role in relation to human rights and children's rights and that informs the equality and human rights impact assessment.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): In the cabinet secretary's previous response, she confirmed that the taser regulations are reserved, so the UNCRC that we passed so successfully here cannot be used by children. Will the Government take steps in the near future to ensure that the UNCRC notifies that specific element, so that, as called for by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, young people who are affected in that way can seek protection under their human rights here in Scotland?

Angela Constance: The Government will always strive to advance the rights of a child. It is also the right of every child to be protected in difficult circumstances. I am happy to correspond with Mr Whitfield and any other member of the Scottish Parliament on the matter, because I am conscious that time is running out and there are some complexities in the issue. However, I reassure members that police officers receive training that allows them to deal with highly fluid

situations in which they have a duty to protect police officers, members of the public and, not least, a child or young person who is at risk or in distress.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Discharging a taser is a significant responsibility for officers, so it is vital that they undergo thorough training before they are authorised to carry a taser. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me a moment, Ms Nicoll. I appreciate that people are coming into the chamber, but I would be grateful if everyone could do so quietly.

Audrey Nicoll: Therefore, before they are authorised to carry a taser, it is vital that officers undergo thorough training with a focus on de-escalation and an understanding of the incidents in which it might be appropriate to use a taser. Will the cabinet secretary outline the processes that are in place to ensure that that is the case?

Angela Constance: Taser use is limited to specially trained officers, who must undergo rigorous training. Each officer must qualify to use a taser and must take part in yearly refresher training in order to continue to be issued with a device.

Ms Nicoll touched on an important point, which is that the figures on discharge of tasers in comparison with their overall use would demonstrate that, in difficult situations, the presence of an officer who is trained to use a taser enables de-escalation of an incident. Furthermore, their deployment allows for de-escalation of incidents from a safe distance.

This is a complex matter in which the rights and responsibilities of all must be protected. I will be happy to correspond on it further with members.

Budget 2024-25

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a statement by Shona Robison on the Scottish budget 2024-25. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:20

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): It is an enormous privilege to present my first budget, which is built on our values and sets out, in tough times, to protect people, sustain public services, support a growing sustainable economy, and address the climate and nature emergencies.

Our values of equality, opportunity and community are missions that should be at the core of any social democratic Government. They are our guiding lights in difficult times. This Government is committed to achieving equality through tackling poverty and protecting people from harm. At the heart of the budget is our social contract with the people of Scotland, whereby those with the broadest shoulders are asked to contribute a little more, where everyone can access universal services and entitlements, and where those who are in need of an extra helping hand will receive targeted additional support. That is what we mean when, in the face of Westminster austerity, we say that we will always stand up for Scotland.

This budget is set in turbulent circumstances. At the global level, the impacts of inflation and the war in Ukraine and the after-effects of the pandemic continue to create instability. In the United Kingdom, the combined effects of Brexit and disastrous Westminster policies mean that we are uniquely vulnerable to such international shocks. Recent research by the Resolution Foundation concluded that the UK is now defined by the toxic combination of low growth and high inequality and is therefore “a stagnation nation”.

Despite that, our economy has been resilient. Unemployment is low, at 3.8 per cent, and average earnings in Scotland are growing faster than those elsewhere in the UK. Scotland is the top-performing economic area outside London and the south-east, and it is the third largest as regards wages and gross value added per person in 2021. A record number of foreign direct investment projects were secured in Scotland last year.

Devolution has brought many benefits, but it has also exposed quite how beholden we are to the decisions of Westminster. We are fighting Westminster austerity with one hand tied behind

our back. In today’s budget, the Scottish Government has no say on corporation tax, no powers to mandate the real living wage for all, no ability to consider windfall levies on excess profits, and no options on wealth taxes such as capital gains tax.

Last month’s autumn statement was the worst-case scenario for Scotland. It contained a fiscal settlement from the UK Government that undermines the viability of public services across the whole UK, including here in Scotland. Our block grant funding for this budget, which is derived from the UK Government’s spending decisions, has fallen by 1.2 per cent in real terms since 2022-23. Our capital spending power is due to contract by almost 10 per cent in real terms over five years.

Under his own fiscal rules, the Chancellor of the Exchequer could have invested £27 billion more in core services and critical national infrastructure, but he did not. Instead, he prioritised tax cuts at the expense of public services. For example, members of Parliament will receive a £754 tax cut at the expense of funding the national health service and other vital public services. That cannot be right, Presiding Officer. Disgracefully, the motivation for that choice is not the national interest but the electoral interest of the Tory party ahead of the coming general election. We should be in no doubt that, while Scotland remains in the union, we will continue to pay the price of Westminster austerity.

Given the current turbulent economic environment, we are publishing single-year spending plans for 2024-25 in this budget. I recognise the merit of multiyear budgets, but the autumn statement and the forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility make future prospects more volatile. I will revisit the multiyear outlook in our 2024 medium-term financial strategy.

I am very grateful to both the Scottish Fiscal Commission and the Office for Budget Responsibility for their engagement in the budget process, and I have of course used the tax and social security forecasts prepared by the Scottish Fiscal Commission. We have worked with our Scottish Green Party colleagues to present a budget that is true to our shared priorities. The latest Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts show a significant improvement in our tax performance, driven by higher earnings growth in Scotland, with Scottish income tax receipts forecast to increase by £1.5 billion between this year and next. That is positive news, and it has contributed to Scotland’s improved income tax position for 2024-25.

On income tax, we will make no changes to the starter, basic, intermediate and higher rates of 19 per cent, 20 per cent, 21 per cent and 42 per cent.

We will increase the starter and basic rate bands by inflation to £14,876 and £26,561 respectively. I will maintain the higher-rate and top-rate thresholds at their current levels of £43,662 and £125,140. Maintaining the higher-rate threshold in 2024-25 will add £307 million to the income tax forecast, as estimated by the Scottish Government.

We do not believe that those people who are the backbone of our public services—our teachers, police officers and nurses—should see their tax rate increase. Taking the police as an example, constables, sergeants, inspectors and even chief inspectors will not see their tax rate rise. However, this Government believes that, when public services need investment and protection from Tory cuts, those with the broadest shoulders should pay a higher rate of tax. To be clear, by “the broadest shoulders” I mean the top-earning taxpayers. We will therefore add a new income tax band to the Scottish system—the advanced rate—which will be set at 45p and will apply on incomes between £75,000 and £125,140. In addition, I will increase the top rate by 1p to 48p in 2024-25.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission estimates that those policy decisions will raise a further £82 million in revenue next year. We have chosen to create the new band at a threshold above the top of the unpromoted teacher salary scale, and above those of a police chief inspector and a band 8b nurse. The threshold is set so high that it does not even capture MSPs. However, in case Mr Ross is wondering, MPs will have to pay a little more tax, because they get paid more than £86,000. Combined, the income tax policy that I have outlined will grow our much-needed revenues by £389 million. On income tax, only top earners—around 5 per cent of taxpayers—will be impacted by the rate changes. Of course, no one in Scotland will pay more in council tax for their main home.

Overall, taking a different progressive course on income tax in Scotland means that, in 2024-25, we will have an estimated £1.5 billion of additional revenues compared with what we would have if we followed UK Government tax policies.

Asking those with more to pay more is the right choice. It is a choice rooted in our values, and it is in stark contrast to the tax and service cuts of the Tory party. In making our choices, we are supporting public services, including those delivered by councils. Let me be clear that the Government will fully fund the council tax freeze. This year, in 2023-24, councils set their average council tax increases below the level of inflation. The OBR projection for inflation in the coming year based on the consumer prices index is 3 per cent. Of course, I could fund an inflation-proof 3 per cent council tax freeze, but I want to help support

services, so I will go further than that. I will fund an above-inflation 5 per cent council tax freeze, delivering more than £140 million of additional investment for local services. Combined with the other support that is being provided to local government, that will increase councils’ overall funding by 6 per cent since the last budget, taking local government funding to a new record high of more than £14 billion. That will help household budgets during tough times, and it will support our local authorities to deliver services.

On other devolved taxes, I can confirm that I intend to make no changes to land and buildings transaction tax rates or bands, and we will introduce legislation to increase the Scottish landfill tax rates, in line with planned UK landfill tax increases.

I have considered very carefully the steps that I can take on non-domestic rates that support business while ensuring that we have the necessary funding to protect public services. Although the UK Government may be happy to provide tax cuts on the back of real-terms cuts to the NHS, I am not, because—let us be clear—if I spent every penny of consequential on business relief and tax cuts, that would mean making a real-terms cut to our NHS and other vital public services, just as the UK Government has done.

However, I must also be clear that I will take a balanced approach to this budget, including how we can support businesses through non-domestic rates. The number 1 ask that we have heard on NDR has been to freeze the poundage. I am therefore happy to announce that we will freeze the poundage on the basic property rate, thereby protecting businesses with a rateable value of up to and including £51,000 from the impact of inflation. That is forecast to save ratepayers £37 million compared with an inflationary increase. Alongside inflationary increases in the intermediate and higher property rates, that will still ensure that Scotland has the lowest rate for all but the largest properties for the sixth year in a row.

I am pleased to confirm that we will maintain the small business bonus scheme in the budget, ensuring that 100,000 properties are taken out of rates altogether. We recognise the pressures that the hospitality sector faces, which is why, this year, we will work through the new deal for business group to take forward two actions to be implemented in our budget for next year. First, we will work with the sector to explore long-term targeted solutions and better promotion of existing reliefs, rather than relying on short-term steps that do little for future sustainability. Secondly, we will examine with the Scottish assessors the valuation methodology for the hospitality sector, to address concerns that have been raised that the

methodology is not truly reflective of the experiences of those businesses.

In addition, in recognition of the unique challenges that the hospitality sector in our island communities faces, we will, in this budget, introduce 100 per cent relief for hospitality properties in our islands, capped at £110,000 per business. We will take forward the two actions that I mentioned earlier in our budget for 2025-26.

We will prioritise tackling poverty and protecting people from harm. One child or household in poverty is one too many. This budget prioritises support for low-income households, centred around a cash-first approach. It is here, driven by our priorities and values, that we will make our largest single investment. We will invest £6.3 billion in social security benefits and payments—an increase of more than £1 billion compared with 2023-24. That will support disabled people to live full and independent lives, help older people to heat their homes in winter and aid low-income families with their living costs. All in all, it will support more than one in five people in Scotland.

We will support those who are most in need by uprating all Scottish benefits by 6.7 per cent, in line with the consumer prices index rate of inflation at September 2023. That includes increasing the weekly amount for our game-changing Scottish child payment to £26.70 from April 2024. The Scottish child payment lifts children out of poverty and stands as an example for anyone looking to form the next UK Government of the action that can be taken if one is true to one's values.

We will continue to deliver free school meals for all children in primaries 1 to 5 and special schools, and we will invest £43 million in estate upgrades to support the delivery and expansion of free school meals. That includes extending the roll-out of free school meals for primary 6 and primary 7 children who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment, providing more children with access to healthy meals during the school day.

Due to Westminster mismanagement of our economy, too many households worry about debt. With our limited powers, there is only so much that we can do, but, where we can step in, we will. That is why I am pleased to confirm that we will provide local authorities with £1.5 million to cancel school meal debt, removing a worry that hangs over families up and down the country who struggle to make ends meet.

I also confirm that, through this budget, we will keep the Promise to Scotland's care-experienced children and young people, providing £50 million through the whole family wellbeing fund for holistic family support.

We recognise the importance of high-quality childcare. That is why, in 2024-25, we will continue

to invest in a more flexible childcare system that offers families access to more local options and expand our innovative childminder recruitment and retention pilots to grow that essential part of the childcare workforce by 1,000 more by 2026-27.

Affordable housing is a key area for supporting many people to find a home. That is why we will invest over £550 million in the supply programme. That will help to deliver homes for social rent, homes for mid-market rent and low-cost home ownership in communities throughout Scotland.

I have said throughout this budget that it is a statement of our values. Unlike some, the Scottish Government does not think that homelessness is a "lifestyle choice". We know that those who are homeless need support not just with housing but often with other complex challenges that they face. That is why, in 2024-25, we will commit over £90 million in discretionary housing payments and £35 million of additional funding for specific action to end homelessness and reduce the number of households living in temporary accommodation. That is over and above the homelessness funding that is provided through the local government settlement.

It is because we follow our values that we are providing direct support to people, tackling poverty, and working to achieve a more equal Scotland.

Our ability to ensure that employment opportunities are available and to provide the support that is required to tackle poverty is reliant on our seizing the huge opportunities that exist in Scotland to build a fair, sustainable and growing economy. Businesses are critical to creating good jobs, delivering fair wages and expanding Scotland's tax base in order to tackle poverty and improve our public services. This budget and the new deal for business support our national strategy for economic transformation.

Only yesterday, the Fraser of Allander Institute published a study that showed that the renewable energy sector supported more than 42,000 jobs across the Scottish economy and generated over £10.1 billion of output in 2021. That is yet another illustration of the significant opportunity to develop the renewables supply chain and maximise the economic benefits from Scotland's renewables potential. That is why we will invest nearly £67 million to kick-start our commitment of up to £500 million over five years to leverage private investment in the infrastructure and manufacturing facilities that are critical to the growth of the offshore wind sector.

Delivering the critical infrastructure for a green and growing economy requires investment. That is why we are boosting funding for digital

connectivity from £93 million to £140 million in this budget.

Recognising the importance of planning to a growing economy, we will work with local authorities, business organisations and the development sector and will set out options to accelerate the planning system in a consultation paper that will be published in early 2024.

To tackle structural barriers to employment, we will invest up to £90 million in devolved employability services in 2024-25 to provide support to people who are keen to re-enter the workforce but need help when taking the final steps.

Recognising the needs of the Highland economy, we will progress the next phase of the A9 dualling programme in 2024-25, including commencing construction on the Tomatin to Moy section and advancing procurement and land acquisition for further sections. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Net Zero and Just Transition will make a statement on the details to Parliament tomorrow.

Our aim for opportunity is about more than economic opportunity; it is also about the opportunity for individuals and organisations to realise their potential. That is especially true of our nation's culture. The transformational power of our culture is immense. It attracts people from all over the world who want to come here and experience it at first hand.

As the first instalment of delivering the First Minister's commitment to double arts and culture funding, we will increase funding for culture in 2024-25 by £15.8 million. We will restore funding to Creative Scotland for utilising its reserves this year, and more. That is only the first step on the route to investing at least £100 million more in the arts and culture by 2028-29. Our aim is to increase arts and culture investment in 2025-26 by at least a further £25 million.

Perhaps the biggest opportunity before us and one of the most pressing dangers that the world faces is the climate emergency and our actions to address it. While the UK Government rolls back, we will take action. We will invest nearly £2.5 billion in public transport to support our bus, rail and ferry networks, ensure that there is a viable alternative to car use for those who need it, and allow people to make sustainable choices.

That includes investing more than £425 million in bus services through our network support grant and concessionary travel schemes for under-22s and for older and disabled people. Our investment in public transport includes £434 million to support our island communities through the provision of ferry, port and harbour services.

ScotRail and the Caledonian sleeper are now in public hands, and, through this budget, we are providing £1.6 billion to support passenger rail services, as well as for the operation, maintenance and renewal of our rail infrastructure. We will invest £220 million in active travel as we continue increasing our investment in walking, wheeling and cycling.

We need a step change in how we heat our homes, so we are providing £358 million to continue to accelerate energy efficiency upgrades and the installation of clean heating systems. We are investing £49 million to make progress in Scotland's transition to a circular economy.

Effective support for nature can bring a substantial impact in sequestering carbon, which is why we are investing £129 million to maintain and restore peatlands and to increase woodland creation.

We recognise the vital role that agriculture plays in the rural economy, and we recognise the opportunity to become more productive and sustainable. I confirm that we will provide the same level of support through direct payments to farmers and crofters that was available before Brexit. We are currently providing farmers and crofters with the most generous package of support anywhere in the UK. We will provide additional funding to support them to transition to a new support framework. In November, I wrote to the National Farmers Union Scotland president to reiterate my commitment that the funds that had been released to support the cost of living crisis would be returned in full, to be spent on the right agricultural priorities at the appropriate time. Agricultural Scotland has taken the hit for a Brexit that we did not vote for, but this budget demonstrates that the Scottish Government is resolute in our support for farmers and crofters right across Scotland.

While the UK Government has chosen to prioritise tax cuts at the expense of the NHS and other public services, our values—and therefore our choices—are very different. We recognise that we cannot address the financial challenges that are before us through tax alone or by delivering public services in traditional ways. Our approach must be investment and reform. Working in partnership with Scotland's trade unions, we will take action to ensure that our services remain sustainable, improve outcomes and support the people and communities that need them most. That approach will be underpinned by our continued commitment to our policy of no compulsory redundancies. Reform takes time, so we are taking decisive steps today.

Investing in Scotland's NHS is a non-negotiable position for this Government. Health consequential to Scotland from the UK

Government's autumn statement amount to a total of £10.8 million, which is equivalent to five hours of NHS Scotland activity. It is evident from the autumn statement that the UK Government has no intention of funding pay uplifts for staff in England. Instead, as many independent analysts have said, we are looking at deep real-terms cuts to public services across Scotland.

We choose to take different choices in Scotland, which is why we are delivering an increase of more than £550 million to front-line NHS boards. That is a 4.3 per cent uplift that takes the total investment in them to more than £13.2 billion. That is above real-terms protection for the NHS in Scotland, in the face of UK Government austerity and a real-terms cut to the NHS in England.

The investment will help the NHS to continue to evolve its delivery of services and work to improve waiting times. New services and innovations will need a step change in our reform programme, which is why we will take forward a national conversation to help to shape the NHS for the future.

In stark contrast to others who, in their words, are keeping "the door wide open" for the private sector in our NHS, we remain absolutely committed to keeping our NHS publicly owned, publicly operated and free at the point of need.

We know that one of the keys to a successful NHS is the successful provision of social care, so that everyone has access to consistently high-quality care, whenever they need it. We are investing £2 billion in health and social care integration, meaning that we are already exceeding our commitment to increase social care investment by 25 per cent by the end of this parliamentary session—two years early.

We are supporting hard-working social care and early learning and childcare workers in the private, third and independent sectors by providing more than £200 million additional funding to raise pay to at least £12 an hour from April 2024. That is the equivalent of a rise of £2,000 a year for full-time workers, which is a pay rise of more than 10 per cent in a year.

We recognise that disabled people living in Scotland face particularly difficult barriers, and that is why we are reopening the independent living fund. That will enable up to 1,000 disabled people in Scotland to access the support that they need and deserve to live independent lives.

One of our key partners in the delivery of services is, of course, local government. Through our partnership with local government under the Verity house agreement, we will work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to empower councils through a new fiscal framework that will also increase discretion to determine and

set fees and charges locally. Through the fiscal framework, we will also seek to ensure that distribution arrangements continue to meet the needs of our remotest communities and changing population.

One of the key services that councils deliver is, of course, schools. Delivering excellence and equity in Scottish education remains a top priority for the Scottish Government. That requires meaningful engagement with the students, teachers, families, support staff and communities that rely on our education system.

We remain committed to investing £1 billion during this session of Parliament to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap. That long-term targeted investment improves outcomes for children and young people and helps to break the cycle of poverty, with recent statistics showing record levels of literacy and numeracy attainment at primary school level and improvements in secondary.

As part of that, £130 million of pupil equity funding will continue to empower headteachers across Scotland to invest in the best approaches to improving the literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing of children and young people in their schools.

We will continue to provide £145.5 million to councils to maintain teachers in the system and enable councils to offer permanent contracts to our education workforce. In addition, we are taking action to support our colleges, universities and skills system with more than £2.4 billion of investment, which includes protecting free tuition and driving forward our commitment to widening access.

The safety and security of the public is one of the most important duties of any Government. That is why we will invest £1.55 billion in policing in 2024-25, increasing the Scottish Police Authority resource budget by 5.6 per cent, which is an additional £75.7 million, and giving Police Scotland a real-terms increase, providing the resources that are needed to support front-line service delivery. We are also increasing the police core capital funding by 12.4 per cent to £64.5 million for investment in the police estate, technology and fleet.

Another key blue-light service is the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. We have listened to and engaged with the SFRS. That is why, next year, we will provide it with a resource uplift of £13.5 million, and increased capital investment of £10.3 million, enabling the service to improve its facilities.

For the Scottish Prison Service, we are committing an additional £38.6 million to its resource budget, which is an additional 10 per

cent, to meet its rising costs. We will also invest in the modernisation of the prison estate, providing £167 million in capital funding, progressing much-needed replacements for HMP Inverness and HMP Barlinnie.

I know that there will be members who want us to go further in different areas in the budget. I would remind them that we are in this situation because of the constraints that have been placed upon us by a United Kingdom Government that does not share our values, our principles or our commitment to public services. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

Shona Robison: Quite simply, we cannot spend money that we do not have and we cannot mitigate every cut that the UK Government makes. We are at the upper limit of the mitigation that can be provided within the devolved settlement. We will always do our best with the powers that we have, but they are simply no substitute for independence. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, members.

Shona Robison: We have always said that, to truly transform our economy, society and public services, and to reap the benefits of Scotland's resources for current and future generations, we need the full powers of independence and to retake our place in the European Union.

The autumn statement's impact on services was just the latest example of why Scotland must walk a different path. Through the choices that we have made in this budget, we have been true to our values and have been rigorous in prioritising our investment where it will have the most impact.

Our social contract with the people of Scotland is at the core of this budget and shines through every funding decision that is contained in it. We choose investment in our people and our public services. This is a budget that reflects our shared values as a nation and that speaks to the kind of Scotland that we want to be. I am proud to commend it to the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues raised in her statement. I intend to allow about 60 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It is very good to see the Presiding Officer back in the chair. *[Applause.]*

What was not so good was the extraordinarily late delivery of a copy of what is an important budget statement. I consider that to be a discourtesy to the Parliament.

In the Deputy First Minister's very lengthy letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 20

November, she set out all her demands for the Scottish economy. Shona Robison wanted more money from the UK Government for public services, increased capital investment for infrastructure and more money for public sector pay increases. She said:

"Businesses across Scotland have faced various challenges in recent years",

so

"I encourage you to take action by using the reserved tax levers at your disposal to support them".

