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Scottish Parliament

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good morning. The first item of business is general question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would greatly appreciate succinct questions and responses.

Male Suicide Rates

1. **Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what work it is undertaking to reduce the rates of male suicide in Scotland, in light of the issues raised in the Equality and Human Rights Commission's "Equality and Human Rights Monitor" report for 2023. (S6O-02950)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities suicide prevention strategy, "Creating Hope Together: Scotland's Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2022-2025", takes a targeted approach to reaching and supporting people who are at higher risk of suicide, including men. Through the likes of targeted work with partners in the west Highlands and Skye and the "Changing room—extra time" programme, we are continuing to understand more about what helps men to reach out for support and what type of support works best. Another key part of our strategy is the building of peer support groups right across Scotland as a way to prevent suicide, which we know works well for many men.

Finally, our gender-balanced suicide prevention lived-experience panel allows us to continue to benefit from the insights of men affected by suicide. That is invaluable in helping us to prevent male suicide.

Meghan Gallacher: I welcome the minister's answer, because the suicide rate for boys and young men aged five to 24 is two times higher than that for girls and young women in the same age group. One of the recommendations in the report is that the Scottish Government sets a national equality outcome to reduce the suicide rate among five to 24-year-olds, particularly in males. Will the minister commit to implementing that?

What other recommendations from the report could be implemented to provide support to boys

and young men and prevent more lives from being lost to suicide?

Maree Todd: I agree with Ms Gallagher that we need to very carefully target our support for teenage boys and young men. However, when we look at suicide as a whole, the curve is U-shaped and the highest rate is in middle age, so we cannot take our eyes off any age group. We need to ensure that we have strategies that meet the needs of every age group, and we are doing that very carefully, working with partners. The programme in Skye and the west Highlands, which I mentioned, looks particularly at rural communities, where we know there is a particularly high rate and people are susceptible. We also have work going on in LGBT communities.

I am confident that we are doing the right things. We need to do more. Every suicide is preventable and every suicide has absolutely tragic consequences, so we will absolutely remain focused on tackling the issue.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Can the minister provide an update regarding work that is under way to raise awareness about suicide and to improve understanding, particularly in sectors that support groups with higher rates of suicide, which include, as we have heard, men and boys?

Maree Todd: In implementing our "Creating Hope Together" policy, we are working with partners that represent high-risk groups, such as the LGBT community and other known marginalised groups, to develop tailored approaches to suicide prevention, awareness raising and support. We have taken a targeted approach to learning so that people in the workforce who are most likely to be supporting people who feel suicidal are supported. That includes people in health and social care, education, the emergency services and third sector organisations that work in local communities. We are going to extend that approach further into other key services, including homelessness support services.

The community-based supports that we fund for children and young people and adults also have a focus on distress prevention and support. Through our "Time, space, compassion" approach, we have worked hard to identify and connect services and communities that are already doing important work to support communities that are at higher risk of suicide.

Electric Buses (Glasgow)

2. **Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to support the roll-out of electric buses across the Glasgow city region. (S6O-02951)

The Minister for Transport (Fiona Hyslop):

Since 2020, £62 million of Scottish Government investment has supported operators to acquire 315 zero-emission buses and supporting infrastructure to serve the Glasgow area. Of those buses, 305 are already on the road, as the remaining 10 will be by the end of March. The final phase of the Scottish zero-emission bus challenge fund is currently live, offering a further £43 million to transform the market for zero-emission buses so that they are affordable to all operators, without subsidy.

Kaukab Stewart: Electric vehicles go a long way in improving inner-city air quality and public health, as well as contributing to meeting the net zero target. Naturally, therefore, the decision not to award Strathclyde Partnership for Transport ScotZEB 2 funding for a new fleet of electric buses has been met with disappointment. What support can the Government offer organisations such as SPT to help them to meet their electric vehicle ambitions?