I have read that letter several times, and I cannot see anywhere any acknowledgement—there is none whatsoever—that the Scottish Government takes any responsibility for the current fiscal circumstances in Scotland. Indeed, there was a complete abrogation of responsibility for the running of the Scottish economy not just for this financial year but for the past 16 years. Not only is that disingenuous, but it will not wash with the public, because the current fiscal situation in Scotland reflects the policy decisions that have been made right here in Holyrood by the Scottish National Party during all the time that it has been in government.

Pandering to the Greens most of the time, ministers have failed to improve public services; they have failed to undertake public sector reform, which economists and analysts have warned about for years; and they have failed miserably to grow the economy, thereby starving Scotland of the much-needed revenue that is required to close the gap relating to the huge bills for public expenditure. Indeed, if the Scottish economy had grown at the same rate as the UK economy has grown over the time that the SNP has been in power, we would have many extra billions of pounds to spend, just as we would have if billions of taxpayers' money had not been wasted on failed projects.

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Hah! HS2!

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Do you think that this is funny?

Liz Smith: Of course, the Scottish Government—

The Presiding Officer: Ms Smith, please give me a moment. I must ask that we do not have shouting from members on the front benches. *[Interruption.]* Members, let us hear one another in this important session.

Liz Smith: I think that the First Minister is embarrassed by that, because he knows full well that the UK Government is having to help Scotland.

The Scottish Government asking the UK Government to use its tax levers to support

business really does take the biscuit. Last year and this year, the UK Government decided, on top of all the furlough and cost of living support that it provided during the pandemic, to give businesses 75 per cent rates relief, but—oh no—the Scottish Government refused to pass on those Barnett consequential, with the exception, I think, being rates for those on the islands this year.

First, in line with the cabinet secretary's own demands to the chancellor, why is she not supporting businesses more? That would be in line with some of the comments from her back benchers, too.

Secondly—again, with her back benchers in mind—does the cabinet secretary really think that, by increasing the tax burden and the income tax differential between Scotland and the rest of the UK, she is sending the right message that Scotland is open for business, for economic growth, for investment, for innovation and for job creation, because it is abundantly clear that those in business and industry, including Sir Tom Hunter, do not think that it is?

With regard to local government, which seems to be getting only half of what it asked for—perhaps even less than half—does the cabinet secretary not accept that the long-term cuts that the SNP has imposed on core local government funding over many years could have been reversed for the next financial years if it cancelled its controversial National Care Service (Scotland) Bill, with all its spiralling costs, and gave that money to front-line services that are more in line with the priorities of the people of Scotland?

Shona Robison: I join Liz Smith in welcoming the Presiding Officer back to her seat. I also give my apologies for the late statement.

Our asks of the UK Government—for more money for the public sector and for capital—were quite modest. The UK Tory chancellor had £27 billion of fiscal headroom but chose to deliver only tax cuts and no investment in public services. That is a political choice made by the Tory chancellor, but it is not a choice that will be made by the SNP Government. Of course, the £1.5 billion that we have in addition to spend is due to the tax decisions that we have taken here—those are actions taken by the SNP Government.

Liz Smith mentioned failed projects. I have to say to her that, with the growing list of HS2, the failed Rwanda policy and the latest PPE—personal protective equipment—scandal, I do not think that she should really bring that point to the chamber.

The top three concerns and asks of business are on inflation, interest rates and energy costs, and those issues have been compounded by the decisions that the UK Government has made. On

tax, I have been clear that the tax position will impact only on the highest-earning 5 per cent of taxpayers in 2024-25. People who earn up to £28,850—that is 51 per cent of Scottish taxpayers—will continue to pay less income tax in 2024-25 than they would pay if they lived elsewhere in the UK.

We have been clear on growing the economy, and I set out in my statement the actions that we are taking to do that. Since 2007, gross domestic product per capita in Scotland has grown by 10 per cent, compared with 6.4 per cent at UK level. Average earnings in Scotland are now growing faster than those in the UK. Next year, we will continue supporting investment that seizes the opportunities of our net zero transition, and we will work with business and investors to launch a new green industrial strategy.

We will get on with delivering a balanced budget that recognises the needs of public services, first and foremost, but also of households and of business.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

This is a chaotic budget from an incompetent Government that will leave ordinary Scots paying much more and getting much less in return. The SNP's mismanagement of our public finances has left us with a massive gap to be filled between what it promised and the tax revenues that ordinary Scots pay. That is an SNP waste gap, an SNP incompetence gap and a huge SNP growth gap. If Scotland's economy had kept pace with the economy in other parts of the UK, it would now be £8.5 billion larger. The failure of this Government over 16 years to focus on the priorities of country rather than party means that it now needs taxpayers to bail it out as a result.

It is chaos—there is no other word for it. The SNP was going to raise council tax by 22 per cent and suddenly, unbeknownst to the civil service or even to the Cabinet, it was freezing it. The SNP had a plan to cut thousands of jobs in the public sector, but then the Deputy First Minister came to Parliament and said that the plan was cancelled. Now the plan for thousands of job cuts is back with a vengeance.

The Deputy First Minister invited all Opposition parties to suggest their cuts, and then Humza Yousaf announced £1 billion of conference spending commitments as he panic-spent public money following the Rutherglen by-election. Now we are told that the black hole is the biggest that it has ever been.

The SNP has neglected the day job of growing the economy and delivering public services for Scotland. Tax cannot and should not be used as a substitute for economic growth. NHS waiting times are soaring—we heard even today that cancer

waits are up again. General practitioner services and NHS dentistry are a fiction for many across our country, but it does not need to be like that. Scotland cannot accept more managed decline from the SNP, with two incompetent Governments in the UK. Scotland needs change, and it is coming.

Does the Deputy First Minister accept that her Government's failure to grow Scotland's economy means that we are lagging behind England and Wales? What will this horrendous budget mean for the one in seven Scots who is currently on an NHS waiting list? How many more Scots will be on NHS waiting lists by next year? How many public sector workers will be made redundant as a result of the budget? Why does she think that the hard-pressed people of Scotland should bear the brunt of her Government's failures in higher taxes and cuts to services?

Shona Robison: I am not sure whether Michael Marra is saying that he is against the people with the broadest shoulders paying a bit more, which would mean, therefore, that there would be less revenue for public services. I take it that he is confirming that the Labour Party would invest £82 million less in public services. That is now on the record, and it is an incredible thing for a Labour finance spokesperson to say.

Today, the Welsh Labour Government set its budget. The Welsh Minister for Finance and Local Government, Rebecca Evans, said:

"We have had to take some really difficult decisions to radically redesign our spending plans to focus funding on the services which matter most to the people of Wales ...

We have been presented with the most stark and painful budget choices in the devolution era. We have"

had to reshape

"departmental spending plans so that we can invest more in the NHS".

Exactly the same issues face this Government. Why do Michael Marra and the Labour Party in the Scottish Parliament support the position of the Welsh Labour Government in putting the blame where it lies—at the UK Government's door—but do not accept the same premise for the Scottish Government? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Thank you!

Shona Robison: In my statement, I was clear that we are prioritising funding for the NHS and vital front-line services, and that we are raising revenues to do that. As Michael Marra knows, we have a clear position of no compulsory redundancies in the public sector, so we will work with our trade union colleagues on ensuring that we reform our services in a way that makes them sustainable and high quality.

We will get on with that. We will just leave Michael Marra and the Labour Party to whinge from the sidelines, as they always do.

The Presiding Officer: I call Alex Cole-Hamilton.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Thank you, Presiding Officer, and welcome back.

The SNP has spent years ignoring expert warnings about the lack of a long-term economic strategy and the impact of its failure to grow the economy. Scotland needs predictability and a long-term plan for tax and the wider economy, not erratic changes that will undermine confidence.

We now know from the budget who will pay the price: everyone who is going without the social care that they need, parents who cannot access childcare and pupils who are left behind as Scotland slides down the international rankings. Councils are on the brink, and education is half of what they do. The vulnerable, pupils and taxpayers—all taxpayers—are all suffering the cost of SNP-Green incompetence, from ferries to the white elephant takeover of social care.

The budget is about priorities. Why is the Government slashing energy efficiency spending in the middle of a climate emergency, and why is the Deputy First Minister slashing the housing budget in the middle of a housing emergency?

Shona Robison: In the face of a 10 per cent cut to our capital budget from the UK Government over the next five years, we are taking the action that we need to take to prioritise investment in our vital infrastructure. There is nothing erratic about making sure that our tax decisions raise £1.5 billion of additional revenues that would not have been there had we followed UK Government tax policy. As I set out in my statement, we are very clear about investment in the front line.

Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned local government. The total resource budget has increased by £840.3 million since the 2023-24 budget, which is a 6.8 per cent cash increase and a 5 per cent real-terms increase. On top of that growth, the budget also makes available up to £144 million to support councils to freeze their council tax. In total, the budget makes available more than £14 billion of funding to councils, should they agree to freeze their council tax. That is a record level of funding to local government—more than £14 billion. Alex Cole-Hamilton should have looked at the figures before he came to the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): I advise members that there is considerable interest in asking questions, so we will need to have shorter questions and answers.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The Deputy First Minister has had to make very difficult choices, not least because of decisions that were made by the chancellor in his autumn statement, such as freezing capital expenditure at a time of high inflation. What will be the impact of such a freeze on public investment in Scotland's infrastructure, productivity, economic growth and labour market participation? Does the Deputy First Minister agree that widening the tax base, nurturing new business start-ups and backing innovation would boost our economy and help to deliver the resources that are needed to fund our public services?

Shona Robison: As I said, our capital spending power has reduced because the UK Government has persistently underinvested in infrastructure and has not inflation proofed its capital budget. It will now take longer to deliver on all our planned capital projects and programmes unless the UK Government changes course and increases its investment in its capital programme.

Despite those cuts, we are using all our powers to maximise the funding that is available to support employment and the economy, achieve net zero and maintain high-quality public services and infrastructure.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Ahead of this budget, the business community in Scotland had two key asks: first, that the income tax differential with the rest of the UK should not be widened; and, secondly, that the chancellor's 75 per cent rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses that has been delivered in England for the second year would be replicated here. In both cases, the finance secretary has decided to do the opposite of what was asked. Does that not leave the much-vaunted new deal for business in tatters and leave the position of the economy secretary in this Cabinet utterly untenable?

Shona Robison: Let us be clear. Murdo Fraser has just put on the record that the Tories wanted us to follow the UK Government Tory spending plans, which would have meant that, out of the £320 million available in consequentials for this year, £260 million would have gone on tax cuts for business, not the NHS. That would have meant that there would have been only £10.8 million of investment in our NHS. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat, cabinet secretary. We will not have this shouting across front benches—I am referring to members of both the front benches that I am currently looking at. Cabinet secretary, please resume your answer.

Shona Robison: That would have meant us replicating the real-terms cut to NHS England here in Scotland.

Let me tell Murdo Fraser what that would have meant to health boards. A 0.8 per cent real-terms reduction applied to health boards in Scotland would have resulted in more than £0.5 billion less funding for our health boards this year. Let me tell Murdo Fraser what that would have meant for his health boards. In Fife, that would have been £31.27 million less funding, and in Tayside, it would have been £35.27 million less. I hope that he will explain that to his constituents when he goes back to meet them, because I think that they will be very interested in his priorities. Business tax cuts over NHS funding—that is not the priority of this SNP Government.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): On the one hand, the budget boasts about investing in colleges, universities and skills, and on the other hand, it cuts £100 million from the Scottish Funding Council, which pays colleges and universities to deliver those skills. The warm words about wanting people to get opportunities through further and higher education are cold comfort when colleges and universities face such a devastating cut, in a year when they have already faced cuts and had money snatched away from them. Colleges and universities are doing an incredible job in considerably hard—and harder—times, against a backdrop of higher costs and year-on-year cuts. Today's news will leave them wondering whether the SNP Government values them at all. Rather than recognising their value, the Government has—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We need a question, Ms Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Where does the Deputy First Minister expect the Scottish Funding Council cuts to fall? If those cuts fall on colleges and universities, how much funding will be cut from colleges and how much from universities? How does she plan to explain that to colleges, universities and students?

Shona Robison: I say to Pam Duncan-Glancy that the education and skills resource budget has increased by £144 million, or 4.8 per cent. Neither Pam Duncan-Glancy nor anyone else on the Labour benches can come to Parliament demanding more money for education when the party's finance spokesperson has basically said that they want £82 million less to be spent on public services because they do not agree with the new advanced tax rate. They cannot come asking for more money when they have said that they want less money for public services. That does not add up. I hope that we are not going to hear more funding calls from the rest of the members on the

Labour benches, because that would be totally incompetent.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): The Deputy First Minister mentioned that she was targeting some support; for example, in the hospitality sector. Can she explain her thinking around targeting support rather than providing universal benefits?

Shona Robison: We have to balance out those benefits that are universal and those that are targeted. We are looking at programmes across the Government and we have been looking at ways in which we can make sure that we have the right balance of universal services for as many people as possible, but target our resources where necessary; for example, on the Scottish child payment. Over the coming months, we will set out where that balance lies. We will have difficult decisions to make. That is why, in our free school meals expansion, we are targeting those who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment; we are targeting that provision in a way that makes sure that the priority is those children and young people who need it most.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): In recent months, both the City of Edinburgh Council and Glasgow City Council have declared housing emergencies. Under the SNP-Green Government, we see a record number of homeless people in Scotland and children living in temporary accommodation. Will the Deputy First Minister explain to Parliament why cutting our housing budget by more than a third will help to address that situation?

Shona Robison: The UK Government cut the housing budget—it was the member's own Government that cut the budget. I find it astonishing that members of the Tory party come here demanding that we spend more money on an area for which their Government has cut the budget, which means that we do not get any consequential for housing or homelessness in our budget. If we were to follow what we have just heard from members on the Tory front bench, we would be putting every single penny into business tax cuts. Members cannot demand that more money be spent on housing or homelessness when they want every penny to go on business tax cuts. The Tories need to get more joined up, because they are looking pretty incompetent, from where I am standing.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): The Grangemouth flood prevention scheme in my constituency is a vital infrastructure project. The project has been waiting for some time for clarity over funding for the next stages. I have assumed that the delay was due to budget uncertainty, particularly around capital. As a result of the budget, will the cabinet secretary be able to shed

any light on funding for flood prevention schemes generally, and specifically for Grangemouth?

Shona Robison: Michelle Thomson will be aware that we have made £42 million per year available to local authorities to invest in important flood risk management actions, and we have committed an additional £150 million over the course of this parliamentary session to support those actions.

The Grangemouth flood prevention scheme is exceptional in its scale and cost and, as such, requires careful consideration. The Scottish Government will continue to work with Falkirk Council to ensure that the scheme delivers for the local community and economy, and I will ensure that the minister sets up a meeting with Michelle Thomson to discuss the details.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I may be corrected if I am wrong, but I am a bit concerned that I did not hear the Deputy First Minister actually use the term “economic growth” in her statement.

The Deputy First Minister has announced a £15.8 million increase in cash terms for the arts and culture budget, but the budget line for Creative Scotland is less than it was in 2022-23, leaving only £4.7 million in cash terms for the rest of the sector and promises of jam tomorrow.

Does the Deputy First Minister accept that the budget announcement does not rise to the challenge of dealing with the crisis in the sector, which affects jobs, venues and organisations, and that the Government is not on track to deliver its promise—the Government's own promise—of £100 million over the next five years?

Shona Robison: First, I mentioned economic growth on a number of occasions and made very clear the actions that we are taking.

Secondly, I clearly announced additional funding for culture in my statement. We will deliver on that, as per the First Minister's commitment.

Yet again, we have a Labour member coming here and demanding more money when members on Labour's front bench have said that they want less money because they do not support the tax changes that we are making in this budget. I cannot understand where Neil Bibby thinks the money is going to come from when Labour members are against the additional revenues that we will raise because of the decisions that we are taking.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome the additional resources for Police Scotland and for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. Those were two of the items that I spoke to the Deputy First Minister about when we

met last week—the third being the Inverclyde socioeconomic task force.

I ask the Deputy First Minister to provide more detail regarding the funding allocations for Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, which I hope will result in extra resources being channelled directly to the emergency services in my Greenock and Inverclyde constituency.

Shona Robison: The investment in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has been made in response to concerns that have been raised by Stuart McMillan and others. I met the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs to ensure that what is in the budget will help to deliver some of the infrastructure needs of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. How that money is spent is an operational matter, but I am sure that the justice secretary would be happy to meet Stuart McMillan to discuss the details of that funding allocation.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The Deputy First Minister has confirmed the positive impact of decisions made since 2017-18 in response to Green proposals about tax, with £1.5 billion now available to support public services as a result of those decisions. That is in sharp contrast to the UK Tory Government, which prioritises tax cuts for its rich mates, and a Labour Party that is actively opposed to redistributing wealth from the richest to those who are most in need.

What will the additional £1.5 billion from Green tax policies deliver for public services in Scotland next year?

Shona Robison: The Scottish Fiscal Commission has estimated that our income tax policy choices since devolution will raise around £1.5 billion more in 2024-25 than if we had matched UK Government policy. That is vital revenue to invest in our public services. Presumably, we would have £1.5 billion less to spend, had we followed the advice of the Tories sitting to my left, and it seems that the Labour Party is in exactly the same place and also wants less money for our public services. Those are not the priorities of this Government.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Will the Deputy First Minister provide further information about how the Scottish budget will help to reduce the cost of the school day for low-income families?

Shona Robison: Reducing the cost of the school day is really important, which is why a decision has been made about school meal debt. That is a straightforward, practical way for this Government to support households that are struggling with debt and is something that we will

take forward, with COSLA and local government, to ensure that we deliver.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): What impact analysis has been undertaken of the cabinet secretary's decision to increase income tax? Does it include an analysis of the impact of behavioural change on Scotland's labour market?

Shona Robison: Behavioural change is always part of the Scottish Fiscal Commission's analysis, which is why it has said that £82 million will be raised by the advanced tax band. As I said in my statement, that will impact on only 5 per cent of taxpayers. A majority of taxpayers in Scotland will still pay less tax than they would pay if they lived elsewhere in these islands.

The behavioural analysis is something that we will, of course, keep a very close eye on. It is at the heart of the Scottish Fiscal Commission's analysis.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): As well as households, businesses across Scotland are facing substantial pressures as a result of rising costs. Can the Deputy First Minister provide an update on the Scottish Government's latest engagement with businesses and business groups to ensure that their views and concerns have been considered in the budget? Can she say any more about how the budget will support businesses in Scotland to thrive as we move forward in our economic recovery and transformation?

Shona Robison: Neil Gray, the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy, met business earlier today. We know that businesses' key concerns are around inflation, interest rates and energy costs, and their number 1 ask has always been around the freezing of the poundage. I am pleased that we have frozen the poundage and made sure that it is lower than it is elsewhere in these islands for the sixth year in a row. I am sure that business will welcome that.

I recently met the Confederation of British Industry, whose main ask was about simplifying the planning process. That is why, in my statement, I made reference to us taking forward work on the planning process to see how we can make sure, particularly for big projects, that we have the capacity and expertise in our planning system that is needed to move projects forward at pace.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): At a time when renters and home owners are facing spiralling costs, the budget cuts more than £200 million from the housing budget. That means that, in two years, spending on new housing will have halved. While we face skills shortages, while colleges and universities face a cut of £100 million and while we need to support businesses, our

enterprise agencies are being cut by £63 million, or 25 per cent in two years. Housing, skills and enterprise support are all levers that are vital for growth, but they are all being cut in the budget. Is it the case that the Scottish Government has given up on growth altogether?

Shona Robison: No. It is in recognition that we have a 10 per cent cut to our capital budget over the next five years. If the Welsh Labour Minister for Finance and Local Government was standing here, she would be making the point that that is due to the UK Government's decision to cut our capital budget by 10 per cent over five years. It is just a pity that the Labour Party here cannot put the responsibility where it lies, which is at the UK Government's door.

On our investment in housing, skills and enterprise, I set out in my statement the priority that we are giving to those areas, but I cannot stand here and say that the budget decisions of the UK Government and an austerity budget will have no impact on our budget. If the Labour Party wants to tell me where it would take money from, elsewhere in the budget, to apply to the areas that Daniel Johnson wants to apply money to, I am willing and able to listen to that. *[Interruption.]* However, if Labour just wants to come here and ask for more money on the basis of having no more money and opposing tax rises from the front bench, it has no credibility whatsoever. *[Interruption.]* Do not—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Clare Haughey, to be followed—*[Interruption.]*

Shona Robison: I have to say to Daniel Johnson that his patronising manner in the chamber leaves a lot to be desired and is very disrespectful.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, please resume your seat for a second. I thought that you had finished. I say to members on the Labour benches who are normally better behaved that we have to have the courtesy of listening to the person who has been asked to respond. I have to say that Mr Johnson's dismissive gesturing was not very courteous.

We move on to Clare Haughey, to be followed by Brian Whittle.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I hold a bank staff nurse contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

Investment in our NHS over the years from this Scottish Government has led to record high staffing levels and has ensured that we have the best-performing core accident and emergency services across the UK. Can the Deputy First Minister outline how the newly announced record

NHS funding will be used to improve A and E waits and reduce waiting lists?

Shona Robison: Clare Haughey's question goes to the heart of the priorities that we have set. Funding was not available to do everything that we wanted to do, so we had to prioritise.

We also had to make the decision not to just pass on a real-terms cut in health funding of £10.8 million. In order to make sure that we could give the NHS that real-terms increase, we had to prioritise funding to it, and that is exactly what we have done. Reducing the waiting list backlogs that were built up during the pandemic and improving A and E performance remain absolute priorities for the health portfolio budget. The increased funding for NHS Scotland will support our cross-system approach to performance, productivity and improvement, grounded—as is important—in clinical leadership across NHS Scotland.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary's statement proves that we should never underestimate the SNP Government's willingness to prioritise short-term gain regardless of the potential for long-term pain. That lack of ability to develop a long-term strategy is coming home to roost, and the Scottish public are paying a heavy price, with the continued closures of community facilities and the lack of investment in local public services. Does the cabinet secretary accept that, by doubling down on that short-term sticking-plaster economic strategy, she condemns Scotland's public services to a state of perpetual crisis management?

Shona Robison: It takes a brass neck for Brian Whittle to talk about short-term gain. There have been tax cuts as a pre-election bribe to the electorate. What is that, other than a short-term gain?

Brian Whittle talks about there being no money for public services, but the consequential that we got had no money for public services other than £10.8 million for the NHS. Had we followed the advice of Brian Whittle's front bench, we would have put all that money into business tax cuts and none into public services—whether to the NHS or local government.

I cannot understand why Brian Whittle thinks that it is okay to come here and ask for more money for public services, given that his own Government has butchered public services and prioritised tax cuts. That really takes a bit of a brass neck.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The finance secretary will be aware of the unique challenges of rurality and depopulation that are faced by Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders. Will she further outline how the budget will support people in D and G and the Borders

who are most impacted by the Tory-created cost of living crisis and will help to address depopulation and attract people to the region by improving transport and infrastructure?

Shona Robison: Shortly—early next year—we will publish our addressing depopulation action plan. It contains a range of commitments that will support communities to deliver place-based interventions that will support population attraction and retention.

Making Scotland an attractive and welcoming country is a key pillar of our population strategy. To help to deliver that ambition, we will launch a talent attraction and migration service in 2024, which will support employers to use the immigration system effectively to address the skills that they need. That will help people to move to Scotland and successfully settle into their communities, including in the south of Scotland.

As we know from figures from National Records of Scotland, there is still net in-migration to Scotland from the rest of the UK. That is very welcome.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Given that the national minimum wage will be £11.44 per hour from April, does the cabinet secretary really think that paying social care workers just an extra 56p will make any difference to the social care recruitment crisis? Given that, when she was health secretary, she promised to eradicate delayed discharge but is now presiding over it at record levels, how many hundreds of millions of pounds has she had to build into her budget to pay for the cost of this incompetent Government's utter failure to tackle delayed discharge?

Shona Robison: The additional support will mean an extra £2,000 a year to those social care workers. However, we would not be able to afford that extra £2,000 a year if we did not have the tax position that we have had. Colin Smyth's front bench did not want to raise those additional tax revenues. They want more money for social care workers, but they do not want to raise the revenue to pay for it. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, please resume your seat for a second.

I really must insist that, when a question is asked, we listen to the response.

Shona Robison: The Labour back bench and front bench members should have a word about their incoherence.

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): As the Deputy First Minister outlined, the UK Government's autumn statement was the worst-case scenario, with big consequences for the Scottish Government's budget. In the face of continued austerity and the Tory-made cost of

living crisis, can she outline what the Scottish Government is doing and the challenges that it faces in trying to mitigate so many reckless Tory policies? Can the Deputy First Minister also highlight the measures in the budget that will help to tackle inequality?

Shona Robison: The Government has spent more than £1 billion mitigating the impacts of 13 years of UK Government policy, such as the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. As I have said, the UK Government's autumn statement was a missed opportunity to reverse those policies and wider spending decisions that have resulted in a 1.2 per cent real-terms reduction since the 2022-23 budget was presented by the UK Government.

By contrast, this Government continues to prioritise investment to tackle and reduce poverty, including committing £6.3 billion in social security benefits and payments, which is just over £1 billion more than in 2023-24. That is our single biggest increase in funding in the budget, which is helping to deliver our national mission to tackle inequality.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): In last year's budget, the Government eventually pledged £6.6 million to Creative Scotland. It then cut that funding entirely in September, before being forced to reinstate it and shattering the confidence of those who work in culture and the arts, U-turning not once, not twice, but three times. We now have a supposed commitment to Creative Scotland for next year, but how do we know that we can trust the Government to deliver for the culture sector when it has been so cavalier with its promises in the past?

Shona Robison: What we do know is that we cannot trust the UK Government, because it puts no money into culture. It cuts culture budgets. Donald Cameron comes here and asks for more spending in an area where his Government has reduced funding. I do not quite understand how he thinks that that is a thing.

Let me be clear: as I said in my statement, we will increase funding to the culture sector by £15.8 million. That is the first step on the path to increasing funding for the culture sector by £100 million in five years. We will provide Creative Scotland with £6.6 million in national lottery shortfall funding for 2023-24, along with a further £6.6 million for 2024-25. However, we would not have been able to do any of that had we followed the advice of the Tory front bench to put every penny into business tax cuts, not public services. Again, I think that the member ought to have a word with his party and get a bit of joined-up thinking going on.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Given its role in supporting

young people in our communities with a whole range of issues, from improving mental health and wellbeing to reducing antisocial behaviour, what consideration is given to youth work in our budget deliberations?

Shona Robison: I know about the importance of youth work, having been a community youth worker back in the day, before I came into Parliament. Of course, it is an important service that is delivered by local government, so I hope that the record level of more than £14 billion of funding that we are giving to local government will help to sustain services such as youth work, which are so important in making sure that we support young people, particularly those who are vulnerable.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Green MSPs have pressed to ensure that the budget invests in the green economy of the future. I welcome the fact that the proposals will see £4.7 billion invested in cutting carbon emissions and tackling the nature emergency. That is the right thing to do for the planet and for the people of Scotland. Already, households are feeling the benefit, as this week's report from the Fraser of Allander Institute highlighted, of the huge growth in jobs in the renewables sector. However, it is critical that those benefits are felt in rural communities. Will the Deputy First Minister set out how the budget will support green job creation in rural Scotland?

Shona Robison: Woodland creation, sustainable management of Scotland's national forests and lands, and peatland restoration are part of our just transition to net zero. The £129 million funding for those measures supports Scotland's rural economy and creates economic opportunities and good green jobs. Green job creation and support for workers and young people who are transitioning into those roles remain at the heart of Scottish Government planning. We welcome the Fraser of Allander Institute's study, which, as I said in my statement, shows that the renewable energy sector supported more than 42,000 jobs across the Scottish economy and generated more than £10.1 billion of output in 2021.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): In her statement, the cabinet secretary spoke of having a one-year budgeting cycle. Does she agree that long-term strategic budgeting, such as that which is done by most of our European neighbours, would be much better for all concerned, and that the one-year cycle that the Treasury currently puts before us represents both short-term and long-term pain? However, that is what we have come to expect from bankrupt broken Brexit Britain.

Shona Robison: I agree with that. That is one of the reasons for my intention to come back at the point in May when we will publish our medium-term financial strategy, to set out what we think will be the future fiscal position once we have more certainty. The recent autumn statement is an extraordinary one. It clearly represents a pre-election bribe to cut taxes at the expense of public services, which makes it very difficult to plan on a multiyear basis. We will set out our further plans when we get to that point in May, once we have more certainty of the future fiscal position.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a partner in a farming business and a member of NFU Scotland, Scottish Land & Estates, and the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland.

Tens of millions of pounds will be stripped away from the agriculture budget in the next financial year. With £61 million of ring-fenced funding already cut in year, this budget represents an attack on rural Scotland. What does the cabinet secretary have to say to Scotland's farmers and crofters, who will feel angry and abandoned by this SNP-Green Government in Edinburgh?

Shona Robison: We received no money from the UK Government for rural Scotland or for agriculture. Again, Jamie Halcro Johnston comes here [*Interruption.*] and contradicts members on his party's front bench. They want all the money to be spent on business tax cuts, whereas he wants it to be spent on agriculture.

In my statement I set out the importance of agriculture and supporting our rural economy. I have made it clear, as I did to NFUS, that we will return that £61 million at the start of the year. We will work with it on the priorities for when that funding is returned.

It is a bit rich for any Tory member to come here and talk about the lack of money for rural Scotland or agriculture when not a single penny has been given by their UK Government colleagues for that purpose. I reiterate that not a penny for those areas was asked for by members on the Tory front bench. That is just total incoherence.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jim Fairlie, to be followed by Ash Regan. [*Interruption.*]

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Can you hear me, Presiding Officer? [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Fairlie, please resume your seat for a wee second. We need to hear the person who has the floor. The person who currently has the floor is not any of the people who are sitting on the Conservative benches; it is Mr Fairlie.

Jim Fairlie: Thank you, Presiding Officer. Will the cabinet secretary tell my constituents what the proposed reduction of almost 10 per cent on capital funding in the Scottish Government's budget will mean for the timescale for building the new elective treatment centre at Perth royal infirmary?

Shona Robison: Jim Fairlie is right to point out the impact of a 10 per cent cut in capital budgets over the next five years: it will have a profound effect on our ability to invest in our infrastructure. In the new year, we will come back with a revised infrastructure investment plan that will set out what we are able to do and the timeframes within which we will be able to do it. If any member in the chamber thinks that a 10 per cent cut to our capital budget will not have an impact on our infrastructure investment, they are living on another planet. We will set out our priorities and how we will ensure that we continue to invest in Scotland's vital infrastructure.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): The budget shortfall is down to the Conservatives choosing to keep children in poverty and to underfund the NHS across the UK. Those are clearly political choices, not economic ones. That funding model is not working for Scotland, and securing independence is the only way out of this mess.

I note that, in the Deputy First Minister's 30-minute statement, no mention was made of funding to advance the cause of Scottish independence. If spending reflects priorities, the Scottish Government is not serious about independence, is it?

Shona Robison: Let me first find a point of agreement with Ash Regan, as I always try to do. She is right about the political choices that the UK Tory Government has made. It has made a political choice to cut NHS funding by 0.8 per cent in real terms. Had we followed that political choice, all the health boards in Tory members' areas would have had cuts to their funding, and they would have had to explain to nurses, doctors and their constituents why that was—why we were following Tory spending plans and cutting the NHS. Of course, we will not do that, because those are not our priorities. Our priority is, of course, to protect front-line NHS funding.

On the other business of Government, as Ash Regan will know, Jamie Hepburn is working on the matters that she alluded to, and that is important. As I set out in my statement, to get away from Tory austerity budgets for good requires us to have independence.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): There are, understandably, concerns among disabled people that

unprecedented pressures on public finances may impact on the support that is given to them. Those concerns are only exacerbated by UK Government plans to slash sickness benefit, force disabled people into work and axe the post of Minister for Disabled People. What assurances can the Deputy First Minister give to disabled people in Scotland that the Scottish Government will take a different approach here and that the budget will support disabled people in Scotland?

Shona Robison: Bob Doris is absolutely right about the butchering of welfare support by the UK Government. It sees it as the go-to area to cut, which means cutting support to those who are most vulnerable. I am sure that we have not seen the last of that from the UK Tory Government.

In stark contrast, and as I set out in my statement, we are going to support the re-establishment of the independent living fund, supporting those who are living independently and ensuring that more people who want to live independently in their own homes will be able to do so through the independent living fund.

I should add that one of the biggest investments in our budget, as I set out in my statement, is that in social security benefits, which is more than £1 billion higher than the funding that we receive through the social security block grant adjustments from the UK Government. The contrast could not be starker.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): Page 71 of the unredacted budget booklet shows that the funding for "Children's Rights, Protection & Justice" goes up to £53.6 million next year and then falls to £51.4 million. Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that on-going support from the Government for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child implementation programme will last three years and will go beyond the first quarter of next year?

Shona Robison: Yes, I can—but, as I said earlier, we will come back to the matter of multiyear funding in May next year. Unfortunately, because of the difficulties of the autumn statement and the uncertainty around our fiscal position, we have only been able to set out one-year spending plans, by and large. Martin Whitfield will know that implementation of that programme is a key priority for us, and we will ensure that the resources are there to take it forward fully.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): There are cuts to the Scottish Funding Council, the skills budget and student support for tuition fees. There are cuts across the board for all the things that matter most to the future economy of this country.

I will ask the Deputy First Minister about Barnett consequential. Across the UK, the apprenticeship levy raises £3.5 billion annually. That means that

the Scottish Government is receiving at least £300 million in Barnett consequentials for apprenticeships. How much does the Scottish Government plan to spend directly on apprenticeships this year? If it is not £300 million, as business would expect it to be, how much is it?

Shona Robison: There was nothing for apprenticeships whatsoever in the £320 million of consequentials for 2024-25. There was £260 million for business tax cuts, a small amount for social security and £10.8 million for the NHS. There was no funding for apprenticeships, skills, education or colleges. If Stephen Kerr thinks that that is where the UK Government should prioritise its funding, he should have a word with UK Tory Government ministers, who clearly do not think that investment in public services, apprenticeships, skills or anything else is important.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Beatrice Wishart joins us online, to be followed by Graham Simpson.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The Deputy First Minister talks of support for a growing sustainable economy, but today it has been revealed that the Scottish Government is increasing the cost of lifeline travel on NorthLink Ferries, with an eye-watering fares hike of nearly 9 per cent. What comfort is there in this budget for families and communities in the northern isles who are faced with additional travel pressures that will impact businesses as well as individuals who are already struggling through the cost of living crisis?

Shona Robison: I say to Beatrice Wishart that the ferry fares had been frozen for four years prior to this budget, but I will make sure that the Minister for Transport engages with her. There is absolutely no doubt that difficult decisions are having to be made because the money to fund every part of the Scottish budget to the extent that we would want to is simply not there, so we have had to prioritise front-line public services such as our NHS, our council services and our education system. Those are the decisions that we have had to take. If Beatrice Wishart or anyone else wants to come to me with different priorities, they can do so, but they will have to tell me where the money would come from.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The finance secretary has managed to deliver a £29 million real-terms cut to the transport, net zero and just transition budget. What will be the effect of that?

Shona Robison: Tory members have today asked for more money for skills, education, housing, homelessness, transport and net zero. However, Graham Simpson may not have realised that the UK Government's biggest cut to its budget

is to the environment and net zero budget, and the UK Government cutting net zero budgets has a direct impact on the money that is available to this Government. He should look to the UK Government ministers on the decisions that they have made, and, if he does not like them cutting net zero budgets, he should make representation that they change their position. As I set out, this Government will continue to invest in meeting net zero targets and in our transport system, in stark contrast with Graham Simpson's UK Government colleagues.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary says that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will receive an extra £10.1 million for capital spending, but SNP ministers have starved the fire service of funding year after year. It would cost £800 million to fix the crumbling and dangerous estate. Does the cabinet secretary accept that firefighters will not be duped by her budget?

Shona Robison: I know that our firefighters will not be duped by a UK Tory Government that has slashed the justice budget at Westminster. One of the biggest Westminster cuts after net zero, I think, was to the justice budget, but Russell Findlay is demanding that more money be spent on justice services. We will continue to protect our Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and we are increasing the money for it—no thanks to any of the decisions that have been made by his UK Tory Government colleagues.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can squeeze in a question from Mr Lumsden if it is very brief.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I note that the rail budget has been cut by nearly £80 million in cash terms. Can the cabinet secretary explain how a cut to the rail budget will encourage more people on to our railway?

Shona Robison: We will invest £1.6 billion to operate, maintain and improve Scotland's railway. We are investing £147 million in a prioritised programme for Scotland's railway that includes major project enhancements such as East Kilbride improvements and the Levenmouth rail link, alongside development work for further electrification, and we will invest £488 million in the maintenance, safe operation and renewal of the Scottish rail network.

I say again that there is a 10 per cent cut to our capital budget over five years because the UK Tory Government is cutting capital budgets. How does that help Scotland's railways? If Douglas Lumsden does not think that it does, he should have a word with his UK Tory Government colleagues. What we are seeing is incoherence, with Tory members coming here and asking for

spend on just about all areas of the Scottish budget when not a single penny came for any single one of them from their UK Tory masters.

Medication Assisted Treatment Standards

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a statement by Elena Whitham on implementing the medication assisted treatment standards. The minister will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:52

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy (Elena Whitham): Today, I want to assure members that I am determined to continue to work across these benches, across all sectors and across each and every community throughout Scotland to embed the critical aims of the national mission to save and improve lives. My thoughts are with everyone impacted by the loss of a loved one.

I acknowledge the suspected drug deaths figures that were published last week by Police Scotland. That management information report provided an indication of current trends in suspected drug deaths. It covered the period from January to September 2023, and it reported that there were 900 suspected deaths, which is 13 per cent more than there were in the same period in 2022.

I am absolutely steadfast and determined to turn the tide on drug deaths. A real concern for me right now is the increasing appearance of synthetic opioids in the drugs supply. That increase is being seen across the United Kingdom; I will cover that later. Those new drugs, especially nitazenes, are being found in a range of substances, and they bring with them an increased risk of overdose, hospitalisation and death.

That is why the MAT standards are so important. The second annual benchmarking report, which was published in June, illustrated that clear progress was being made in a number of areas of Scotland. I take the opportunity to again thank everyone involved in working to change services for the better. Change is happening. In my meetings with individuals and various stakeholders over the past few months, I have heard about and witnessed for myself the will and drive to improve access to treatment and support. For example, on MAT standard 3, the MATS implementation support team—MIST—is working in collaboration with colleagues from across Scotland to develop guidance to ensure that all people who are at risk of drug harms are identified and provided with support, and to ensure that pathways extend beyond the Scottish Ambulance Service and the emergency

department and into housing, family members and justice and third sector organisations, and include people who use any substances problematically.

It is important to acknowledge the hard work and determination in relation to implementing the MAT standards. However, I do not shy away from the work that there is still to do to ensure that successful implementation is achieved and sustained across Scotland.

That is why, following the ministerial letter of direction that was issued in June last year, I have maintained the requirement for the majority of areas to report quarterly to the Scottish Government. In seven areas, there has not been significant progress, and those areas will provide monthly updates on their progress. However, I do not wish to demotivate or demoralise any member of staff or individuals in those areas, who are working above and beyond to implement the standards, because there have been local challenges to overcome.

MIST is working closely with each of those areas, and I can report that, for most, good progress is being made with a view to the full implementation of standards 1 to 5. It is my intention to meet staff in those areas in the coming months to hear for myself how barriers are being overcome. I have heard from individuals, families and supporting services that our aims are not always translating into positive experiences on the ground, and I will discuss those cases when I meet local leaders.

We know from this year's benchmarking report that standards 6 to 10 require new approaches. I acknowledge that some of those are taking time to embed, but I remain committed to implementation in 2025. What I see, however, is services working together more closely than before. For example, MAT standard 9 criteria and the mental health strategy set clear expectations that people with co-occurring mental health and substance conditions should have access to high-quality and integrated care. Work is on-going to improve care by getting the local foundations right, empowering the workforce and embedding clear lines of accountability. As part of MAT standard 8, we are working alongside Public Health Scotland and experts across the field to ensure that advocacy and support are in place at local level. For MAT standard 7 and primary care—although this can be seen as challenging—areas are exploring different service models such as shared care, non-medical prescribers and better joint working.

Community pharmacy also has a role in improving outcomes for people. For example, there is a programme of work that has been successful in improving education for pharmacy teams on substance use. That includes the roll-out of training on naloxone use for all community

pharmacies and supporting the pharmacy network in Scotland to deliver undergraduate and postgraduate pharmacy training on substance use.

In justice settings, in partnership with others, MIST has led the development of a resource kit to support police and prison staff to implement the MAT standards. There is innovative work going on in HMP Perth to promote recovery and to ensure that those at the highest risk of drug harm are followed up by community services. There is improvement work being undertaken in NHS Highland to support those who are most vulnerable in police custody, offering nursing support at first point of contact. In Kilmarnock, the organisation We Are With You attends people who are in police custody to help them with regards to MATS.

MATS implementation needs to be based on hearing and listening to the voices of people who use services. However, areas need to go further than listening. We need to drive improvement based on the feedback that is gathered from those with lived and living experience. That will often mean making changes to how we do things.

Last week, I had the pleasure of attending the launch of the national collaborative's draft charter of rights. The charter helps people to understand their rights and sets out the kind of actions that public bodies, including the Scottish Government, will be expected to take in the context of the forthcoming Scottish human rights bill. That strengthens efforts that are already under way as part of implementing the MAT standards, and, crucially, it ensures that people are involved in decisions that affect them.

The successful implementation of MATS and our national mission requires a skilled and resilient workforce. It is therefore crucial that services are able to attract, retain and support staff. We are engaging extensively with partners to get a clear understanding of the specific steps that are required to drive improvement. Those steps are set out in the drugs and alcohol workforce action plan, which was published earlier this month. The action plan details the key workforce priorities that we will deliver over the next three years, and I want to offer reassurance that significant progress has already been made towards delivering a number of those.

Although I am committed to ensuring that MAT standards are fully implemented, I fully recognise other emerging threats that we need to be aware of and tackle, including the threat from synthetics such as nitazenes. We have improved our surveillance to monitor drug trends and what is in the drug supply through our rapid action drug alerts and response, or RADAR, system. That has allowed Public Health Scotland to issue two public health alerts this year on specific substances, one

of which was for synthetic opioids. Alerts aim to raise awareness of risks for individuals and families and to alert service providers to deliver vital harm reduction, including the provision of naloxone.

Through surveillance, we have already seen synthetic opioids appear in the supply. Those substances, which are significantly stronger than regular opiates, are a massive concern for everyone, not just in Scotland but across the UK.

In the summer, the UK Government issued its own alert about nitazenes, and, last week, the National Crime Agency published information estimating that, in the past six months, there had been 54 nitazene-related deaths in the UK, nine of which were in Scotland.

I discussed the issue with the UK Government and other devolved Administrations at the UK drug ministerial meeting that was held last month, and I am committed to continuing to work with UK colleagues on the issue. I also recently met international experts to discuss their experience, and I will hold a round-table event with stakeholders to discuss operational issues early in the new year.

We know that naloxone works on synthetic opioids. Therefore, our aim is to continue to increase the number of kits in general circulation, with the public to provide initial medical treatment.

In addition, we are working with our cities to establish drug-checking facilities and the aim is to submit licence applications to the Home Office to allow those to be established in the coming months.

In Glasgow, we are supporting the setting up of a safer drug consumption facility in which emergency care can be offered if someone overdoses. That will be even more important if there is an increase in consumption of synthetic opioids as overdose is more likely due to their increased strength.

In Glasgow, the enhanced drug treatment service treats people with prolonged heroin use who have had little or no response to traditional opioid treatment methods. The service has been evaluated to work safely and effectively, and it has ensured a safe supply of diamorphine as a harm-reduction method for that population.

We have also seen an increase in the use of cocaine and its associated harms. No medicine is available that can act as a substitute, but other types of treatment such as psychosocial interventions and supervised detoxification are available. Third sector organisations are leading the way in helping people with cocaine problems. Indeed, a blog was recently published on the Healthcare Improvement Scotland MAT learning

system website detailing how Harbour Ayrshire, which is a charity, is helping people into recovery from cocaine.

Moving forward, continued implementation of the MAT standards will drive further change. I remain committed to the timelines that have been set out. We must also be alive to emerging threats and services must adapt—as they have been doing admirably thus far—to meet the new challenges.

MAT implementation should remain at the forefront of what areas are doing. The work is saving lives, stigma is being tackled, the workforce is being valued, and areas are sharing learning and best practice. Everything is coming together to save and improve lives.