Fiona Hyslop: Organisations such as SPT can contact the remaining lead bidders to discuss joining their consortia ahead of the deadline for best and final bids on 19 January. Information is available from the Energy Saving Trust, which administers the scheme. I encourage all bus and coach operators and organisations to explore the range of information packs, how-to guides and case studies that have been produced by our bus decarbonisation task force, which is hosted on the Confederation of Passenger Transport website.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Given the budget announcement that there will be no direct funding for the bus partnership fund next year, what will happen to work by the Glasgow city region bus partnership, and other partnerships, to progress bus priority measures?

Fiona Hyslop: That does not necessarily relate directly to the roll-out of electric buses and the ScotZEB fund. Graham Simpson will be aware that there has been progress on bus partnerships, to support bus priority lanes. I add that his Conservative colleagues in Aberdeen have been highly critical of the work and investment that are already taking place in Aberdeen to encourage such bus lanes.

I remind Graham Simpson that we cannot have the United Kingdom Government introducing budgets, such as the one that was made by Liz Truss and her Chancellor of the Exchequer, that decimate the public finance system and introduce a capital reduction of almost 10 per cent at a time of increasing construction costs, then have him come to the chamber to ask for more money that literally does not exist because of his Conservative colleagues at Westminster.

Business Support (Highlands and Islands)

3. Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to support businesses across the Highlands and Islands region. (S6O-02952)

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): Our economic development agency for that region, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, provides advice, training and funding to help businesses to grow and innovate. It invested £20.1 million in 272 small businesses across the region during 2022-23, supporting 478 jobs and an increase of £122 million in turnover.

Our investment of £242.5 million in the four city region and growth deals across the Highlands and Islands will deliver significant and lasting economic benefits for businesses.

The 2024-25 Scottish budget ensures that businesses across the Highlands and Islands will continue to benefit from a competitive non-domestic rates relief package, which—according to the latest figures—includes 23,000 business properties paying no rates at all, thanks to the small business bonus scheme.

Donald Cameron: Last October, HIE's chief executive, Stuart Black, told the Economy and Fair Work Committee that a projected cut of 4.8 per cent to HIE's budget would affect its

"ability to work with communities at local level".—[*Official Report, Economy and Fair Work Committee*, 4 October 2023; c 7.]

Given that HIE's total budget is now at its lowest level in more than a decade, following a cut that was three times as great as was previously forecast, does the cabinet secretary not recognise the serious damage that will be done to business confidence across communities in the Highlands and Islands?

Neil Gray: As our delivery agent, HIE will continue to make a key contribution to achieving the Government's objectives through support for businesses and communities in strategic economic development. The budget provides investment of almost £67 million in 2024-25 as the first part of the Scottish Government's commitment of up to £500 million to anchor a new offshore wind supply chain in Scotland. We expect HIE to play a key role in delivering our ambitions for that supply chain and in maximising the economic benefits therein.

I will also continue to work with HIE to ensure that it can prioritise the funding that it has received to maximise the opportunities that are available.

However, at a time when our budgets are under attack from the United Kingdom Government, I

respectfully say to Donald Cameron that it is incredible that he comes here asking for more money but does not come up with an answer on where it is supposed to come from.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Before Christmas, it emerged that the Lerwick-Kirkwall-Aberdeen Serco NorthLink ferry service costs would be hiked by an eye-watering 8.7 per cent from April 2024. That is obviously above inflation, and it will hit businesses with increased freight costs. Does the cabinet secretary consider such cost hikes on the lifeline service to be supportive of island businesses?

Neil Gray: We will continue to work with Serco NorthLink to ensure that it provides a sustainable and supportive environment for the lifeline services that it provides. I declare an interest, having travelled on NorthLink ferries over the Christmas period in order to visit family. I will be happy to meet Beatrice Wishart to discuss the issue that she has raised.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I welcome the Government's commitment to supporting business in my region. There are now more than 1,200 social enterprises across the Highlands and Islands, which is the highest density in Scotland. A third of all of Scotland's social enterprises are in rural areas, and they contribute 88,000 jobs and more than £2.3 billion to the economy. What specific support can be offered to the growing social enterprise sector in the Highlands and Islands?