I must pay due respect to the continuing commitment from parties in this chamber. Members' challenge and desire for change are welcome as we look to full, equitable and sustained implementation of MAT standards in all areas across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. It would be helpful if members who wish to ask a question could press their request-to-speak button.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I thank the minister for the advance copy of her statement—this one was sent timeously.

Last week, data released by the Scottish Government revealed that drug deaths have risen for the first nine months of 2023 by 13 per cent compared to the same period in 2022. It is unacceptable that an additional 103 lives have been tragically lost to drugs.

The Scottish Government is focused primarily on harm reduction and the destigmatisation of drugs. The 10 MAT standards are its vehicle to achieve that, but they are one that it is failing to deliver, having pushed back their full implementation until April 2025.

The minister mentioned in her statement progress with MAT standards 7, 8 and 9, but perhaps the most important MAT standard is standard 1: same-day access to treatment. The standard is to enable people to access treatment or support on the day that they present to any part of the service. However, national drug and alcohol treatment waiting times that have been published today show that five out of 13 health boards did not meet the standard that 90 per cent of people who are referred for help will wait no longer than three weeks for specialist treatment. If health boards and alcohol and drug partnerships cannot

provide treatment within three weeks to 90 per cent of the people, how many are capable of achieving same-day access to treatment—in other words, MAT standard 1?

The minister stated that she is

“absolutely steadfast and determined to turn the tide on drug deaths.”

If that is true, every avenue must be explored. Will the minister finally get behind the proposed right to recovery bill?

Elena Whitham: I recognise Sue Webber’s commitment to and passion for this subject.

Access to specialist treatment is slightly different from access to same-day treatment in the MAT standards. Perhaps I need to do a bit of work to communicate that more effectively. We are making progress in achieving MAT standard 1 across the board, which is very welcome.

Harm reduction is a form of recovery; I do not think that we can separate the two. I am committed to extending access to residential rehabilitation. We have committed more than £37 million to seven capacity projects, and people are accessing those services in numbers that we have never seen before. Last year, 812 people accessed a publicly funded placement in residential rehab, which represented a 50 per cent increase.

I am committed to working with members across the chamber and to considering the proposed right to recovery bill when it is published. I will be interested to see how some of the concerns about unintended consequences that were raised during the consultation have been addressed. I give a commitment to looking at the bill once we see the details of it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind all members who wish to ask a question to ensure that they have pressed their request-to-speak button.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank the minister for advance sight of her statement, although I found it to be wholly depressing.

MAT standards 1 to 5 have still not been fully implemented, and there is no guarantee that standards 6 to 10 will be delivered by 2025. As we have heard, the fact that the number of drug deaths has increased by 13 per cent from last year is simply shameful. Since a public health emergency was declared four years ago, almost 5,000 lives have been lost, so any progress on MAT standards and on the safe consumption room pilot in Glasgow represents steps in the right direction, but much more needs to be done.

The massive cuts to health and social care partnership budgets that have been handed down

by the Scottish National Party Government have resulted in a reduction of men’s rehab services and the planned closure of Turning Point, which provides women’s rehab services in Glasgow. Its funding was slashed by £850,000. Despite the rising number of drug deaths, the SNP has cut funding to alcohol and drug partnerships by £46.3 million in real terms. That tells us all that we need to know about the SNP’s priorities. What is the minister doing to stop the cuts to drug rehabilitation and treatment services so that more people do not lose their lives in Scotland?

Elena Whitham: I absolutely recognise that we have lost far too many people in our country to wholly preventable deaths.

There have been significant increases in funding for drug and alcohol services as a result of the national mission. Funding for drug policy has increased by 67 per cent in real terms from 2014-15 to 2023-24, according to figures that were published by Audit Scotland last year. Although I recognise that there are funding issues, we should also recognise that, since the year prior to when we traditionally think of the services having a reduced budget, there has been a 67 per cent real-terms increase in funding.

Decisions regarding Turning Point and other such services are not taken by the Government, but I understand why people are afraid of what might happen if such a service closes. I am looking for the health and social care partnership to explain how it will support some of the most vulnerable women, especially those in Glasgow city centre, who have multiple and complex needs.

I am alive to all those issues, and I am determined to ensure that the budget of which I have control goes to where it is needed, so that we get the best results for our investment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: A number of members wish to ask a question, so we will need briefer questions and answers.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): During recent engagement with my local ADP service lead, the issue of medication costs was raised. Can the minister provide an assurance that health boards are meeting the costs of medications that potentially save lives, such as Buvidal and naloxone, in the same way that other patient groups have access to life-saving medication?

Elena Whitham: I thank Audrey Nicoll for asking that important question. Buvidal and naloxone are medicines that need to be available everywhere to help to save the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. It is simply unacceptable for health boards and integration joint boards to single out those medicines and treat them differently from all other

medicines. Stigma is pervasive in all areas of our culture when it comes to issues relating to drug use. My officials have met chief finance officers and ADPs to ensure that the costs of those medicines are being provided for appropriately. For boards where there may still be some confusion, we will be writing out shortly to give clear instructions on the need to properly fund the availability of Buprenorphine and naloxone.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare my interest as a practising national health service general practitioner.

The minister's statement today, like many statements that we have heard before, does not actually say anything except that drug deaths have gone up by 103 more people—real people with real families. That is completely unacceptable. The minister also stood there and said that she is

“absolutely steadfast and determined to turn the tide on drug deaths”,

yet her record does not back up her rhetoric. When will we see the introduction of safer consumption rooms in Glasgow?

Elena Whitham: I recognise that, across the chamber, we all want a reduction in drug deaths, and I recognise that each and every one of those people is an individual. So far in my time in this job, I have met several families who have been affected, and I know of far too many people and families who have suffered that loss.

I will remain steadfast. A safer consumption facility is one thing that we can do to support those individuals who are sometimes at most risk of harm in Glasgow city centre and who are injecting in public. We know from the 2016 report “Taking away the chaos—The health needs of people who inject drugs in public places in Glasgow city centre” that they require a safer consumption facility. The Glasgow health and social care partnership is working at pace to ensure that its staff members in place come the spring. We hope that the facility will be open by the summer months, once we have the infrastructure in place.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The minister will be aware that I have been working to ensure that the MAT standards are implemented for rural parts of Scotland, such as Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders. Will the minister provide an update on how implementation is working in rural areas versus urban areas? Will she comment on how stigma reduction work is progressing in rural Scotland through, for example, the important work of local recovery cafes such as those that are run by Borders In Recovery, which has cafes in Hawick, Gala, Kelso, Eyemouth and Peebles?

Elena Whitham: Small teams and those in remote and rural settings have particular challenges. However, ADP areas with remote and rural settings have demonstrated innovation in maximising the use of technology and flexible models of care so that people can benefit from equitable care and treatment. Those in our remote and rural communities have always had the adage that, as my grandpa would say, “Huv tae’ is a guid maister”, and they are very innovative in their approaches.

Emma Harper mentioned Borders In Recovery, which is an organisation that I would like to visit in the new year to discuss how it delivers its support services in that rural setting. I am keen to ensure that our rural services develop.

We know that stigma prevents people from accessing the treatment and support that they need and are entitled to, and that there can be specific impacts in rural areas. Work is taking place locally to reduce stigma, with all ADPs reporting that they consider stigma reduction in written strategies or policies, including the MAT standards implementation plans, alongside a range of other actions.

Nationally, we published our stigma action plan last year, which outlines our plans to develop a voluntary accreditation scheme to tackle structural stigma and to implement a national programme of activity to challenge social stigma. I will keep the Parliament updated on the progress of that plan.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): An evaluation of Glasgow's diamorphine-assisted treatment service pilot found that people who engaged with the service decreased heroin use and experienced improvements in their overall health and wellbeing. Those are very positive signs. The evidence shows that diamorphine-assisted treatment works, but the Glasgow service has helped just 30 people since it was launched in 2019, which is a very restricted capacity. What is the Scottish Government doing to increase that capacity so that more people with complex needs who use drugs can access the treatment, in line with MAT standard 2, on choice?

Elena Whitham: I absolutely recognise the issue that Paul Sweeney raises. The model that is on offer in Glasgow started during Covid, so there was an interruption to the number of people who were brought on board. We know that the number is increasing as time passes after Covid, but I am also aware that there are other models that we can implement across the country. Funding has been made available for projects to carry out scoping exercises in local areas and to look at taking on that approach. I have had discussions with Cranston and other organisations about how that can perhaps be delivered in different parts of the country with different models, and I am willing

to work with any local area that wants to do that. The Government is ready to stand side by side with local partners.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): I remind members that I am the vice-chair of Moving On Inverclyde, which is a local recovery service.

There are important differences in drug-related deaths data collection methods across the United Kingdom. Can the minister speak to those differences, the consequences for the comparability of the figures and the continued steps that are being taken to ensure that improvements in data collection take place in Scotland?

Elena Whitham: The definitions that are used for drug deaths statistics are consistent across the UK, but there are important differences in data collection methods and in the death registration systems that affect the comparability of the statistics, due to there being different levels of missing data across the UK nations. The same comparability problem that is found with identifying drug misuse deaths applies to the figures for all individual substances and drug categories. The drug misuse death definition is the main headline figure that is used in Scotland, but the drug poisoning death definition is the more accurate comparator with the rest of the UK.

The Scottish Government remains committed to improving our data and surveillance on drug deaths and harms through, for example, our rapid action drug alerts and response—RADAR—surveillance system. That system, which has come into its own recently, assesses emerging threats, shares information to reduce the risk of drug-related harm and recommends rapid and targeted interventions.

There have also been great advances in toxicology reporting in Scotland. Ministers in the rest of the UK have looked towards us for leading on that. The more we can identify the substances, the more we can introduce harm-reduction measures.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): The minister will be aware that she carries the good wishes of Liberal Democrat members for her mission with regard to drug deaths.

In November, I raised with her the threat posed by synthetic opioids, which can be up to 100 times stronger than morphine. In the United States, in 2012, 2,500 people died after using them. By 2022, that number had leapt to nearly 80,000 deaths a year. That could be the canary in the coal mine for what is happening in Scotland. There has been an increase in the use of nitazenes, a synthetic opioid, which has been linked to nine deaths in the past six months. Will the minister

commit to more regular monitoring of, and updates to Parliament about, nitazene use and mortality, so that we can be clear whether that wave is about to break here?

Elena Whitham: I have been pondering how we ensure that we collate the information that we get from the RADAR reports and collect from the Queen Elizabeth university hospital's programme, which monitors people in real time as they come into accident and emergency, and examine that information in totality. I am concerned about what might be coming down the line to us. I visited local organisations this week and heard that four doses of naloxone have had to be deployed in a service to reverse an overdose. That is concerning.

I am also concerned about the fact that nitazenes have been found in substances that are not linked to heroin, which means that somebody will not anticipate that they are taking a nitazene. They might be buying an illicit benzodiazepine or using what is supposed to be a cannabinoid-type vape, and nitazenes are contained therein.

I commit to keeping Parliament abreast of the emerging threats, but I will also try to figure out how we respond in an even shorter timeframe.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): In her statement, the minister said that there has been a rise in cocaine use and its associated harms. She also stated that there are no medicines available as substitutes. Other treatment methods are available, one of which is supervised detoxification. Will she explain how supervised detoxification will be delivered and whether there will be a requirement for residential rehabilitation? If there will be such a requirement, will she explain how residential placements will match demand?

Elena Whitham: Annie Wells asks an important question. Cocaine use is rising across the country in different age groups and cohorts of individuals. Although there is no medication substitute for such a stimulant, detoxification can work well. We have committed £5 million per year to look at our stabilisation and detoxification provision across the country. Of that, £3 million is to increase the provision, and £2 million is for a rapid capacity-building fund.

I ask that local areas work together collectively on services so that we can increase the provision of placements for stabilisation and detox, because they are a key part of our mission. They are also the key link between community recovery settings. People might go into the detoxification and stabilisation setting and then on to residential rehabilitation, if that is right for the individual.

I am happy to keep Annie Wells informed as we go along.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):

The MAT standards emphasise a multipronged approach to treatment and recommend residential rehabilitation as a potential course for support. Will the minister provide an update on the progress that is being made on expanding and improving access to publicly funded residential rehabilitation?

Elena Whitham: Following on from the question that Annie Wells has just posed to me, Jackie Dunbar has asked another really good question. We are committed to expanding access to residential rehab. We are investing £37 million in seven residential rehabilitation capacity projects across the country. Through that and other funding over the course of this session of Parliament, we are working to increase overall residential rehabilitation capacity by 50 per cent, which is an increase from 425 to 650 beds.

We are moving at pace to develop a standardised approach to commissioning residential rehabilitation services through work with Scotland Excel, which has also supported us to create an online service directory, which will be available soon, to allow services and individuals to see what is on offer across the country.

We are providing funding to support residential rehab placements, including £5 million per year to ADPs, and additional funding through our prison to rehab scheme and our capacity programme.

This morning, Public Health Scotland published a report that shows a further increase in the number of referrals in the first two quarters of 2023-24, with a total of 477 statutorily funded placements being approved. That is an increase of 126 placements on the figure for the same period in the previous year, when 812 placements already showed a 50 per cent increase in the number of placements overall. We aim to increase the number of statutorily funded placements by 300 per cent over the next five years so that, by 2026, at least 1,000 people will be publicly funded for their placement in residential rehab.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green):

Drug use is not a simple issue, but one that is compounded by factors such as deprivation, poverty and exclusion. What training is being provided to ensure that those interrelated and interlinked issues are being dealt with? Given the minister's acknowledgement that experiences on the ground are not always good, how are we ensuring that, when things go wrong, those situations are evaluated and addressed and, where appropriate, are used to improve knowledge and individual practice?

Elena Whitham: I thank Gillian Mackay for that question, which is a very important one that has several facets to it.

As per MAT standard 8, the Scottish Government is working with Public Health Scotland and experts across the sector to ensure that people who use drugs have access to independent advocacy and support for their housing, welfare and income needs. The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that those who use alcohol or drugs are supported to access services and that staff are trained to understand the wider complex needs of people who use drugs.

In order to ensure that those important and complex interlinked issues are recognised, Reach Advocacy has been awarded funding to deliver training on the implementation of MAT standards as part of a wider human rights-based approach. The training allows front-line staff and managers across statutory and third sector services to develop their knowledge of MAT standards and human rights legislation in order to provide holistic and rights-respecting care.

There is also a fundamental part about really taking on the learning when we recognise where things have gone wrong. That learning can then be cascaded to other front-line services. After hearing directly from front-line services yesterday, I am cognisant of the impact that repeated overdose reversals are having on members of staff. We are looking to support members of staff's wellbeing.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I hold a bank staff nurse contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

As the minister is aware, standard 9 states:

"All people with co-occurring drug use and mental health difficulties can receive mental health care at the point of MAT delivery."

I note that the minister mentioned standard 9 in her statement. Can she give further information on the progress that is being made in implementing that MAT standard?

Elena Whitham: I thank Clare Haughey for the question, because it is on the fundamental aspect of ensuring that people who have co-occurring issues with substance use and mental health are not bounced around services, which happens far too often.

We have commissioned Healthcare Improvement Scotland to produce an exemplar protocol, which will build on best practice from across the country and internationally. It will ensure that every area has access to a high-quality document on which they can base their own protocol. Once the exemplar protocol has been made available to the local areas early next year, HIS will offer strategic change management

support, which will help local areas to adapt the exemplar protocol to their own circumstances, pilot elements of it and then implement it fully. In addition, we will work with HIS and stakeholders, including NHS Education for Scotland, to ensure that we have the appropriate training and data reporting to support and monitor improvements.

By implementing the exemplar protocol, local areas will also be implementing MAT standard 9, with co-occurring support being provided where it is needed. However, the protocol is not limited to opiates or medication-assisted treatments; it will support many more people in relation to their substance use.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the statement. There will be a short pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Ukrainians in Scotland

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11696, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on from a warm Scots welcome to a warm Scots future for Ukrainians in Scotland.

16:25

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am pleased to speak once again on support for Ukraine and the delivery of a warm Scots future for its people here in Scotland. As 2023 draws to a close, it is with great sadness that I note that, despite it being a time of year when we might expect to pay homage to fraternity and peace, so many people around the world continue to experience war and violent conflict, and that so many people will be apart from their family and loved ones this year.

We have all been shocked and horrified by the conflict in Gaza and Israel, but we must also remember that it has now been nearly two years since the Russian state's full invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022. The United Nations has reported that civilian casualties in Ukraine since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion have reached nearly 30,000.

Let me be clear once again that the Scottish Government condemns Russia's illegal war and offers its unqualified support for Ukrainian sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. That solidarity extends to the Ukrainian people—to those who remain in Ukraine and to the many who have now made Scotland their home. That partnership between the people of Scotland and Ukraine remains as strong today as it was at the outset of Russia's full-scale invasion. That is why it is so important that Scotland's Parliament reinforces that solidarity in the debate this afternoon and by supporting the motion.

At the outset of the war, the Scottish Government, keen to ensure that Scotland played its role as a good global citizen, welcomed the United Kingdom's decision to establish the homes for Ukraine scheme to enable Ukrainian nationals and their family members to come to the UK. In order to enable applicants to travel promptly and to eliminate the need for individuals escaping conflict to actively search for sponsors, the Scottish Government opted to act as a sponsor in its own right. We created the Scottish supersponsor scheme—an accessible and secure approach for displaced people from Ukraine to travel to Scotland and the UK.

I take the opportunity once again to thank sincerely all those who have opened their hearts and their homes to displaced Ukrainians fleeing

war. The success of the supersponsor scheme and its wider efforts to support displaced people in our communities could not have been achieved without the overwhelming generosity of our constituents the length and breadth of the nation. Since the invasion began, almost 26,300 people, sponsored by an individual in Scotland or by the Scottish Government, have arrived in the UK. Those figures translate to Scotland having offered sanctuary to more displaced people from Ukraine per head of population than any other part of the UK.

It must be said, however, that the people of Scotland have gone beyond offering our new friends from Ukraine somewhere to live. They have worked alongside Government partners, local authorities, charities and third sector bodies to offer displaced people a real home and a place of belonging in our communities.

The Scottish Government is investing more than £100 million in 2023-24 as part of the Ukrainian resettlement programme to ensure that people continue to receive a warm Scots welcome and are supported to rebuild their lives in our communities for as long as they want to call Scotland their home. That builds on the significant funding that was provided in 2022-23 to support our resettlement programme.

Working with our partners in local government and across civic society, we have used that funding to provide a place of sanctuary for our new friends and neighbours from Ukraine that supports them to integrate fully into Scotland.

At this point, I take the time to congratulate everyone who has been involved in Edinburgh's warm Scots welcome, which is a multi-agency response to the displacement of Ukrainian refugees, on winning the voluntary sector partnership award. I also congratulate all the staff working in the Scottish Government's Ukraine resettlement directorate for the work that they have done this year. It is fitting that, at the recent civil service awards, that team won the excellence in delivery award. There are many fine civil servants in the Scottish Government, but our Ukraine colleagues are certainly among the best and I am proud to work with them.

We can, and will, continue providing further support with unemployment and the cost of living. Displaced people from Ukraine have the right to work in the UK and to apply for social security support from the day of their arrival. The Scottish Government has worked closely with Skills Development Scotland, the Department for Work and Pensions, the third sector and local authorities to ensure that displaced Ukrainians in Scotland are able to access relevant and appropriate employment, training and social security support.

Local authority teams and employment partnerships are active in every council area, offering bespoke and tailored advice to help displaced people to take advantage of opportunities to engage in economic activity and to immerse themselves in our society. Those opportunities also have the potential to be of real benefit to Scotland, with analysis published by this Government in March highlighting the tangible benefit that the migration of people displaced from Ukraine can have on the Scottish economy.

Beyond the economic opportunities, the Scottish Government has always been clear that our friends from Ukraine should be able to access the full array of the public services and elements of life that are available to everyone in Scotland. Those include the right to access the national health service, an entitlement to primary and secondary school education and to the cost of living support and free tuition that are available to students who are already resident in Scotland.

Listing all the services and opportunities that are available would take a long time, because they are the same services and opportunities that we, along with our partners, work to provide to all people living in Scotland. I thank the many organisations and volunteers who have done so much to help displaced Ukrainians access those services and opportunities.

Alongside that, the Scottish Government has taken bespoke measures in an array of areas to help displaced people settle into life in Scotland. That is why we are working to ensure that displaced people do not have to stay in short-term accommodation for longer than is necessary. We are working intensively with local authority and third sector partners to support everyone into longer-term housing.

One example of our efforts in that area is the £50 million Ukraine longer-term resettlement fund, which aims to bring empty properties belonging to local authorities and registered social landlords, and which would otherwise not have been available for let, back into use. I am delighted to confirm that, to date, a total of 16 capital projects, providing 1,201 homes, have so far received commitments to fund improvement works through the fund at a cost of around £24 million, thus delivering strong value for money and, in many cases, providing a longer-term legacy of social housing for Scotland.

I now turn to the longer-term legacy of our Ukraine resettlement programme. Although the Scottish Government of course wishes Ukraine a speedy victory in the current conflict, the legacy of Scotland's efforts to integrate the people of Ukraine into our communities is one that we hope will last. That is why the next phase of our support for those from Ukraine is part of our vision to

provide a warm Scots future, offering Scotland's support in the longer term.

In light of that, the Government published its warm Scots future policy position paper in September. That document sets out our five strategic priorities to ensure that people from Ukraine can play active roles in communities across Scotland and can fulfil their potential in work and education.

Beyond the continued focus on the delivery of longer-term housing, which I have already outlined, our warm Scots future strategic priorities include a holistic and rights-based approach to longer-term integration, in line with our new Scots refugee integration strategy. That approach will ensure a concerted effort not only to support the immediate needs of displaced people but to empower them to regain their autonomy and reduce the vulnerabilities caused by displacement.

The upcoming review of English for speakers of other languages, as part of our adult learning strategy, will be utilised to ensure that the unique experiences of displaced people from Ukraine are acknowledged and addressed.

Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly, our holistic approach to enabling displaced people to engage in healthcare, education, employment and our communities aligns with the national trauma training programme and the mental health and wellbeing strategy. That will ensure that we take into account the specific circumstances of each individual's health, but also the impact that war and the experience of displacement have had on them.

One of our other key strategic priorities in delivering a warm Scots future will be to pursue clarity on routes to settlement, family reunification and repatriation. We have been clear that we want displaced people from Ukraine to be able to make Scotland their home for as long as they need us. However, with immigration being a reserved matter, we are pressing the UK Government for clarity on what will happen as the initial three-year period of homes for Ukraine visas comes to an end in March 2025. Displaced people from Ukraine must not be at risk of becoming destitute if they are unable to return safely to Ukraine after their visa expires. Urgent clarity is needed for Ukrainians on what their options may be, so that they can make informed decisions about where they want to live.

We recognise that many displaced people from Ukraine may opt for voluntary repatriation when it is safe for them to return to Ukraine, and we are clear about the need for support to be in place for them to do so. However, in line with our commitment to deliver a warm Scots future, clarity on visas is also essential to help us to work

effectively with our partners across Scotland to plan for on-going integration and to ensure that Scotland can offer the life chances and opportunities that will help our new Scots to fully embrace their roles in our communities. While we press the UK Government for certainty on visas, we will continue to work with stakeholders to ensure that the lived experience of those who are already in our communities is taken into account.

The motion provides the Parliament with an opportunity to restate its unwavering commitment to Ukraine and an opportunity for us to reaffirm once again that those from Ukraine are welcome here. I had the pleasure of attending the inaugural meeting of the new cross-party group on Ukraine, which is another good example of that support. We will be there for those from Ukraine now and into the future, after victory, as they continue to rebuild Ukraine, whether that is through links with our universities or businesses. I sincerely hope that this Parliament will take the opportunity to make clear again our firm commitment to Ukraine and that it will continue to do so in the months and years ahead.

I move,

That the Parliament condemns, in the strongest possible terms, the illegal Russian war against Ukraine; reiterates its firm solidarity with the people and government of Ukraine; pays tribute to the significant contribution made by the organisations, people and communities across Scotland that have opened their hearts and their homes to support Ukrainians to settle in Scotland; welcomes the publication of *A Warm Scots Future Policy Position Paper*, which outlines the Scottish Government's strategic approach to transitioning from an emergency response to Russia's illegal invasion, to a long-term, holistic and rights-based approach that supports the integration of people displaced from Ukraine, so that they have the opportunity to rebuild their lives, play active roles in communities across Scotland, and fulfil their potential in work and education, and declares unequivocally its position that all Ukrainians who have made Scotland their home are welcome for as long as they need.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I gently remind those members who intend to speak in the debate but have not yet pressed their request-to-speak buttons to do so now, or as soon as possible.

16:37

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I welcome this debate and the opportunity, which the cabinet secretary mentioned, for Parliament to reaffirm in the strongest possible terms our solidarity with the people and Government of Ukraine. The United Nations human rights monitoring mission in Ukraine has estimated that, since President Putin and the Russian military launched their full-scale armed attack against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, at least 10,000 civilians have been killed, including more than 360 children, and over 18,500 have been injured. As we prepare for Christmas

and think about a peaceful time here in Scotland and across the UK, I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the scale of the horror that is being faced by men, women and children in Ukraine at the moment.

It is estimated that around a quarter of civilian casualties have occurred not on the front line, but due to attacks with missiles and loitering munitions predominantly launched by Russian armed forces. In the deadliest such attack this year, a missile that was launched by Russian armed forces struck a funeral reception in Hroza village in Kharkiv Oblast on 5 October, killing 59 civilians, in total violation of international humanitarian law. That attack, although it was more lethal, aligns with a pattern of several attacks in which powerful missiles have struck populated areas that are under the control of Ukraine, resulting in multiple civilian casualties and significant damage to civilian property and infrastructure.

It has been estimated that the number of Ukrainian and Russian troops who have been killed or wounded since the war began is nearing half a million. The situation in Ukraine remains appalling, and the brutality that has been visited on its people defies belief. It is important that we stand with the people of Ukraine and ensure that their concerns are heard in our Parliament today. Humanitarian concerns over events in other parts of the world at this moment must not detract from the situation in Ukraine or diminish our complete support for its Government and the country.

I am proud of the fact that, from the outset, the United Kingdom has stood shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine and been at the forefront of helping its people and Government. We were—and continue to be—one of the main countries that have provided military equipment and training after the Russians seized Crimea, and we have supported Ukraine through the build-up to the war as they have resisted the invasion. It is vital that we continue to provide that support for as long as it takes.

As I have stated, the human impact of the war is stark. Around 6 million people—a record—have been displaced from Ukraine across Europe, and 5.1 million are displaced within the country. Poland has had the highest number cross its border from Ukraine, at around 13 million; Russia is hosting around 1.3 million people; and Germany is hosting around 1.1 million.

As has been mentioned, the United Kingdom has also offered sanctuary. Around 209,000 displaced people from Ukraine are in the UK. The Scottish Government's latest statistics suggest that around 26,000 of those are here in Scotland for sanctuary.

Across our public services, we have stepped up to provide that in all our communities. As the cabinet secretary has done, I pay specific tribute to those who have put in that work across our local government. From the outset, Edinburgh members who have undertaken visits to various schools and to the ship that was in Leith have seen that in action.

I especially want to pay tribute to the schools that have supported young people. A lasting legacy of the conflict will be the friendships that have been forged between Ukrainian and Scottish children. That will last forever.

Councils have worked closely with their partners across the public, voluntary and community sectors to provide that support, and I want them to be highlighted in the debate as well, because there has been a community uprising in providing that support. Often, many people do not take the support that the Government offers, but communities raise funds and make sure that individuals are supported. We should acknowledge that.

However, as my amendment notes, specific concerns have been expressed by charities and organisations about the housing issues that are faced by many displaced Ukrainians—and Scots—who, currently, are placed in temporary accommodation. Finding sustainable solutions to that problem is critical, as other debates on the issue have highlighted. I hope that the consensus that the cabinet secretary has asked for will mean that all the motions in the debate are supported across the parties, because it is important that we register that we need to continue to focus on the housing element, for Ukrainians and also Scots who are in temporary accommodation.

As the cabinet secretary has said, it is important that there is recognition of the work that is undertaken by local support groups the length and breadth of the country. In addition, as the cabinet secretary has done, I put on record the fact that the Scottish Parliament has finally established a cross-party group on Ukraine. Those of us who were at its first meeting saw the passion of those who were involved. I was very much taken by the full support for Ukraine of the other consuls general who attended that event. I welcome the establishment of the cross-party group. I am not sure whether Colin Beattie will speak in the debate, but I put on record my tribute to him as a catalyst for the creation of the group. Colin Beattie, Paul O'Kane, Alex Cole-Hamilton and I will co-chair that group, but I hope that other members from across the Parliament will join it, because, for as long as the war continues, it will, I hope, give the concerns and voices of people from Ukraine who live in Scotland the opportunity to be heard at the heart of Parliament.

The people of Ukraine are fighting not only for their freedom but for the cause of freedom, and we must make sure that they prevail. I hope that the debate—just before Christmas—has given the Parliament the opportunity once again to put on record our full-hearted support for the people of Ukraine, their Government, and the sanctuary that Scotland will continue to offer.

I move amendment S6M-11696.2, to insert at end:

“; expresses concern for the situation being faced by many thousands of displaced Ukrainians and other people living in Scotland, who are currently placed into temporary accommodation; commends the work done by local support groups, which have been established to help support Ukrainians living in Scotland; welcomes the establishment of the Scottish Parliament’s Cross-Party Group on Ukraine, and further welcomes the UK Government’s unwavering support for Ukraine by issuing visas for almost 250,000 displaced Ukrainians, and by pledging to providing Ukraine with £4.6 billion in military aid, £347 million in humanitarian assistance and £100 million to support the Ukrainian economy.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Paul O’Kane to speak to and move amendment S6M-11696.1. You have around five minutes, Mr O’Kane.

16:44

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): It has been 663 days since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and it has been 3,589 days since Ukraine’s sovereignty was first violated during the illegal annexation of Crimea on 20 February 2014. It remains now, as it was then, an unacceptable and despicable act to launch such aggression on the European continent for the first time in many of our lifetimes. It remains vital, as it was then, to stand side by side with the people of Ukraine and to provide them with the support needed by those who have remained in Ukraine and those who have had no alternative but to flee from Ukraine and seek refuge elsewhere in the world.

Indeed, as we have heard already in the debate, we have welcomed into this country those who were fleeing bombs, artillery and missiles. That was the very least that we could do to demonstrate our firm solidarity with the Ukrainian people. We must continue to offer such a welcome for as long as Ukraine remains unsafe and its people are unable to return home. Those people should know that they have the option of a home in the United Kingdom and that Scotland is a safe place that is available to them with all the support that they would need.

During the debate, we have heard about the important initiatives that Parliament has carried out during the time that I outlined. I add my voice to those of colleagues from across the chamber who

have spoken about the strength of the cross-party group on Ukraine, which was established just this month in the Parliament. I hope that it will be a strong vehicle that will allow all of us across the Parliament to offer solidarity and support to the people of Ukraine.

The move by the Scottish Government to establish longer-term support for Ukrainians in Scotland beyond the emergency phase is correct and necessary. It is incumbent on the Government to ensure that the voices of Ukrainians in Scotland are listened to when constructing and implementing that support, and to ensure that the programme of work is carried forward at pace, with all the appropriate resourcing that we would want.

My amendment notes and seeks to add to the Government’s motion. We applaud all ordinary Scots who have welcomed Ukrainian refugees into their homes. It is important to put that on the record in the debate and in the amended motion. When the call for help came, people across the country answered it and demonstrated the very best of us. Their on-going support should never be forgotten in this chamber or elsewhere in Scotland, because it was the ordinary people of Scotland who rose to answer that call and brought people into their homes.

As we move to a longer-term strategy to support those Ukrainians who have come to Scotland as a result of the invasion, it is important that we face up to and solve many of the challenges that are in front of that strategy. We have already heard reference from Miles Briggs to housing being one of the bigger challenges that we know exist. There is a housing emergency in Scotland, and research conducted by Heriot-Watt University for the British Red Cross has shown that Ukrainians are four times more likely to face homelessness than the wider population. That sits on top of previous research from the British Red Cross, which was published back in March, which showed that many Ukrainian refugees were living in inappropriate accommodation.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): In the interests of a more rounded debate, will the member acknowledge that some of the issues with housing came about because the UK took so long to open its borders that it withdrew the local government resettlement fund tariff, which is available to help local authorities resettle people, and that Scotland has taken nearly 20 per cent of all Ukrainians who have come to the UK? Would that not add some pressure to the housing situation in Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You may have the time back.

Paul O’Kane: I am grateful, Presiding Officer.

I would not deny much of what Mr Brown has said about the challenges that there have been with UK support and ensuring that it is available, particularly to local authorities across the country, in a more sustainable way. However, I am coming on to discuss the fact that we have long-standing structural problems with housing in Scotland, which is compounding the issues with the opportunities and options for local authorities to provide housing more generally to those who come to our shores seeking asylum and refuge.

Although I accept some of those points, the wider one is that much of the money that has been passed down from those funds is not ring fenced. Although I appreciate that the Government would not seek to ring fence funding, it means that local authorities that are already stretched have to spread that money more thinly to ensure that they can provide more housing options across all their estates.

There are significant challenges. We will need to reflect on today's budget. Initial analysis shows that it includes a 32 per cent reduction on housing spending. We will have to have a serious conversation about that in the broader context that I referred to in reply to Keith Brown's intervention.

I am conscious of the time and, indeed, the consensual nature of the debate, which I think is vital, so I will conclude my remarks.

Consideration must also be given to education, healthcare and other services that allow people from Ukraine who live here in Scotland to have access to as normal a life as possible.

The Parliament must ensure that we reaffirm our supportive and welcoming attitudes to people who are fleeing war, violence and persecution, that we stand full square with Ukraine against Russian aggression, and that we advance our warm welcome by putting in place all the structures and support that are required to make that a genuinely deliverable outcome.

I move, amendment S6M-1196.1, to insert, after "home and welcome":

“; applauds ordinary people in Scotland who have worked tirelessly to give Ukrainians fleeing conflict a warm welcome in their own homes; notes with concern that Ukrainians are four times more likely to find themselves facing homelessness than the wider population, and calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that a workable plan is fully implemented to enact long-term strategies to allow Ukrainian refugees to access vital housing, education and healthcare”.

16:51

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I declare an interest, having been a sponsor or host under the homes for Ukraine scheme for

nine months and also having been placed under official sanction by the Russian Federation.

I thank the Government for bringing this important debate to the chamber. In an excellent speech at the start of the debate, the cabinet secretary said that, right now, there is tight competition for the worst place in the world. She rightly mentioned Gaza, but also right up there would be the east bank of the Dnipro river, where the fighting men and women of Ukraine have established a tiny bridgehead from which they hope to launch a full-on counter-offensive. We wish them well in that regard. They are fighting not only for their own sovereignty but for the free democracies and the principal democracies of the entire world.

As, today, we remember the refugees to whom we have opened our homes, it is important to remember the war from which they are fleeing, because the west is in real danger of suffering from combat fatigue. We see that no more clearly than in the United States House of Representatives debates on the cessation of funding.

Almost exactly one year ago today, I was visited by a combat veteran of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. He gave me one of the best Christmas presents that I have ever had, which was a set of combat insignia patches from his regiment. He did so because my constituency staff and I had helped him and his disabled wife get council accommodation in the city. For several months, he had been living in the DoubleTree by Hilton hotel at the airport. He had an acquired brain injury, having been blown off a tank in the early days of the war.

The veteran's story was really important to my team as regards the swiftness with which we were able to help him and local services wrapped around him. He followed the journey that many refugees make, right into the heart of my constituency. West Edinburgh was the principal point of ingress for our Ukrainian guests, with many of them having arrived at Edinburgh airport. There they were met by volunteers at the Ukrainian welcome desk. Not many of the volunteers spoke Ukrainian, but they soon learned enough to make people immediately feel welcome. Refugees embarked onwards to the Ukrainian welcome hub at Gogarburn house, which I know that a number of my Edinburgh colleagues have visited. People like Alistair and Gavin would welcome them there—so much so that a baby who was born in that house was actually named Alistair, after one of the City of Edinburgh Council workers who had made his parents feel so welcome.

I know that my experience of being a host has been life enriching in ways that I could not have

imagined. I know that several other members, some of whom are sitting in the chamber, who have themselves been hosts, will attest to that. The process has brought cultures together and made people lifelong friends. I look forward to welcoming Olena, who has been our guest for nine months, back to our table on Christmas day.

Across Scotland, thousands of people have opened their homes to refugees in that way. I was full of admiration for the ambition of the Scottish Government's supersponsorship scheme and the warmth of the hospitality that so many Scots have shown Ukrainians in the face of that terrible, oppressive invasion.

I wish we could offer room for more, but we know that capacity has been at full stretch—evidenced, as Miles Briggs rightly said, by the need to deploy the cruise ship in the port of Leith for the best part of a year. In July this year, we knew that one in 10 Ukrainians were still stuck in temporary accommodation, and that is not the new life in Scotland that they would have hoped for as they were travelling across Europe with a visa and a dream of home.

I wish to attend specifically to the subject of transport, which has been problematic in the context of finding homes for our Ukrainian guests. I have long called for the free bus travel scheme to be extended to anyone who is here on a refugee scheme, particularly given the needs of our Ukrainian guests. In the programme for government last year, the First Minister promised to work with third sector partners and local authorities to consider how best to provide free bus travel to asylum seekers and refugees, including displaced people from Ukraine. In October this year, Patrick Harvie said that he would seek to make free bus travel available to people seeking asylum in Scotland. There is still nothing concrete in place, however. Today's budget had room for just one mention about the scheme, but nothing black and white. I hope that, in her closing remarks, the minister might make reference to where the Government is on the scheme, which I think is really important for the settlement of those people.

I will finish where I started, on the east bank of the Dnipro. All of us who enjoy the comfort and freedom that democracy brings owe those fighting men and women a debt that we will never be able to repay.

Slava Ukraini!

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

16:56

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): It is two years since the invasion began, and much of the talk about the invasion in the media now, particularly in the light of other world events, is about war fatigue—the idea that public willingness to support Ukraine in the west is somehow beginning to slow down. I hope that that is not the case, and today's debate is a chance for us to show that it is not the case here in Scotland. We need to show that we are reiterating our commitment as a nation to supporting the independence of Ukraine, first on its own merits, but also in order to protect human life. It is absolutely right that the motion states that clearly.

In relation to unity and consensus, I regret that there are comments in the amendments that are critical of the situation, noting the points that I have made about how slow the UK was to open its borders, the fact that support has been taken away from local authorities and that Scotland has managed to accommodate around 20 per cent of all Ukrainians who have come to the UK. If we are going to make wider points, that undermines the ability to adopt a consensual approach.

Although we may feel powerless in the face of these huge events, there is of course action that we can take as individuals, as Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned. For my part, I took in a Ukrainian family. I thought that I would end up with an older gentleman—someone too old to serve in the war—but I in fact ended up with a family, including two children and a dog. I had them in my home for a number of months this year and we managed, over that time, to find new accommodation and employment for them, which is very commendable. The children of the family received one-to-one English lessons at school, which was necessary, and the adults undertook language lessons, too. It was interesting to have them come back and ask me about the meanings of words like “drootit” and “dreich”—both of which they seemed to master, although they could not quite get the meaning of “nae bother” until we explained it. Anyway, they were given some Scots language teaching, too.

In October last year, Ukrainian refugees in my constituency organised a fair as part of their celebrations of Ukrainian Cossack day. I cannot speak for every Ukrainian refugee in Scotland, but it is my view that most of them have received a very warm Scottish welcome, with Scotland taking in 26,200 displaced Ukrainians, the most per head of any UK nation. I think that that is worthy of comment and commendation. For those who choose to continue to make Scotland their home, we must turn that into a warm Scottish future. The

policy position paper recognises the need to work across the different layers of government.

Many members have mentioned Edinburgh. In my area, Clackmannanshire Council, a small council, won an award last year for its refugee integration scheme, so that is the right approach to take. The same approach now needs to be taken by the UK Government, and it needs to provide clarity on what happens when the three-year visa period that is available to Ukrainian refugees comes to an end. Paul O’Kane spoke about that, and I will mention a text that I got from a constituent of mine. They have now been rehoused, and they have the opportunity to move into social housing. Paul O’Kane rightly said that we should hear the voices of Ukrainians. My constituent says that, last week, they went to view social housing that had been offered to them, which was half the price of the accommodation that they were currently in. They had to accept it within a day, however. It is a three-bedroom house for a monthly fee of half of what they currently pay, but it requires complete renovation, painting and carpeting. All that work must be done before they can get the 15 months before the rent freeze starts. They also have to buy a freezer, washing machine, cooking stove and so on.

That is difficult in any event, but to do that work without knowing whether they will still have the right to stay in the country in a year’s time is virtually impossible. The same inhibition affects the Scottish Government. How can it be asked to make long-term plans if it does not have the security of knowing that those who are currently here have the right to stay? There needs to be reassurance and an understanding of the trauma that refugees have been through in the first place. That trauma is compounded by not letting them know that they will be safe to stay here if that is what they require and want to do.

The uncertainty that I know is causing distress for Ukrainians also prevents local authorities and third sector organisations such as Forth Valley Welcome in my constituency from adequately planning services, as they do not know how long people will be able to stay in Scotland, or if there is a risk of displaced people being made destitute under UK rules.

I urge the UK Government to step up to support Ukrainian refugees, as the people of Scotland have done. I say to colleagues that, by supporting the motion, we can show that Scotland, and all the political parties in it, remain committed to Ukrainian independence and supporting Ukrainian lives, whether they are here in Scotland or in Ukraine. I urge members to support the motion in the cabinet secretary’s name.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The time that we had in hand has pretty much been exhausted,

so I would be grateful if members could stick to their speaking time allocations.

17:01

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Christmas is the perfect time to have this debate, because it reminds us how much Ukrainian people’s lives have been upturned by Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine. Russia’s illegal invasion forced families from their homes and wrecked hundreds of thousands of innocent lives. It is hard enough for most of us to imagine having to hastily flee our homes, even temporarily, at Christmas, but that is the reality for the brave people of Ukraine all year round. Their Christmases are not the same, but neither are their Mondays or Tuesdays. Every single day, they suffer the terrible consequences of Putin’s war.

Ukrainians have approached the war with admirable defiance. They have been an inspiration not only in the defence of their homeland but in the way that they have settled and continued their lives. The numbers are stark, but they do not truly do justice to the scale of what has happened. There are 8 million Ukrainian refugees across European countries. Almost 250,000 visas have been issued to Ukrainians by the UK Government. More than 26,000 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Scotland. I applaud all those Ukrainians for coming to our country and becoming a very welcome part of our communities.

None of us can really say how we would handle such a terrible situation, but I hope that we would approach it with the same strength of character that the Ukrainians have. I also applaud the generosity and kindness of Scottish and British people who have welcomed Ukrainians. It has been incredible to see so many people, including members in the chamber, take Ukrainian families into their own homes. They have been made to feel safe and included because of the compassion of local people. In South Ayrshire, approximately 350 Ukrainians have come to live in around 160 households, while in East Ayrshire there are 225 Ukrainians living in 86 households.

I also thank the many local groups and charities that have helped, from schools to churches to local businesses. They have all pulled together to help wherever they can. Barnardo’s has also done an incredible job to support those who have come here. It provides regular emotional support and safe spaces for young people and parents, to help them to understand the trauma that they have gone through. It is an excellent resource, because, as Barnardo’s has noted, many families displaced from Ukraine find that difficult in their support networks where others are also in distress. One quote from a Ukrainian parent sums up the work that Barnardo’s has done. They said:

"I am so happy you helped me to settle. You are my biggest angel in Scotland. I appreciate everything you did for me and my family."

We can be proud of our country's actions at home in welcoming Ukrainians and on the front line of this war. The UK has stepped up with a tremendous amount of support for ordinary Ukrainian people in need of aid, and with vast resources to help Ukraine to fight Vladimir Putin's invasion. Our country has done a lot on many fronts for Ukraine, but problems still need to be addressed for Ukrainian people to rebuild their lives in Scotland.

The Scottish National Party Government must act to address the plight of 7,500 Ukrainian refugees who are stuck in temporary accommodation. That is part of a wider housing crisis in Scotland, but we cannot let those people down. They have already endured such hardship. I hope that the Government will consider and reflect on how it can urgently provide Ukrainian families with the level of housing support that they deserve.