Neil Gray: We recognise the unique importance of social enterprises to business and community life across Scotland's Highlands and Islands. Our social enterprise action plan recognises the different challenges that they face.

The Scottish Government directly funds the rural social enterprise hub, and social enterprises from the Highlands and Islands can access business support from Just Enterprise, which is a Government-funded national business support service. That support is delivered locally, often through partners such as Impact Hub Inverness. Since April 2022, we have awarded more than £600,000 of financial support directly to social enterprises in the Highlands and Islands through our delivery partner Firstport.

The Presiding Officer: Question 4 was not lodged.

Cost of Living Crisis

5. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what steps it is taking to address the cost of living crisis. (S6O-02954)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Despite the difficult financial settlement from the United Kingdom Government, this Government is doing everything that it can, with the powers available to it, to support people and communities through the cost of living crisis.

We are investing a record-high £6.3 billion in social security benefits and payments. That is £1.1 billion more than the level of funding that is forecast to be received from the UK Government through the social security block grant adjustments, helping low-income families and disabled people with their living costs.

Stuart McMillan: Earlier this week, I visited Advice Direct Scotland, which is funded by the Scottish Government. According to its stats, more people from my constituency than from any other constituency in the country have contacted it for energy advice. I believe that its outreach work across the country, including in my constituency, has led to some of the increase. It will also be attending a session at 7 1/2 John Wood Street in Port Glasgow tomorrow.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is vital that people reach out for support when they need it? Does she also agree that, in energy-rich but fuel-poor Scotland, we see yet another damning indictment of Scotland's place in the union?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I agree with Stuart McMillan's assessment. It is deeply concerning that we see so many people still in poverty. That is why the First Minister made an announcement about the fuel insecurity fund very early on when he came into post. He recognised its importance within the limited powers that we have to try and tackle poverty. The vast majority of those powers lie with Westminster, which has walked away from supporting people with the cost of living, particularly those who are living in fuel poverty.

We will do everything that we can, which includes funding Advice Direct Scotland and others who provide such valuable advice to people at times of crisis.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): One thing that will not help with the cost of living crisis is slashing the affordable housing supply budget by more than a quarter in real terms in the coming year. Anti-poverty charities such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have used words such as "disappointing", "brutal" and "baffling" to describe the decision. Surely access to affordable housing is the bedrock of dealing with cost of living pressures. When will the Government recognise that there is a housing emergency on its watch and take action—including by reviewing its budget decisions, which are exacerbating the cost of living crisis?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I would be more than happy to meet the member to discuss the matter—as would the Minister for Housing, I am sure—so that he can tell us in detail how we are supposed to deal with a 10 per cent cut to the Scottish Government’s capital budget while still increasing budgets, as he has demanded. Paul O’Kane is of course absolutely within his rights to come to the chamber and ask for more money. If he wants to get into a genuine discussion about how to help with housing and homelessness, my door is open—and the Minister for Housing’s door is open—so we can discuss where the money would come from, and get past the headlines and into the details.

Household Incomes (Rutherglen)

6. **Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how its budget will support household incomes in the Rutherglen constituency. (S6O-02955)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): The heart of our budget is the social contract between the Scottish Government and the people of Scotland. People in Rutherglen will continue to benefit from our long-standing commitments to free prescriptions, free access to higher education and the game-changing Scottish child payment. The Scottish budget commits a record £6.3 billion in social security benefits and payments to deliver on our national mission to tackle inequality. It sets aside £144 million to support a council tax freeze for this year, protecting household incomes across the country.

Clare Haughey: The Scottish Government’s budget ensures that a majority of people in Scotland pay less income tax than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. In the midst of a Westminster cost of living crisis, the budget will freeze council tax, as the cabinet secretary has said, and increase the Scottish child payment. It will also provide the most generous early learning and childcare package across the UK, saving families thousands of pounds each year. Does the minister agree that the UK Government must now step up to protect incomes, and that it should do so by tackling rising food prices, mortgage payments and energy prices?

Shona Robison: I do agree with that. Our values-based budget prioritises what matters, supporting people through the cost of living crisis and investing in our front-line public services.