17:05

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I declare an interest as a member of the cross-party group on Ukraine. I welcome the comments about Colin Beattie setting that up in the Parliament. I am also the MSP for Motherwell and Wishaw.

We have a project in North Lanarkshire that has seen more than 80 families come to my constituency to be welcomed into our community, and I commend the work of North Lanarkshire Council. Those families were not only provided with accommodation; that accommodation was fully furnished. There were starter packs and everything that they would need in respect of white goods and support services. Two towers that were earmarked to be demolished by the council were taken over. They have come back into use for the Ukrainian families, who are very welcome there.

Of course, thousands of people have lost their lives and many more have lost their livelihoods because of the Russian military assault. However, Putin is not just about occupation; he is intent on destroying Ukrainian culture, Ukrainian identity and the Ukrainian language in order to eradicate exactly what it means to be Ukrainian. Critical infrastructure has been razed. Make no mistake: what is happening is cultural imperialism. Theatres, places of worship and amenities for public good have been levelled by Russian shelling. Museums have been emptied of priceless treasures.

The invasion is rooted in centuries of persecution. The Ukrainian language and

Ukrainian culture have been oppressed throughout history. In the early 18th century, Peter I sought to eliminate the idea of a separate Ukrainian state. He issued a decree against the use of Ukrainian in religious texts and books. Peter II ordered the rewriting of the state regulations into Russian. Under Catherine II, churches across the Russian empire were ordered to conduct services in Russian.

Following the end of the Russian empire, Ukraine was absorbed into the Soviet Union. The Stalinist purges saw political dissidents—artists, writers and scientists—summarily sentenced and executed. Ukrainian culture was cynically positioned as rural and outdated, and attempts to assert independence were violently quashed.

Only a few short weeks ago, we debated in the chamber the horrors of the Holodomor. Some people still deny what happened during that dark period, but we cannot deny it, and we should not deny what is happening today.

The invasion draws from a legacy of imperial subjugation that seeks to erase Ukrainians. In 2021, the Russian leader published an article in which it was claimed that Ukraine has never existed and that Ukrainians and Russians are one people—one whole. Putin's supporters have been radicalised by the imperialist ideals of their historical predecessors. It is important to note that those ideals are opposed vociferously by swathes of the Russian population.

After the invasion in 2022, troops began to confiscate and destroy Ukrainian history and fiction books amidst the bombardment of modern artillery. Grim historical goals remain the same.

In August 2022, I was honoured to host in the Parliament a cultural leadership dialogue with the Edinburgh International Culture Summit and the Ukrainian Institute. We brought together political and cultural leaders from countries that share a strong interest in strengthening Ukraine's international standing and supporting Ukrainian culture. If Ukraine is to continue, we must reach out now and do everything that we can to support the Ukrainian people and their culture at this time.

17:09

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): In February 2022, when Vladimir Putin launched his brutal, all-out invasion of Ukraine, which was the worst escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war since it began, in 2014, Scotland rightly stood in solidarity with the Ukrainian people. Scots opened their doors in droves and welcomed displaced Ukrainians into their own homes. It is a testament to the generosity and warmth of Scots that, as of October this year, 25,701 displaced people had arrived in the UK with a Scottish sponsor.

Many Ukrainian refugees were housed on ferries or cruise ships such as the MS *Ambition*, which was berthed at the King George V dock in Glasgow, or in hotel rooms up and down the country. As the war continues and emergency measures shift to longer-term thinking about how we supply safe and appropriate accommodation, it is right that we think about how we best settle and integrate Ukrainians in Scotland, keeping a keen eye on reducing homelessness, because Ukrainians are “four times more likely” than the rest of the population to find themselves homeless.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In a desperate attempt to be consensual, I note that the quote about “four times” is actually a UK figure and is not really replicated in Scotland. I am not saying that there is not an issue that we need to challenge, but I urge some caution about that figure, because I do not think that what is happening across Scotland replicates what is happening in the UK.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you some of that time back, Mr Sweeney.

Paul Sweeney: As my colleague Paul O’Kane intimated, we rely on the briefing by the Red Cross for that information. If the cabinet secretary were to furnish us with equivalent Scotland-specific data in due course, so that we could have clarity on the relative position here, that would be welcome.

It is a shame that the Ukrainian resettlement team in Glasgow, where we have the highest number of Ukrainians settled, is winding down its operations when its work is, arguably, more important than ever. In a move that the GMB trade union has called “misguided”, the resettlement team has been told that, from 15 January, it will merge with the general asylum and refugee team. The resettlement team in Glasgow is working on the specific circumstances of Ukrainians to ensure a smooth transition from hotel accommodation. Critically, the team is dealing with a variety of complex pastoral issues that often come with the trauma of war. Part of the plan surely has to be properly funded asylum and refugee services, and the cuts to provision in Glasgow will significantly harm the efforts to resettle and integrate Ukrainians in the city.

Glasgow recently became the second city in Scotland to declare a housing emergency. With years of chronic underfunding in social housing supply, it is imperative that the declaration of a housing emergency by Glasgow leads to a swift house building plan. Therefore, it was disappointing to hear just a few minutes ago, in the budget statement, that the Government has announced, in effect, a 32 per cent cut in cash terms to the capital funding of housing over the past two years. That has been compounded by a 15 per cent rise in construction costs in 2022 and

a 25 per cent rise in costs in 2021. That is a severe and significant erosion of purchasing power for housing supply in this country, which is completely unacceptable. When set against, for example, the £100 million contract for cruise ship hire, it highlights a lack of long-term planning and financial management to allow for the best effect and best utilisation of public funds to achieve the best outcomes for the people we are trying to help.

I was particularly alarmed by the plan for Balmore Road in Glasgow’s Possilpark district, where 1930s tenement homes that were originally destined for demolition, with the sitting tenants transferred to other housing stock, were suddenly saved and funds became available to renovate them to provide housing for Ukrainian refugees.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Will Paul Sweeney take an intervention on that point?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member cannot give way. He is beginning to wind up.

Paul Sweeney: I am afraid that I do not have time to address that point in detail with Bob Doris, but that is a fine example of the haphazard approach to planning. Although it is right and proper that capital is invested to transform void properties, the Balmore Road example shows that it risks coming at the expense of community cohesion, with a lot of complaints being raised locally about that if it is not done properly.

We will get resettlement right only if we increase housing stock at pace, bring unused properties back into use and build new social housing across the country. We owe it to the Ukrainian people, who have fled the most tragic of circumstances, to ensure that they do not end up without a roof over their heads and that we do so in the most constructive and cohesive way possible.

17:14

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): The war in Ukraine continues to shock, upset and worry us. We continue to feel and share great admiration for the people of Ukraine as they continue to fight for democracy, the rule of law, their culture and their country. Their struggle is our struggle, and we stand with them.

In that spirit, the Scottish people, the Scottish Government, the UK Government and all the authorities that are involved—in particular, I pay tribute to the City of Edinburgh Council—are due a huge amount of praise and respect for the fact that more than 26,000 displaced Ukrainians have come here and been able to establish their lives.

Like the cabinet secretary, I pay tribute to the civil service for its work in that regard, and

specifically two officials I had the privilege of working with—Alison and Miriam—for the remarkable job that they did.

MS Victoria was docked in Leith in my constituency for around a year. I pay tribute to the matching teams of both the Scottish Government and the City of Edinburgh Council, and to Alistair, who Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned. All those individuals, and their colleagues, have rightly won awards for their work, and we should respect and admire them for their commitment and achievement.

MS Victoria being based in Leith meant that my constituency played a significant role in welcoming the 26,000 displaced Ukrainians to our communities. I had the privilege of meeting many on board, as well as meeting local and national organisations that were assisting individuals to settle here, including One Parent Families Scotland.

I received very positive feedback from our Ukrainian Scots about the welcome that they had received, the support that they had been given and their being enabled to contribute to our shared society. They established support networks and became very established in a number of schools, particularly Victoria primary school, which Miles Briggs mentioned. Many Ukrainians took up employment in Edinburgh and contributed a lot; many continue to do so.

When all the Ukrainians had to disembark the ship, a challenge was presented. I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for the Government's engagement with me and my office through that process. Many people had to move out of Edinburgh, some of them reluctantly. That needs to be considered. The work that went into converting 1,201 unused houses so that they could be brought back into use included some in Edinburgh—the £24 million of funding for that made a difference here in Edinburgh—but the situation emphasised the particular challenge of housing that we have in the capital, which I talk about regularly in Parliament. I very much welcome the £550 million in the next financial year for the affordable housing supply programme. If any of that can be given strategic prioritisation in Edinburgh, that would make a difference for everyone here.

I declare an interest as a member of the cross-party group on Ukraine, and we will look to work with the Government on the Ukraine longer-term resettlement fund and its utilisation. I look forward to that.

I will close with some words from Andrii Kuslii, the Ukrainian consul at the consulate in Edinburgh, which is in my constituency. He said:

“Scotland's commitment to supporting Ukrainian citizens in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine serves as a powerful symbol of solidarity. By offering comprehensive assistance, Scotland stands unwaveringly with the people of Ukraine, extending a message of hope and unity. The actions of the Scottish Government and its partners not only provide immediate relief but also send a powerful message to the world about the importance of coming together to support and protect vulnerable populations during times of Russia's war against Ukraine. The people of Scotland and the Scottish Government deserve our deepest gratitude for their unwavering support during this tumultuous period for Ukraine.”

Let us keep supporting the people of Ukraine as best we can.

17:18

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Just a week ago, we were here discussing the human rights of asylum seekers in Scotland. Many colleagues highlighted the important contribution that asylum seekers and refugees have made and will continue to make to our communities. We know that those who fled Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and sought sanctuary and refuge here in Scotland have already made valuable contributions to our communities, our culture and our country.

We should be proud that Scotland has stood resolutely with Ukrainians fleeing war. We should be proud that more than 25,000 displaced Ukrainians have been supported here. We should be proud that we opened our hearts and homes to so many people in perhaps the greatest humanitarian protection that we have ever undertaken.

I am very grateful to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, individual local authorities, the Scottish Refugee Council and others in the third sector who have worked together over the past 21 months to develop a warm Scots future. Strategic planning and the implementation of those plans are everyone's responsibility.

We talk about our tradition of hospitality and welcome and about Scotland being a nation of immigrants, but that tradition and culture is clearly under threat, given the actions of, the legislation that has been passed by and the approach that has been taken by the UK Government, which is desperate to undermine us. We must keep doing things differently here.

Although we applaud the generosity of people opening their homes and families to those in need, this issue is too important to leave to individual actions alone. A warm Scots future represents a shift to looking ahead, with the focus being on the integration of Ukrainian refugees in all aspects of Scottish life. We want them to be able to play active roles in communities across Scotland and to have the opportunity to rebuild their lives and fulfil

their potential in work and education. The strategy highlights the importance of education, which must be accessible for people of all ages, from childcare provision to postgraduate degrees.

We need a warm Scots future in spirit, but we need it in reality, too. The homes that we provide need to be literally warm in winter and not too hot in summer. Quality housing is a key foundation for a thriving future, as others have highlighted. I hope that we can build on schemes such as Aberdeen City Council's use of the Ukraine longer-term resettlement fund to bring up to 500 homes back into use across the city. Of course, when those homes are no longer needed by Ukrainians, they will be retained as part of the city's social housing stock for others in need.

Our response to the war in Ukraine showed our capacity for imagination, empathy and solidarity. People faced experiences beyond our comprehension, and we pulled together. We have collectively learned about trauma, community building and the strength of the bonds of our shared humanity. Over the coming years, we will need to build on all that and more, as we will see an increasing number of international crises: wars over territory and scarce resources, natural disasters and climate catastrophe.

What we have learned over the past two years can help us to facilitate deep and lasting support for Ukrainians and, I hope, for all others who need sanctuary and refuge, because our commitment to a shared humanity must be for all people, not just for those who are deemed worthy.

The work that we do will be complemented by work on the international stage on peacemaking, on mitigation of and adaptation to climate change and on reconstruction that is based not on corporate enrichment but on grass-roots participation and democracy. We must grasp the opportunity to show feminist foreign policy in action.

We should be proud of what we have done in Scotland, but we must always strive to do more. We must be acutely aware of wars, oppression and climate effects across the world and of the people affected. They are equally in need of sanctuary—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Maggie Chapman: —and are equally able to contribute to Scotland's future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Again, I encourage members to stick to their allocated speaking time.

17:23

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate in support of the Scottish Government's strategy to help Ukrainians living in Scotland to settle in communities and gain longer-term housing. Since the invasion of Ukraine, Scotland has offered sanctuary to more than 26,000 people from Ukraine who have arrived with a Scottish sponsor, and more than 20,500 of them have arrived through the supersponsor scheme.

In the West Dunbartonshire part of my constituency, 241 Ukrainians have settled, including 209 in council-owned homes. The local council is developing proposals to make another 60 properties available for Ukrainians in 2024.

The Scottish Government has made it clear that it is following a different path from the one that the UK Government follows when it comes to refugees—one that treats them with compassion, kindness and dignity. Those are the values of many Scots across our country, and it has been truly heartwarming to witness communities across Scotland welcoming Ukrainians with open arms.

In my home town of Clydebank, I have witnessed that welcome with my own eyes. Ukrainian refugees have not just been welcomed; they have been treated as equals and shown that they have a future in our community. Old Kilpatrick Food Parcels' community hub and Chatty Cafe, which are run by Maureen Cummings and her amazing team, are a great example of that.

In 2022, Maureen and her team decided to make up a food parcel for a young Ukrainian family living in a hotel in West Dunbartonshire. Although that was welcome, the family had no appliances to cook meals in the hotel and were desperate to make a home-cooked meal, so the Old Kilpatrick Food Parcels team put together a list of the ingredients that were needed to make a traditional Ukrainian meal, sourced the food and then opened its Chatty Cafe kitchen to the family to cook.

Since that time, the team have held Ukrainian family days, which are growing every month—I have seen more than 30 parents and children from Ukraine get together for food, fun and a chance to bond with people from back home. The mother of that young family has even volunteered in the food bank and helped to translate for Ukrainian families to make sure that they receive food, too.

On mothers' day this year, the team held a special event for Ukrainian families to come together, share food and gifts, chat and have a sing-song and get other people to learn Ukrainian songs. It was a great day. Many of those people will be missing their own mothers this year, so it was a lovely and special moment.

The Old Kilpatrick Food Parcels team has gone above and beyond to make sure that Ukrainians in the community feel not just welcomed, but a real part of the community. The team has made it clear to the community that refugees will be welcomed in Clydebank and will be shown that they have a future there. They are an equal part of our community. I will always be truly in awe of the team, so my sincere thanks go to Maureen and all the amazing staff and volunteers. Their selflessness is unmatched. The Old Kilpatrick Food Parcels team is just one example from many, but it shows how local communities have come together to support people in need.

The Scottish Government's new strategy will build on the initial kindness and compassion that has been shown by residents and will work to ensure that Ukrainian residents can settle in the community in long-term accommodation. Scotland acted swiftly at a time of illegal invasion of Ukraine, so it is only right that we lead the way in giving Ukrainian people a positive future here. With a strong community spirit and Scottish Government funding, our local Ukrainian residents will be able to thrive and have a bright future in Scotland. That is the way it should be: a compassionate Scotland that is there for everyone.

17:27

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Sadly, in recent years, we have witnessed numerous international crises that have displaced millions globally, including the situation in Afghanistan, the on-going crisis in the middle east and, of course, the topic of today's debate: the illegal Russian war against Ukraine. It is now estimated that the conflict has pushed 6.3 million people out of Ukraine, which is the largest displacement of people that Europe has seen since world war two. To put that figure into perspective, it means that almost 1 million more people have been displaced than the entire population of Scotland.

The Parliament has consistently been united in voicing our support and solidarity and in standing alongside our European neighbours for democracy, human rights and the rule of law, at home and abroad. I am proud to say, as others have already said, that Scotland has gone above and beyond in offering sanctuary and support to those who are fleeing the conflict. More than 26,000 Ukrainians are now based in Scotland, and although I dearly wish that the circumstances that forced so many Ukrainians to come to Scotland had never transpired, it is indicative of our welcoming nature that Scotland has supported the most refugees per capita of the UK nations.

Many Ukrainians now have a base in my constituency of Coatbridge and Chryston, with High Coats Court in Coatbridge currently home to nearly 150 Ukrainian families. I must give special mention to the North Lanarkshire Council resettlement service, which has done, and continues to do, an outstanding job in integrating, supporting and welcoming the Ukrainians who are presently based in North Lanarkshire, both in my constituency and in Clare Adamson's.

Last April, I held a "Welcome to Coatbridge" event, which connected new arrivals with a host of businesses, churches and community groups in the area. I intended to name them all, but the Presiding Officer is being really tough on time today, so I will not do that. However, I thank each and every one of them. I feel that it was a successful event, and we also heard that from the Ukrainians who attended. I know that it helped them to integrate into the community.

I thank my office team for setting up the event. I have a surprise visit from one of my office staff today, Donna Simpson, who is in the public gallery, so I want to put on record a wee surprise back to her: I thank her and all the team for the work that they have done, and continue to do, on my behalf in supporting the Ukrainian refugees in Coatbridge.

I mentioned the focus on integration, which is important, because it is now almost two years since Vladimir Putin's devastating actions. Although Scotland has done well at providing emergency accommodation in this dreadful context, we must now look to ensure that people who are fleeing the war in Ukraine are supported to rebuild their lives in Scotland, should they wish to do so. The warm Scots future strategy seeks to do that by providing funding to help provide language lessons, employment services, mental health support and housing support. I reiterate that Scotland can be home for every Ukrainian who is living here for as long as they need and want it to be.

During a recent meeting here in Holyrood with the North Lanarkshire Council resettlement service and a number of Ukrainian refugees who live in North Lanarkshire, visas were raised as being a key concern among not only those Ukrainians, but among all Ukrainians in Scotland. Although the Parliament cannot pass legislation regarding asylum seekers, refugees and visas, it is imperative that we continue to press the UK Government to give clarity to refugees who face uncertainty, as their current three-year visas draw to an end. That uncertainty not only leaves Ukrainians in stasis, but leaves services, local authorities and third sector partners in limbo as they seek to plan for the future in order to best support those who have come here. Will the

minister therefore outline what discussions she has had, and will have, with the UK Government on getting clarity on visas for those who are affected? That will be deeply appreciated by my constituents, among others.

I once again thank everyone in the community, across my constituency and across Scotland who has made a great effort in sheltering people who are fleeing the Ukrainian conflict. I urge the UK Government to provide clarity and security for people who have come here, for the people of Scotland and for the UK.

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

17:31

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): This debate is an opportunity for us all to reaffirm our solidarity with the people of Ukraine, and it is a great honour for me to close it on behalf of the Labour Party.

A concrete solution for displaced people from Ukraine in Scotland has been long awaited. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine almost two years ago, the SNP Government promised a warm Scottish welcome for those who had been displaced. As Keith Brown pointed out, Scotland has been able to host 20 per cent of the Ukrainians who have come to the UK. Ordinary Scots and public service providers have pulled out all the stops and given displaced Ukrainians a very warm welcome and vital support. That is not to mention organisations such as the Scottish Refugee Council, which has been working flat out to help the refugees to find housing in the middle of a housing crisis.

We must now support the amazing actions of Scots and local authorities with a solid, long-term solution that allows Ukrainian refugees to have fair access to housing, education and healthcare. That plan must remain in place for all those who might still be to come as Putin's unlawful war in Ukraine continues.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice pointed out, under the supersponsor scheme, many ordinary Scots stepped up and housed those people who were most in need in the aftermath of Russia's invasion. As Alex Cole-Hamilton mentioned, that was an excellent scheme, under which many Scots opened their homes to displaced people from Ukraine, but it was not a permanent solution.

We must remember that it was the SNP that temporarily housed Ukrainian refugees in boats in Edinburgh and Glasgow because it had not prepared anywhere else for them to stay.

Ben Macpherson: Will Mr Choudhury give way on that point?

Foysoil Choudhury: I am tight for time, but I will take an intervention.

Ben Macpherson: Does Mr Choudhury acknowledge that, in many cases—arguably, the majority—the feedback from the Ukrainian community in the Lothian region that he represents is that those who were on the MS Victoria in Leith had a positive experience and spoke positively about how they were looked after and supported during that period?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Choudhury, I cannot give you that time back.

Foysoil Choudhury: I appreciate Ben Macpherson's intervention. I had the privilege of visiting both the boats—the one in Leith and the one in Glasgow. There was a positive response, but we are talking about a long-term solution.

The people who were housed on the boats had begun to build lives where they were docked. They built relationships, sent their children to local schools and got to know the areas. Of course, the lease of the boats had to come to an end and the refugees who had been housed on them were once again moved to a new place and had to begin again. That was due to a lack of a long-term plan.

Paul O'Kane and my colleague Paul Sweeney highlighted that Ukrainians are four times more likely to find themselves facing homelessness than members of the wider population. That is in the middle of a housing emergency across Scotland, in which the homelessness rate reaches close to 5,000 households a night in Edinburgh alone. I appreciate that, as the cabinet secretary said in her intervention, there could be different data in Scotland; I will await that. Miles Briggs rightly pointed out that sustainable solutions are urgently needed to reduce the impact of the housing emergency on Ukrainians and everyone in Scotland.

A long-term concrete plan is long overdue. The war in Ukraine is not over, and as long as Putin's illegal war continues, Scotland must be both welcoming of and prepared for refugees coming from Ukraine.

The cabinet secretary spoke of the need to support the integration of Ukrainians for as long as they want to call Scotland their home. For true integration, the Scottish Government must ensure that a workable plan is implemented now—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Foysoil Choudhury: —to allow Ukrainian refugees to access long-term assistance, not just—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Choudhury. We now need to move to the next speaker, who is Meghan Gallacher.

17:36

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Presiding Officer,

“We are standing strong. We have deep roots. We can’t be blown over—this is the place where we are grounded.”

Those words will stay with me for a long time, because of a talented Ukrainian artist, Tetiana Hurn. I had the pleasure of meeting Tetiana at the Moira Anderson Foundation in Airdrie when I was invited, along with local MSPs, to see the mural that she hand painted for it.

I thought that the mural would be a section of wall, not a 15m corridor that had been completely transformed into a beautiful woodland scene that creates a sense of calm and tranquillity. The mural, which is now entitled “Spirit of the Forest”, creates a corridor of hope for children and adults who have been affected by childhood sexual abuse. The quote that I read out was written across the top of the woodland scene. When I saw it, I realised that the quote meant just as much to Tetiana as it does to the many people who receive vital support at the foundation. Ukrainian people are strong, they care deeply about their country and they will not be broken by the illegal war that Putin has inflicted on them.