The oversight and regulation of mortgage lenders is a reserved matter. We have repeatedly called on the UK Government to increase support for those who are being most impacted by increasing inflation, interest rates and living costs. In June 2023, Scotland became the first nation in

the UK to publish a plan to work towards ending the need for food banks. That includes a new £1.8 million programme to improve urgent access to cash in a crisis. We continue to repeat our calls on the UK Government to provide more targeted support for vulnerable consumers. That includes pressing for the urgent introduction of a social tariff mechanism as a much-needed safety net for priority energy consumers—which, unfortunately, the UK Government has so far chosen not to progress.

Alcohol and Drugs Policy (Budget)

7. **Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on whether its proposed budget spend increase of £0.1 million for alcohol and drugs policy, which is reportedly a real-terms reduction, is sufficient to address the challenges faced in this area. (S6O-02956)

The Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy (Elena Whitham): The 2024-25 alcohol and drugs budget has remained the same as that for 2023-24. The minor change seen in the published 2024-25 budget is not a proposed budget spend increase; rather, it shows funding being formally baselined into the alcohol and drugs budget line. The £13.6 million budget increase from 2022-23 to 2023-24 includes an additional £12 million to deliver the cross-Government plan, which was published in January 2023. The remaining £1.6 million increase covers portfolio operating costs for drug and alcohol staff, the funding for which was previously held centrally. Funding for drugs policy has increased by 67 per cent in real terms from 2014-15 to 2023-24, according to Audit Scotland figures published in 2022.

Carol Mochan: We need to get some reality here. The Scottish Government declared alcohol harm as a public health emergency in its 2022-23 budget. Since then, the number of people losing their lives to alcohol has tragically increased while, since 2016-17, the number of people with alcohol problems who are accessing treatment has fallen dramatically.

Is it time for the Scottish Government to stop tinkering on the edges and instead put forward a comprehensive strategy to ensure that fewer people experience problems caused by alcohol and that people get the support and treatment that they need when they need it?

Elena Whitham: I thank Carol Mochan for that question, which gives me the opportunity to inform the Parliament that, in the coming weeks, we will have a debate in the chamber on alcohol harms and how the Scottish Government is seeking to address the matter. I look forward to having Carol Mochan and others participate in that debate with me.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general questions.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Post Office Horizon Prosecutions

1. **Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** The Post Office scandal involving Horizon is a horrendous miscarriage of justice that has ruined hundreds of lives. Politicians of all parties will rightly reflect on what they should have done sooner. The United Kingdom Government has now acted to overturn the wrongful convictions of innocent victims. In Scotland, however, prosecutions were handled by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, not the Post Office. Has the First Minister established whether passing a legislative consent motion to the proposed UK law will be the fastest way to clear all victims here in Scotland? Will he confirm to Parliament how he will work with the UK Government to overturn those convictions as quickly as possible?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): First and foremost, I pay tribute to Alan Bates and the hundreds of other campaigners, sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses—[*Applause.*]—who have worked tirelessly over decades to ensure that they receive justice—justice that they are still waiting for. Of course, it should not have taken the showing of a television drama before action was taken.

Douglas Ross is right that there is a need for reflection on the part of all those involved. The Post Office is a wholly reserved institution that is accountable to UK Government ministers. As he rightly pointed out, the difference is that prosecutions in Scotland have been conducted by the independent Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. I spoke to the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General this morning. The Lord Advocate is willing to provide a briefing for any members of the Scottish Parliament who have an interest in the Crown Office's handling of the issues.

To answer Douglas Ross's question directly, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice has written to her counterpart in the UK Government to say that we are willing to work with it on the legislation that it is introducing to overturn wrongful convictions. The quickest way to do that would probably be through the legislative consent motion process, but there are a number of complexities to navigate, for the reasons that Douglas Ross has already highlighted. We will, of course, engage on that immediately and urgently, as we have already done with the UK Government. It is absolutely certain that, whether people who have been impacted and affected by the scandal are in Scotland or any other part of the United Kingdom,

some have waited far too long for justice. They should not have to wait a moment longer.

Douglas Ross: I join the First Minister in congratulating Alan Bates and others, as I did in the House of Commons earlier this week. Victims and the public will rightly ask why it has taken so long for this deep injustice to be corrected. Multiple political parties and many individuals should have, and could have, acted sooner. Blame starts with the Post Office, but people are understandably examining what others could have done. Scotland's Crown Office was made aware of concerns with the Horizon system in 2013—more than 10 years ago. This week, Dr Andrew Tickell, a senior law lecturer at Glasgow Caledonian University, said:

“The revelation that the Crown Office knew of problems is huge.”

He continued:

“Did they stop prosecuting? Did it occur to them that any of their cases before 2013 might now be unsafe because of these uncertainties?”

He added that Scotland was

“just at the beginning”

of addressing the miscarriages of justice, while cases in England and Wales—*[Interruption.]*—were

“much, much further down the road”.

Douglas Ross: I am just quoting a law professor. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Let us hear Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: I simply ask the First Minister whether he agrees that the process in Scotland needs to be accelerated.

The First Minister: First and foremost, we must remember that a public inquiry is under way, but it has already been well established that the inaccurate data and evidence that was presented by the Post Office is at the very heart of the scandal. The Post Office is, and has been, accountable to UK Government ministers over many successive parliamentary terms. That will undoubtedly be a matter for interrogation and questioning at the public inquiry.

I reiterate that the Lord Advocate is willing to meet members of the Scottish Parliament to talk them through what the Crown Office has done here, because it involves the independent functions of the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service.

My understanding is that, in 2013, when Post Office solicitors told the Crown Office about the challenges around the Horizon evidence, it continued to have dialogue with the Post Office

but, immediately, at the earliest possible point in time—September 2013—it provided guidance to every Scottish prosecutor to treat cases reported by the Post Office with regard to their individual facts and circumstances and evidence that did not rely on Horizon. It then spent the next couple of years—between 2013 and 2015—in continual dialogue with the Post Office to try to get further detail around the evidential basis.

To conclude, on the position post-2015 with regard to assurances that have been provided, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service issued instructions to all prosecutors in 2015 not to proceed with any Post Office case in which a sufficiency of evidence was dependent on evidence from the Horizon system. Therefore, no case was effectively prosecuted from 2015 in which the evidence was dependent on evidence from the Horizon system.

On where we are in relation to the process with the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, please, First Minister.

The First Minister: —I am willing to work with the UK Government to look at a process that effectively seeks to overturn any wrongful convictions en masse.

Douglas Ross: The actions of the Post Office were despicable and probably criminal, but the actions of the Crown Office here in Scotland should trouble us greatly. There was a sudden spike in cases involving people who were among the most trusted in their communities, but the Crown Office proceeded anyway. That was until 2013. Suddenly, it decided not to proceed with a case in the Gorbals.

The First Minister has just articulated that it was in September 2013 when the Crown Office first found out and sent out that information, but it was not. We know that, on 29 January 2013, a procurator fiscal cited “issues with Horizon” as the reason for not proceeding with a case. That was in January 2013, not in September 2013. The convener of the Law Society of Scotland's criminal law committee, Stuart Munro, said that the procurator fiscal should have gone public. He said:

“The Procurator Fiscal has a legal duty to disclose relevant information to those accused of crimes, and that duty continues even after a trial is concluded. As soon as the Fiscal became aware of concerns about the reliability of Horizon, that should have been disclosed.”

Does the First Minister agree that Scotland's Crown Office has serious questions to answer?

The First Minister: I say genuinely and in sincerity to Douglas Ross that the real questions are for the Post Office and are about the

information that it provided not just to the Crown Office but to Government ministers. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: That is why a public inquiry is so important. Anybody who has questions to answer should co-operate with that public inquiry. Let us not forget that the Post Office is a wholly reserved institution that is directly accountable to UK Government ministers.