That is why today’s debate is important. We cannot lose sight of the horrors of this war, as Miles Briggs and others highlighted during their speeches this afternoon. Six million people have been displaced, 209,000 have come to the UK and more than 26,000 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Scotland since the illegal war began.

It is right that we reflect on the support that has been offered so that we can continue to offer a safe place for Ukrainian families to live, learn and work. Many Ukrainians, such as Tetiana, have embedded themselves in communities and have already made such an impact by helping and supporting others and using their skills and talents. Sharon Dowey reiterated that when she applauded families from Ukraine who have come over to Scotland. Alex Cole-Hamilton and Keith Brown reminded the chamber that they opened their own homes when the war began through the sponsorship scheme, helped families to get the support that they needed and, of course, passed on the local lingo of “nae bother”.

We know, however, that the Ukrainian refugee scheme has had its challenges, and it is important

that we continue to do more for as long as our friends intend to stay here with us. The cabinet secretary mentioned the collegiate working between local authorities, charities and third-party organisations, and the support that has been implemented to ensure that those who have arrived from Ukraine have access to services, including healthcare and education.

We need to continue to look at the needs of our friends during their time here, and I welcome the cabinet secretary’s intention to look at the real-life experiences of Ukrainian refugees, especially when dealing with the trauma of war and displacement.

Miles Briggs spoke about schools and paid tribute to children who have forged relationships that will lead to many lasting friendships. He also spoke about the Conservative amendment, which raises concerns over current housing issues, specifically about refugees who are stuck in temporary accommodation. There needs to be a focus on that. Although I appreciate that it is outside the cabinet secretary’s brief, the Government must have a focus on driving down the housing waiting lists and ensuring that good, affordable homes are available.

Paul O’Kane mentioned the strength of the cross-party group on Ukraine, which allows MSPs to call for more support and to ensure that we are getting it right for those who have been displaced. The Labour amendment, as it says, seeks to add to the motion the fact that Scots the length and breadth of the country rose to the challenge and welcomed Ukrainians into their homes. We will be supporting the Labour amendment at decision time.

It has been said many times today that, as we approach Christmas, we must remember the people who will be spending this time apart from their families because of the on-going wars and conflicts. As always, my thoughts are with all innocent people who are caught up in those conflicts. That is why I close by reiterating the Scottish Conservatives’ support for the people of Ukraine. We will continue to work across the parties to ensure that Scotland remains welcoming and that we offer a home for as long as it is needed.

We will be voting for the Scottish Government motion and the Labour and Conservative amendments. As Paul O’Kane said at the beginning of his speech, Parliament is at its best when we stand together, so I ask the Scottish Government for a collegiate approach this evening, too.

17:41

The Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees (Emma Roddick): I welcome the general consensus in the debate, as well as the opportunity to share what we have been doing to successfully welcome almost 26,300 Ukrainians to Scotland, which is more per head of population than anywhere else in the UK. That has been welcomed by Ukrainians. As Ben Macpherson said, the Ukrainian consul has called our demonstration of support a strong message to the rest of the world about how to welcome those who are in need of refuge.

Miles Briggs was right to say that we need to give proper consideration to the concerns of Ukrainians living in Scotland. That is exactly what we intend to do and why the cabinet secretary and I engage frequently with Ukrainians in Scotland and those who support them. That is very important, because the responses are often surprising. While we can be sure that employability questions will come up, I have had Ukrainians give feedback that I did not expect—everything from parents being concerned that their younger kids in particular are doing so well with English in school that they will lose Ukrainian, to people enjoying the rain so much that they wish that it would come more frequently.

It is important that we pick up on issues with our programme that we can sort out and that we support Ukrainians not just to integrate into Scotland but to keep their Ukrainian culture and language alive while they are here, so that those who wish to can return and help to rebuild the country after they win the war.

Clare Adamson was right to focus on the destruction of culture. I am glad that a speech in the debate gave time to that issue. The Ukrainians' fear that people will forget Ukrainian or how to play the bandura, or that they will not see people wear vyshyvankas is very real. This year, I enjoyed a demonstration of what an excellent instrument the bandura is at an event celebrating Ukrainian independence day in Glasgow. On Saturday, I was introduced to a homemade Kyiv cake. Ukrainians have so much to be proud of, and I hope that they are able to protect their culture and keep it alive while they call Scotland their home.

I recognise that there is a strong voice of support for Ukrainians across the Scottish Parliament and that many members take a special interest in the matter, whether they are contributing to debates such as this one, joining the new CPG, or taking part in the work of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, which I know—having sat in front of it last week—has been working hard to scrutinise the work that is going on.

Our priorities for supporting displaced Ukrainians must be led by the lived experience of Ukrainians, and that is why we must all continue to listen. Our “A Warm Scots Future” position paper commits us to that, and it reflects the input of Ukrainians who told us what their priorities were moving forward.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: One of the lived experiences of some of our Ukrainian guests has been an inability to access employment opportunities, or indeed housing, because they do not have the mobility to do so. Will the minister reflect on my remarks about whether the Scottish Government will make the discretionary travel scheme available to our Ukrainian guests?

Emma Roddick: I will come to that specific point about concessionary travel later but, when Ukrainians came to Scotland, we opened up social security to them and they have the right to work. We are doing everything in our power to ensure that they have the mobility opportunities to support themselves and their families.

On Saturday, I was welcomed at the Highlands for Ukraine hub in Inverness by Ukrainians and those who support them. I spoke to people about the support, events and opportunities to gather that have been helpful to them. What came across very clearly was the strength of spirit and determination among the displaced Ukrainians who are making their home in the Highlands, in Inverness and Aviemore, as well as the widespread will of the Highland community to help them. That included individuals becoming hosts, trucks being filled with aid to send to eastern Europe and the local Rotary club organising fun and lively acts of kindness such as sleigh rides and contributing to collections for Ukraine.

As has happened in all my recent engagement with the Ukrainian community, the issue of visas came up. People are worried. We can all understand the anxiety of people who have escaped the on-going war in Ukraine and are trying to make their lives here without knowing how long they will be allowed to stay. Keith Brown described that distress, which is also having a wider impact on people's ability to integrate because it is a matter of concern for their landlords, employers, lenders or anyone who wants to see the certainty of a secure immigration status.

Fulton MacGregor asked a question about pressing the UK Government. I have done so many occasions, most recently at a Ukraine trilateral, along with the Welsh Government minister Jane Hutt. There is an on-going and joint effort to get clarity for Ukrainians living in Scotland and across the UK and I hope that the UK Government will provide that clarity as soon as possible. In the meantime, and as the cabinet

secretary has already assured members, we will continue engaging with our valued partners to support displaced people from Ukraine as best we can in the circumstances.

I do not want to fall short of celebrating the work that is being done. As the cabinet secretary noted, our Scottish Government team has been nationally recognised for the work that has been done on the warm Scottish welcome. We welcomed more than 3,000 people to MS Victoria and MS Ambition, the former of which I had the opportunity to visit to speak with residents. That temporary accommodation, which was kitted out to a high standard with services on board, served its purpose of providing emergency, short-term accommodation before those on board could be supported fully by us and our local authority partners to find long-term accommodation. I point out that their experience of life on board was so positive that children drew pictures of the boat, calling it home, and that Ukrainians asked whether we could just keep it there for ever. However, we recognise that temporary accommodation is exactly that and have encouraged and supported people to find suitable long-term accommodation.

Our partners, the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain, the Scottish Refugee Council and the local authorities that have gone above and beyond, have ensured that Ukrainians' experience, from the point where they stepped off the plane until they got into long-term accommodation, was one of Scotland being a welcoming country that supports Ukraine, is glad to have Ukrainians here to stay and wants to help them as much as possible. Like Maggie Chapman, I thank everyone involved, including the many Ukrainians who now volunteer to ensure that others get the same warm welcome.

Alex Cole-Hamilton asked about concessionary travel. We must be clear about the difference between the rights of asylum seekers and those of people who have been displaced from Ukraine. We are looking into how best to provide free bus travel for asylum seekers, because they are not eligible for social security and they do not have the right to work. The Scottish Government opposes both those things. We have consistently called for better support for asylum seekers and are working on a proposal, to be published next year, for asylum seekers in Scotland to be allowed the right to work. Every day, I see the mutual benefits that we and Ukrainians who have been displaced to Scotland get from their right to work. Employers who have recruited Ukrainians often tell us that it was a great move for them to fill vacancies with people who have been displaced by war and are often very skilled and have brought qualifications and experience that Scotland badly needs.

Scotland has been unwavering in its solidarity with Ukraine, and our message today for Ukrainians in Scotland is clear. We continue to stand with you, we continue to welcome you in our communities and we will continue to support you to build new lives in Scotland. Slava Ukraini.

Business Motion

17:50

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-11722, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to the business programme. Any member who wishes to speak against the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for Wednesday 20 December 2023—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands;
NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: A9 Dualling Programme

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish Government Response to the Section 35 Order Judicial Review

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.30 pm Decision Time—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:50

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-11696.2, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11696, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on "From a warm Scots welcome to a warm Scots future for Ukrainians in Scotland", be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:51

Meeting suspended.

17:54

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the division on amendment S6M-11696.2. Members should cast their votes now.

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)
Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

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, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (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)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 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) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 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)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11696.2, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 53, Against 66, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-11696.1, in the name of Paul O’Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11696, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on “From a warm Scots welcome to a warm Scots future for Ukrainians in Scotland”, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My screen did not refresh.

The Presiding Officer: I can assure you that your vote has been recorded, Mr Choudhury.

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)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysoil (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)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)

Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

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, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (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)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Annesland) (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)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 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)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11696.1, in the name of Paul O’Kane, is: For 53, Against 65, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-11696, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on “From a warm Scots welcome to a warm Scots future for Ukrainians in Scotland”, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament condemns, in the strongest possible terms, the illegal Russian war against Ukraine; reiterates its firm solidarity with the people and government of Ukraine; pays tribute to the significant contribution made by the organisations, people and communities across Scotland that have opened their hearts and their homes to support Ukrainians to settle in Scotland; welcomes the publication of *A Warm Scots Future Policy Position Paper*, which outlines the Scottish Government’s strategic approach to transitioning from an emergency response to Russia’s illegal invasion, to a long-term, holistic and rights-based approach that supports the integration of people displaced from Ukraine, so that they have the opportunity to rebuild their lives, play active roles in communities across Scotland, and fulfil their potential in work and education, and declares unequivocally its position that all Ukrainians who have made Scotland their home are welcome for as long as they need.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. We will move on to members’ business. I would be grateful if members who are leaving the chamber could do so quietly.

Coalfields Regeneration Trust

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-09747, in the name of Alex Rowley, on supporting the work of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the publication of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Coalfield Communities' report, *Next Steps in Levelling Up the Former Coalfields*; welcomes the recommendations of the report to support the continued development of former coalfield communities; believes that the work of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust is instrumental in the progress seen in Scotland's former coalfield communities; supports what it sees as the success of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust's work in developing community capacity, mentoring, coaching and supporting grassroots organisations to tackle issues in their communities through the Coalfields Investment Programme, and introducing young people from former mining areas to what it understands are the life-changing benefits of sport, through Game On, which is the Trust's Sport for Change programme, among other initiatives; notes the reported concerns that the Scottish Government plans to make what has been described as a significant cut of £100,000 from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust's funding of £750,000; further notes the Coalfields Regeneration Trust's characterisation of this planned cut as "a devastating blow to communities" such as Kincardine and former coalfields communities across Mid Scotland and Fife; understands that the Coalfields Regeneration Trust's funding has been frozen at £750,000 since 2011, and considers that had this amount kept pace with inflation, it would currently be worth £1,034,658; further understands that a proposed cut of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust's funding in 2011 was reversed due to the damaging impact this would have had on Scotland's former coalfield communities; notes the calls for the Scottish Government to reconsider any cut to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust's funding on the same basis, and to support the future success of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust by offering a secure multi-year funding stream such as that provided by the Welsh Government to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in Wales.

18:00

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank all members who signed my motion to bring the debate to the chamber, and all those members who are participating in the debate tonight.

Established in 1999, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust was set up to support former industrial areas through community wealth building, with a focus on the economic development and regeneration of former coalfield areas. Any member in the chamber who represents a former coalfield area will know about the wealth of activity that the trust has supported over the years.

I am pleased to say that, over many years, the Parliament has recognised the work of the trust. In

2007, a members' business debate on the role of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in Scotland was led by the then MSP Cathy Jamieson. In 2011, the late Helen Eadie MSP brought to the chamber a debate celebrating the trust and the work that it does in former mining communities, and in 2015, Christine Grahame MSP led a members' business debate on the continuing success of the trust.

Since the Parliament's inception in 1999, there have been 112 motions lodged by members to acknowledge and celebrate the work of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in Scotland. As such, it is fair to say that, throughout the trust's existence, its work in Scotland has been recognised, respected and valued by all the political parties that operate in the Scottish Parliament.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that we are living with very difficult financial pressures on public finances, and that often means that local community services struggle to meet local demand and local need.

In acknowledging the difficult financial climate, I emphasise that it is now more crucial than ever that funding is prioritised where it will have the greatest impact. That is why I am calling tonight on the Government to look again at the £100,000 cut that has been made to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust budget. The fact remains that the former coalfield communities still have some of the highest levels of poverty and inequality in Scotland and, in my experience of representing such communities over many years, the payback for a small amount of resource and finance can be significant. We need only scroll through the 112 motions that have been lodged in the Parliament about the Coalfields Regeneration Trust to see the type of impact that a relatively small amount of money can have, and has had.

There are a host of regeneration projects that have made a big impact on local communities and local people. In Fife, the Crosshill business centre is now a place to locate and develop enterprise, as well as a venue for community-based learning and work. It has, over the years, supported hundreds of people into further and higher education and into employment.

The Zone in Dalmellington in East Ayrshire is another great example of regeneration, along with Twechar Healthy Living & Enterprise Centre and Glenboig Development Trust. They are all doing amazing work, and all with the support of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust.

The trust has also had massive success in supporting local communities to build capacity in sport and the arts, and in building projects to help to tackle isolation, in turn supporting communities to support themselves. That is a proud record

indeed for what are, again, relatively small amounts of funding.

Looking to the future, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in Scotland is asking the Scottish Government to provide a capital endowment of £20 million, over a negotiated period of years, to enable the CRT to build industrial starter units for small and medium-sized enterprises. That would create a sustainable, long-term revenue stream to allow the CRT to be self-funding so that it can support former coalfield communities into the future.

The CRT has already successfully rolled out that model in England by building industrial units. That allows it to generate jobs and economic growth in deprived former coalfield communities, delivering real regeneration. The rental income allows the CRT to fund its charitable activity through a secure and sustainable income stream.

I take the view that the best route out of poverty is through education, skills and employment. Many who have experienced generational poverty in some of our most deprived areas require more focused interventions, with a great deal of support and encouragement. Over many years, I have witnessed that type of approach from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which builds that capacity at the community level.

I am asking the Scottish Government to restate its commitment to that work by examining the following requests: to reverse the £100,000 cut to the trust's funding; to change the Scottish Government procurement rules to allow the CRT to reinstate its grant programme, which is vital to many small local organisations and charities in coalfield communities, as has been demonstrated over so many years; and to examine the case for a capital endowment fund that would enable the CRT to work with local communities to drive the skills and jobs agenda at a local level.

Although it is true that we are going through difficult times financially, that is all the more reason to support a tried-and-tested organisation that has the ability to provide direct support at a local level to empower our local communities. We celebrate the trust's work, so let us ensure that it has the funds to continue.

18:07

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I thank Alex Rowley for bringing the debate to the chamber. I, and so many of my colleagues in the chamber, represent constituencies and regions where, for generations, coal mining was the main employer and economic driver of communities, and I am very proud of that.

By the end of the 19th century, Lanarkshire's 200 mines were producing around half of Scotland's coal. Farming villages and hamlets such as Coatbridge, which I represent, and Motherwell, which my colleague Clare Adamson represents, had been transformed into the large industrial towns that we recognise today, with their own communities and identities. As we all know, however, the 20th century was not kind to the mining industry. The second half of the 20th century saw nearly 1,000 mines being closed, which transformed many of those former industrial juggernauts into communities that suffered from a lack of employment opportunities, and from health inequalities and poor educational attainment.

Those economic conditions devastated communities, and it was in that environment that the Coalfields Regeneration Trust was established in 1999. It was set up as a charity, and its mission was to create opportunities and support those who had felt the full effect of mining closures across the United Kingdom.

The need for a trust such as the CRT is clear when we consider the statistics. In Scotland alone, 43 per cent of the working-age population of the Scottish coalfields are claiming some form of benefits, against a Scottish average of 23 per cent. A total of 40 per cent of people in the Scottish coalfields have no qualifications, as against 27 per cent in Scotland as a whole, and the mortality rate in the Scottish coalfields is 25 per cent higher than the Scottish average.

In the near 25 years since the CRT's establishment, it has been invaluable in improving the health, skills and employment for the almost 6 million people who currently live in those coalfield areas across the UK.

My Coatbridge and Chryston constituency has many ex-mining villages, including Cardowan and Moodiesburn, where the community is still impacted by the tragic events of September 1959, when 47 men lost their lives in the Auchengeich mining disaster. I attend, and have the pleasure of speaking at, the memorial event every year. This year, I received the honour of being presented with a miner's lamp from the memorial committee. I put on record my thanks to Richard Leonard for his consistent and constant support for that event. Both Auchinloch and Moodiesburn, which are near to Auchengeich, have been supported by the CRT. I am very grateful for that support, and for the support of members in the chamber.

For the remainder of my speech, however, I will concentrate the village of Glenboig: another industrial powerhouse in the 19th and 20th centuries that felt the harsh effects of the industry's constriction over the past several decades.

I have regular discussions with Teresa Aitken, who is the operations manager of the wonderful Glenboig Development Trust, which Alex Rowley mentioned. Glenboig Development Trust provides the local residents of Glenboig and surrounding villages and communities with a wide range of high-quality health improvement and community-based services and activities seven days a week.

To demonstrate the work of Teresa and the Glenboig Development Trust, I note that she has recently been made a fellow at the University of Cambridge, following her work with the faculty of social innovation there to promote the work ethic of the trust and share its

“practices and successes to help UK and international communities recover and flourish”.

That is high praise indeed, and I am very proud of Teresa and all the team at Glenboig.

When I spoke to Teresa, she was keen to stress how helpful and vital the Coalfields Regeneration Trust has been in ensuring that the great work of the Glenboig Development Trust can continue in the community. I will list just some of the things for which Glenboig has received funding via the trust. They include community gardening and environmental projects, a parent-and-toddler group, older people’s art groups, men’s groups, stress-relief initiatives and food-growing projects. In addition, the trust has provided funding to Glenboig United Football Club and Glenboig primary school parent council, and support for the village park play area.

However, although Glenboig Development Trust is now a successful operation in its own right, it is fair to say that that success would not have been realised without the input of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in those early years, which really saw it through.

Those projects and initiatives are the beating heart of our post-industrial communities, and in truth, I was disappointed to hear that the Scottish Government had reduced the grant to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust by £100,000. What might seem like a meagre decrease in funding in comparison with other budgetary commitments will have huge consequences for places such as Glenboig, which require funding from the CRT to enrich my constituency and the surrounding area.

Restrictions concerning Scottish Government procurement rules—as Alex Rowley mentioned—mean that the CRT is limited in running its grants programme to support smaller grass-roots charities in former coalfield communities. Those limitations have resulted in 13 per cent of charities reporting that their organisations are at risk of closure from the ending of the CRT grants programme.

Those communities have been let down by successive United Kingdom Governments in the past, and I urge the Scottish Government to revisit those funding cuts and procurement rules, as we cannot let these communities down again. I understand—as we heard in the budget statement today—the budgeting constraints that are imposed on us by the ruthless Tory Westminster Government, but I do not feel that these already marginalised and penalised communities should suffer again, and suffer more.

As Teresa Aitken told me powerfully when I spoke to her just yesterday—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr MacGregor, you will need to bring your remarks to a close. You are well over your time.

Fulton MacGregor: Okay—thank you, Presiding Officer.

I finish with Teresa’s words. She told me just yesterday that if the funding is taken from those communities, many of the social impacts that have been somewhat mitigated—poverty, isolation and antisocial behaviour, to name but a few—will return. That will lead to a greater burden on public services in the long run.

I will close there, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr MacGregor. I remind members that back-bench speeches should be up to four minutes.

18:13

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate, and I thank my fellow Mid Scotland and Fife MSP, Alex Rowley, for bringing it to the chamber.

The debate provides a welcome opportunity for us to acknowledge the important work that is done by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust across the United Kingdom. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge the distinct character of former coalfield communities, several of which are located in central and southern Fife, and across Clackmannanshire, in my region.

The motion mentions the all-party parliamentary group on coalfield communities and its report on “Next Steps in Levelling Up the Former Coalfields”. As the report states,

“the loss of coalmining jobs still casts a long shadow”

in those communities. It highlights that, with a total

“population of 5.7 million”

across the United Kingdom, those communities

“are too big to be ignored.”

The report also highlights the problems of social isolation and loneliness in those communities, which often have a large population of older people. However, there are still issues for young people, as opportunities for work and training are difficult to find in those areas. It is clear, therefore, that these communities have particular needs and require particular types of support.

The founding mission of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust is to provide those communities with the support that they need. That includes initiatives such as the coalfield work project, and I acknowledge and commend the work that it does. That project provides important support to people who have become separated from the labour market, and it provides work and mentoring. It has already helped a number of candidates to secure permanent full-time work at Fife Council and the University of Stirling. The success of coalfield work means that it brings the real opportunities that those communities across Scotland need, and that is much to be welcomed. As I said, it gives young people an opportunity to move forward.

Other projects that are supported by the trust's funding include Grow West Fife, which supports low-income families across West Fife by providing them with home-grown produce. Funding from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust will help to invest in that project's future and enable it to continue to grow.

Alex Rowley and other members have mentioned the cut of £100,000 from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust's budget, which amounts to a 13 per cent cut. It was right that previous cuts that were talked about back in 2011 were reversed. More than a decade later, the trust is doing so much important work. It cannot lose that funding, because—as we have heard from other members—that will have a massive impact. The Scottish Government has said that it would like to see the trust move towards a new funding model and explore new ways of funding the grant programme. It is important that, if that happens, we ensure that the money goes where it should, and that is what the Coalfields Regeneration Trust wants to see. I hope that the Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning will reflect on that and provide assurances to the trust in summing up the debate.

Scotland's former coalfield communities have a distinctive character, but they also have distinctive needs. The work of initiatives across the United Kingdom, such as the levelling up fund, have a real role to play in addressing those needs, and local government also has a role to play in those communities.

However, organisations such as the Coalfields Regeneration Trust are at the heart of supporting

those communities. I thank the trust for the important work that it does, which it continues to carry out in the region that I represent and across Scotland. I hope that it will be able to continue to support communities for many years to come, because that is what is required.

18:17

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate, and I thank Alex Rowley for securing the opportunity for us to talk about the Coalfields Regeneration Trust.

It is a pleasure to follow Alexander Stewart, who rightly encompassed the issue when he talked about our coalfield communities being

“too big to be ignored.”

Not only are they big, but they sit at the heart of a network—a jigsaw—that exists across the whole of Scotland, and the United Kingdom. That is important. Even those who may now be far removed from ancestors, parents and grandparents who worked in the mines, or who have moved into the coalfields communities, see the empathy that people in such communities have for each other.

That empathy is personified in the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. I have had the pleasure to work with the trust when we were securing funds in Prestonpans and East Lothian. The trust came out to visit Prestonpans, which is a coalfield community. At the first meeting, someone said, “But there are no pits in this town any more”, to which the trust's representatives rightly replied, “It's not actually about the mines. It's about the communities and the people. It's about what's been left”—or, as Fulton MacGregor so accurately described, it is about the challenges that the closure of pits has brought to our towns and villages.

Through working with the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, a significant number of community groups came forward with brilliant ideas for how to improve life in and around Prestonpans and in other mining communities across East Lothian.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Twechar, in my constituency, has benefited greatly from the CRT over the years. Does the member agree that for young people in particular its work in such communities is incredibly important?

Martin Whitfield: Absolutely—I cannot agree more.

The Coalfields Regeneration Trust does not send out an application form. It comes out to talk and explain things to communities—it finds out

what challenges our young people and older people, and our community groups, face, and it asks, "What would help?" It might be something as simple as getting play equipment for a play park—as in the case in which I was involved. It might just involve getting a bench so that people can sit down and chat together. It might involve providing specialised equipment for disabled children or an accessible toilet for a working men's club that previously did not have one but found itself excluding members as a result. It might—as it was with the Harlawhill Day Care Centre and Pennypit Community Development Trust in Prestonpans—be about helping with recovery after Covid, and assistance with unexpected costs to allow organisations to reopen and go back to being part of the beating heart of the community.

It is a great tribute to the CRT that it is able to talk to the communities in that way.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Martin Whitfield: I am happy to do so.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Paul McLennan—[*Interruption.*]

We need his microphone on. Thank you.

Paul McLennan: To supplement what Mr Whitfield is saying, I, too, have had the pleasure of meeting the CRT in East Lothian, and the key point for me is how it drives community spirit and regeneration.

The trust has worked with a few community councils, such as Tranent and Elphinstone community council and Macmerry community council. It also works with organisations and local charities on community-led regeneration, including Sustrans Scotland, Recharge, East Lothian Foodbank and East Lothian Council. I compliment the CRT on the role that it plays in East Lothian.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for that intervention. Paul McLennan is right—the CRT approaches our communities in the same way as the coalfields communities used to help and assist each other. Sometimes there might have been a slap round the head if someone was doing the wrong thing, but more often than not, it was a bowl of sugar or tea if someone did not have it.

Time is short, so I return to the three asks, which have already been raised. I will concentrate specifically on ask 2, which concerns an amendment to the procurement rules in order to allow the CRT to deliver a grants programme to support grass-roots communities. The CRT provides grants that are worth hundreds of pounds, not thousands or tens of thousands of pounds—although it has provided grants at that level in the past. It mainly delivers small grants that people would otherwise not be able to access,

because they would not go out and ask, or they would not know whom to ask. The CRT helps with that.

I finish with a stakeholder's view which, I think, encompasses all that sits within the asks and within this debate. They say:

"CRT helps us to filter out the loudest people so that everyone gets heard."

That is a massive tribute to a charity that serves communities that deserve to be heard, listened to, and supported. [*Applause.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members of the public in the gallery, although you are our very welcome guests, under the parliamentary rules, members of the public are not allowed to participate in the proceedings, albeit that I appreciate how strongly you feel about the issues that are being discussed. I thank you very much for your co-operation.

18:23

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Alex Rowley for initiating this vital debate, and I extend my welcome to members of the trust, who are joining us tonight in the public gallery.

Coalfield communities are still reeling from the consequences of what happened 40 years ago, when the miners waged a year-long struggle in a fight not just for jobs, not just for pits, but for communities and an entire way of life. Next year, we will mark the 40th anniversary of that bitter dispute, but we will mark it not just by wistfully looking backwards, not just by looking back in anger, but by drawing on that fighting spirit, those values of community and those principles of solidarity and applying them to the challenges that we are facing today.

What a blow it would be if, as we approached the 40th anniversary of that heroic and historic struggle, we sat back and we allowed the Scottish Government to withdraw its support from those very same communities who were hammered 40 years ago. Those communities are still living with the consequences. These are the facts: 43 per cent of the population of the Scottish coalfields are claiming some form of benefit, compared with a Scottish average of 23 per cent; 40 per cent of people in the Scottish coalfields have no qualifications, compared with 27 per cent for Scotland as a whole; and the mortality rate in the Scottish coalfields communities is 25 per cent higher than the Scottish average.

Does the Government think that that is because the people who live in those villages and in those towns are feckless, that they are unintelligent and that they are beyond education, or even that they

have a disregard for life itself? Why is it turning its back on them?

Just yesterday, I visited Gorebridge Community Cares in Midlothian. It is supported by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. It was started with a grant from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, and it is run from a former police station. It is a citizens advice bureau outreach centre, a food bank and a base for Upward Mobility, which supports more than 20 remarkable students who just need a helping hand. It is a home for elderly walking groups. It brings the generations together, puts on employability and training courses, backs business development, and provides lifeline support from the Covid economic recovery fund. I spent some time with two of its outstanding workers: Lynne Roy and Mhairi Barrett. Mhairi Barrett told me:

“We support people from the nursery to ninety”.

She also had a clear message for the Parliament. She said:

“No-one understands mining villages, mining communities like the Coalfields Regeneration Trust”.

Next year, as well as marking the 40th anniversary of the miners strike, we will mark the 25th anniversary of the death of the miners’ leader Mick McGahey. He prophetically warned of the decimation of the Scottish coalfield if the Thatcher Government had its way, because he understood better than anyone what it would do to mining communities. He was right. His memorable appeal was:

“If we stop running, they’ll stop chasing us. Stand firm and fight!”

That is what we are doing tonight: fighting for those communities.

I say to the minister that you cannot be allied to a just transition and support unjust austerity. You cannot be an ally of the miners and support a policy that condemns their sons, daughters and grandchildren to a lifetime of poverty. You cannot be an ally to these communities and support these cuts.

The Government needs to decide which side it is on. I hope that it will be on the side of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, the miners, their families, their trade union, and these villages and communities, because they deserve nothing less.

18:27

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow Richard Leonard.

It is coming up to 40 years since the titanic struggle that Richard Leonard referenced in his remarks, which were, as usual, impassioned and energetic. It will be 40 years since he and I first

crossed swords at the University of Stirling on issues relating to the Government of our country at that time. He has lost none of his passion or conviction, and I admire that. I admire politicians who have principles, convictions and passion.

Richard Leonard was right in what he said. He highlighted the work of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust—by the way, I thank Alex Rowley for bringing the motion to the chamber. Richard Leonard was right when he described what is happening in those communities. The most important word that this debate will feature is “community”.

Richard Leonard talks about issues relating to welfare benefit claimants, underqualification, underemployment and mortality. Those are issues that really should concern us.

The Scottish National Party Government proposes cutting the grant for the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which is an organisation that I—as the MP for Stirling and now as a Central Scotland MSP—have admired close up and at a distance. That is a huge mistake given the nature of the engagement that the Coalfields Regeneration Trust has with the communities that it exists to serve and support. If we are in the business of transformation policies, it will be at the local level that those policies make a real difference. We can talk about strategies until the cows come home, but the truth is that it is the work that is done in those communities that makes the real difference. Therefore, I offer a suggestion to the Government: it should restore the £100,000 that it is taking from that grant.

The Government often tells us that, if we come to the Parliament with ideas about spending more money, we should come up with a place from which that money can be taken. I offer this advice: in the spirit of today’s budget, why does the Scottish Government not cut itself, by reducing the number of its ministers—which is at a record high—by one? That would free up more than £100,000, which could then be directed towards the excellent work of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in Scotland.

In the little time that I have left, I will add the following comments. As I said, “community” is the most powerful word that we will hear in the debate. Scotland was—and should still be—renowned for community, especially our working-class communities. We need to support community. That is exactly what the Coalfields Regeneration Trust does.

Fulton MacGregor: I am glad that Stephen Kerr supports the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. The people in the gallery will be grateful for that. However, does he not have any sense of hypocrisy? He has almost got through his speech

but has not talked about the UK Government's role over the years in the decimation of mining communities such as mine? Is he not even going to mention that, or is it just an irrelevance to him?

Stephen Kerr: Of course it is not an irrelevance, but we are talking about the work of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. We can have a historical discussion outside of the chamber—I am more than happy to talk about the issues that prevailed 40 years ago. However, we are not in an episode of “Doctor Who” and we cannot be transported back 40 years, revisit those issues and make any tangible difference to what happened. However, we can highlight the fact that the Government that the member supports has just cut £100,000 from a vitally important source of funding for the work of the trust, and that that cut should be reversed.

I am probably out of time so, with your permission, Deputy Presiding Officer, I will quickly mention one example of community. Earlier this year, the people of Redding commemorated the 100th anniversary of the Redding pit disaster. An inrush of water trapped 66 miners underground in a mineshaft, and there were 40 fatalities. Forty families were impacted by one of the worst mining disasters in Scotland's history. A group of very good people have kept the commemoration going—as has been referenced in relation to another pit disaster. Every year, hundreds of people attend such commemorations, and family members of some of the victims have flown in, from all over the world, to be in attendance and register their solidarity with the local community. In the wellspring of that history, community lives on in those former mining and ex-coalfield communities.

I salute the work of the trust and I hope that, on this budget day, the Government will have a moment of conscience and consider seriously my suggestion that one of them gives up their post so that that money can be used for a better local engagement funding project.

18:33

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Alex Rowley for his hugely important and timely motion. As we head towards the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, the time is opportune not only to reflect on the trust's work but to recognise that that work has never been more important.

I am proud to represent the South Scotland communities that are steeped in Scotland's mining history. Coal seams run literally the length of the region. Midlothian, in the east, was once home to 26 collieries, and today is home to the National Mining Museum. Neighbouring East Lothian was

home to the earliest coal mines in Scotland, between Tranent and Prestonpans, and was where the local Labour club ensured that children were fed a hot meal every day after school during the miners strike. Some of the most valuable coal seams paved the way to make South Lanarkshire the seat of the iron-smelting industry. On the west coast, in Ayrshire, at one time, 14,000 coal miners mined 4 million tons of coal a year—and a certain Keir Hardie founded the Ayrshire Miners Union, which led to the National Union of Scottish Mineworkers.

Even in Dumfriesshire, where I live—an area that many might not associate with coal mines—deep mining was integral to the economy as far south as Canonbie and Rowanburn and, more recently, in upper Nithsdale, from the Fauldhead mine in Kirkconnel, which was the largest local pit until it closed in 1968, to the opencast that continued until just a few years ago. Many of my relatives worked in the upper Nithsdale pits until the industry's demise in the 1980s forced them to move—some to the north-east—to find work in the oil industry.

We often hear ministers in the chamber say, rightly, that if there is one lesson that we must take from the demise of the pits and the devastation that it inflicted on our communities, it is to ensure that we have a just transition for our oil and gas sector. They rightly point out that never again can we have a Government inflict such economic vandalism on communities and then walk away, which means that many of the coalfield communities have still not recovered. However, ministers cannot make those statements on the one hand and, on the other hand, cut the funding of the organisation that is solely dedicated to supporting those very communities.

The cut to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust's funding is not just of £100,000; its funding has been frozen since 2011. That is an additional real-terms cut of more than £250,000. As we have heard, because of the Government's procurement rules, the trust will not be able to run its grants programme to support smaller, grass-roots charities in communities.

When I wrote to the minister in the summer about the cuts, he dismissed them and claimed that there are plenty of other funding sources. However, as the trust's survey of the organisations that are affected showed, that is not their experience. The Government's approach fails to recognise the need for support for those communities over and above the other sources of funding.

Under the trust's grants programme, even the smallest sums of money make a big difference to communities. There is not time to list the successes, but an example of a programme in my

community is the community action plan in Kirkconnel and Kelloholm in upper Nithsdale, where a small investment by the trust supported the plan's development and the early delivery of some projects. The trust also brought its expertise to the table—its understanding of coalfield communities' needs—which helped to ensure that the plan's priorities were the communities' priorities. The trust's support also levered in other sources of funding.

I appeal to the minister—as others have done, including members of his group—to rethink the cuts, which are an attack on our coalfield communities; to rethink the procurement rules in order to allow the trust to continue the important grant programme, which supports grass-roots community organisations; and to work with the trust to invest in and create a new model to provide the sustainable income stream that is needed to invest in our coalfield communities. That would end the need for grants in the long term, but we also need to invest in the trust in the short term.

If the Government is genuinely committed to a just transition, its actions—not its warm words—need to recognise that that has not happened in our coalfield communities. Now is not the time to walk away from those communities; it is time to support them.

18:38

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank my colleague Alex Rowley for bringing this important issue to the Parliament's attention.

I am proud to say that I grew up in, live in and now represent a coalfield community. I thank the visitors in the public gallery, who, like me, believe in those communities, not only because of our history of mining and powering the country but because our history built resilient people and bold communities with warmth, talent and tenacity. They deserve the wealth that has been generated from the labour of our parents, our grandparents and the wider communities.

It is almost 40 years since the rapid closure of the mining industries began, and former coalfield communities in my South Scotland region are still feeling the consequences. We have heard about the inequality in work opportunities and about the need to claim benefits. We have heard about the inequalities in educational opportunities and about the mortality rate. I repeat that the mortality rate in the Scottish coalfields is 25 per cent higher than the Scottish average. Make no mistake: that is by economic design. We in this place—we here—have to take responsibility to change the direction of that, and that is what the debate is about.

The Coalfields Regeneration Trust does such important work in my region, and we have heard about other work from members across the chamber. I live in Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley, and the trust is a central part of our community. It functions as a model of how to effectively build progress in conjunction with communities, rather than by imposing things on those communities. We have heard that the Parliament recognises that; Alex Rowley spoke about that. There have been 112 motions in the Parliament recognising those benefits.

When mining went—or, rather, when mining was so cruelly taken away—many Ayrshire mining communities were simply left to struggle. As anyone in Ayrshire knows, mining was a core part of our identity and remains so to this day. It has not been forgotten because of economic change. Without mining, many towns and villages would never have come to be, so there is a lasting cultural memory for many of those who still live there. The mine was the centre of their work or their parents' work, so they see themselves first and foremost as part of mining communities.

Let us be clear that those communities did not create, but rather fell victim to, the social and economic problems that we all know affect other former coalfield areas. Unemployment, a lack of Government investment and the acceptance of a decline in services are scars that take a long time to heal, and their effect on the day-to-day lives of generations of local people and families is still clear to see.

Organisations such as the Coalfields Regeneration Trust stepped into the void. During rapid and unthinking deindustrialisation, those organisations have pioneered projects such as Yipworld, the Zone, Auchinleck Community Development Initiative, the EPIC East Ayrshire Pipe Band Academy and the Netherthird Initiative for Community Empowerment. We need such projects in our communities and, without their help, we would be in a worse state. People who live there know that—no one needs to say it because we see it every day. The Coalfields Regeneration Trust is essential to our communities.

I will repeat points that have been made. We need the Government to support a capital endowment for community regeneration, we need the Scottish Government to change its procurement rules and we must restore funding for the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. We know that we must do those things. In the words of Mick McGahey, let us stand firm and fight.

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

18:42

The Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning (Joe FitzPatrick): I congratulate Alex Rowley on securing this important debate and thank members from across the chamber for their contributions.

I begin by reaffirming our commitment to supporting our coalfield communities, as is demonstrated by our long-standing support for the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and by the range of investments that we deliver to support coalfields, and all disadvantaged communities, across Scotland.

I think Martin Whitfield give us the quote of the debate when he reminded us that the Coalfields Regeneration Trust is not about the mines but is about people and communities. It is really important that we remember that.

The Scottish Government has provided more than £28 million to the trust since it was established in 1999. That reflects the valuable role that the trust has played in supporting our coalfield communities, building their capacity and delivering essential support through a range of activities.

It is worth taking a moment to touch on the points that were raised by Fulton MacGregor, Colin Smyth and others about what happened 40 years ago. We are coming up to that anniversary and, although this Parliament has taken action, the UK Government has still not apologised for what happened back then and there is still a need for a full UK-wide public inquiry into what happened.

Since 1999, our coalfield communities and other disadvantaged communities have faced many challenges. Market failure and rurality have had lasting impacts on social, physical and economic outcomes. Our long-term support for the trust is mirrored in our approach to regeneration, which recognises that change takes place over time.

We have a strong policy framework in place to realise our long-term, medium-term and short-term ambitions to improve the lives of people across Scotland. We are making an impact and seeing successes through our approach of targeting our investment at the communities that most need support. However, I must be clear that the financial climate in which we are operating is the most challenging ever. As a result, we must watch every penny and ensure that it is being spent on the things that have the greatest impact.

Martin Whitfield: On that point, I am not abandoning the other claims, but an alteration in the Scottish procurement rules would allow the CRT to continue to hand out grants—even small grants—which, as we have heard from across the chamber, are so beneficial and fundamental to giving back dignity to communities.

Joe FitzPatrick: I will come on to that specific point.

We have worked closely with the trust this year and have been open about the financial position that is faced. We are working with a reduced budget to deliver our empowering communities programme, which supports the CRT's grant. That programme also delivers essential support directly to community organisations that deliver front-line activities and services to tackle local challenges of poverty and disadvantage in communities that are most in need across Scotland, including in coalfield areas.

We are not ignoring coalfield communities, as Mr Stewart implied, nor are we turning our backs on them, as Mr Leonard suggested. In fact, our support goes wider than directly funding the CRT. Further to Mr Smyth's point, I want to highlight opportunities for more funding. Our strengthening communities programme and investing in communities fund are two funds that can be applied for across Scotland and which directly support coalfield communities. In 2023-24, the investing in communities fund is delivering more than £1.7 million in coalfield communities. That includes funding for a project in Methilhill that is providing accessible pre-school childcare, after-school clubs, youth clubs and volunteering opportunities for more than 70 young people to gain employability skills and training. The strengthening communities programme is currently providing a total of £600,000 to support the development of community anchor organisations in coalfield communities.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way on that point?

Joe FitzPatrick: I want to finish this point. There are a number of points, including Stephen Kerr's, that I will try to pick up.

The strengthening communities programme is helping Bothwell Futures, which is in the process of asset transfer of the Bothwell library, which will be an important space for the community.

Stephen Kerr: The minister is engaging in a bit of whataboutery. The purpose of the debate is to consider the CRT and the work that it does, and everyone who has spoken has agreed that what it does is highly impactful. The sum of £100,000 is very small in the total scheme of the many billions of pounds that the Scottish Government has at its disposal. *[Interruption.]* Yes, I know that—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, please just ask your question.

Stephen Kerr: Yes. Will the minister consider my serious suggestion that the Government cuts its costs by £100,000 and directs that money to the CRT?

Joe FitzPatrick: Obviously, given the challenges of the budget that we have just presented today, all public services are having to look at how we hold our money together. I was reflecting on a point that Mr Smyth raised—that is why I was highlighting the investing in communities fund and the strengthening communities programme.

Reflecting on the contribution that the CRT makes, and in spite of the challenging fiscal position, we have provided a substantial grant of nearly £650,000 to enable the trust to continue delivery of its employability, skills and training programmes, and its capacity building programmes, which the Government recognises.

I was pleased to meet the trustees in September to listen to their concerns. That provided me with the opportunity to convey to them our on-going support and our commitment to working with the trust. The meeting also gave me the opportunity to stress the importance of ensuring that the trust continues to support delivery of our regeneration outcomes.

Martin Whitfield, Fulton MacGregor, Alex Rowley and others referred to the coalfield investment programme small grants. I absolutely understand and appreciate the points that were made about access to small grant funding. Procurement rules and grant-making conditions exist to support proper use of public funds. However, I have asked my officials to explore the issue with the CRT in order to identify other ways in which the trust can support small community organisations, where that is possible and appropriate. However, I must be clear that the overall grant allocation for 2023-24 cannot be increased.

On future funding for the CRT, members will be acutely aware of the on-going budget challenges over the medium term. The First Minister has been clear that we must be able to demonstrate how every penny supports the three central missions of equality, opportunity and community, and our budget will deliver against those missions.

Members rose

Joe FitzPatrick: I am mindful of the time, so I cannot take an intervention.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, in her statement to Parliament today on the draft budget, set out the spending plans for 2024-25. The budget, which will be scrutinised by members of Parliament in the coming weeks, reflects the very difficult choices that have to be made as a result of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's autumn statement and the impact that UK Government decisions have on Scotland.

Members rose.

Joe FitzPatrick: I am mindful of time, so I will go straight to my conclusion.

I want to reaffirm our commitment to supporting work that delivers impact against our core missions, and to continuing to support the Coalfields Regeneration Trust as much as we can within our limited resources. To the best of our ability, within the constraints of the financial position in which we find ourselves, we want to support the valuable contribution that the trust makes in helping our coalfield communities to thrive.

I thank the people from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust for coming along today and listening to this important debate. I hope that they have felt the support for them from across the chamber. I will continue to do what I can to support the trust in being a sustainable organisation that supports our coalfield communities across Scotland.

Meeting closed at 18:51.

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