There are legitimate questions to ask of the Crown Office, which, of course, operates independently of Government ministers and independently of me, as the First Minister, as it should. There are legitimate questions that individuals and members of the Scottish Parliament will have for the Crown Office. I repeat what the Lord Advocate told me this morning. She is more than happy to provide a briefing to members of the Scottish Parliament who have an interest in the matter.

I will end by reiterating the points that I made at the very beginning. Sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses have waited far too long for justice, and it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that we get them not just access to that justice but access to compensation.

Douglas Ross: The UK-wide inquiry that the First Minister has mentioned will look at all those issues, and it is right that it continues to scrutinise what happened. However, we must examine the unique circumstances in Scotland, where the Crown Office was responsible for prosecutions of innocent people. If the Crown Office knew of specific problems over a decade ago, that raises serious questions. We do not know what it did—if anything—with that information.

The Horizon Post Office scandal has devastated lives. It is the most appalling miscarriage of justice. Good people were criminalised because of an information technology failure that they had nothing to do with and a cover-up that lasted for years. It is right that no stone is left unturned in seeking answers. The Crown Office in Scotland must be transparent. Prosecutors were aware of issues with the flawed Horizon system more than 10 years ago. We do not need meetings or briefings from the Lord Advocate; we need her here in Parliament to answer questions about the scandal. Does the First Minister agree that the Lord Advocate should urgently come to this Parliament to answer questions?

The First Minister: I remind Douglas Ross—this is an important point—that, when the Lord Advocate discharges her functions as head of the prosecution service, she does so independently of me. When I spoke to the Lord Advocate this morning, she was more than happy to consider

whether to provide a briefing, a ministerial statement or whatever was appropriate. I am certain that the Lord Advocate is listening to these exchanges, and it will, of course, be for her to determine, in her independent function as head of the prosecution service, how she should answer any of those questions.

Let me reiterate the point that, in September 2013, Scottish prosecutors were told to treat cases that were reported by the Post Office in regard to their facts and circumstances and using evidence that did not rely on Horizon—they should be reported in their individual regard. Then, from 2015, no cases were prosecuted where the sufficiency of evidence was dependent on the evidence from the Horizon system. My understanding, again from the conversations that I have had with the Lord Advocate, is that, in its engagement with the Post Office between 2013 and 2015, the Crown Office was assured by the Post Office and its legal representatives that issues that arose with the Horizon system in England did not impact on any live Scottish cases. The Crown Office continued to seek those assurances, as well as taking the action that it did in 2013 and 2015.

I simply end where I started. Time and again, sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses were telling the UK Government and ministers that the Post Office, for which the UK Government and ministers are wholly responsible, was lying; it was simply not telling the truth about the Horizon system. Time and again, the sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses were not listened to. They have waited far too long for justice and far too long for compensation. The Scottish Government will work with the UK Government to ensure that they get access not just to justice but to the compensation that they so rightly deserve.

Post Office Horizon Prosecutions

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** The lives of potentially hundreds of Scottish sub-postmasters and their families were ruined by the Post Office and Fujitsu. People lost their livelihoods and, in some cases, even lost their lives. They have described being ostracised in their communities, their families shunned and their children targeted. It is a national disgrace. I welcome that the convictions will be overturned, but there is more to the scandal.

Unlike in England and Wales, where the Post Office itself brought the prosecutions, in Scotland they were carried out by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. As we have heard, ministers and the Crown were made aware of concerns about unsafe prosecutions in 2013. What conversations have the First Minister, his Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs

and the Lord Advocate had about the role of Scottish institutions in prosecuting those cases and how that was allowed to happen for so long?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Again, let me be clear: whether as justice secretary at the time or in my current role as First Minister, it would be wholly inappropriate for any Government minister to demand to see the evidential basis for a case that the Crown was prosecuting. *[Interruption.]* I know that Anas Sarwar is not asking that, but I am making the point that, if the issue is the evidence that was provided by the Post Office, it would be wrong for me, in any ministerial position, to suggest that I need to see that evidential basis in any individual prosecution.

Anas Sarwar asked what conversations I have had with the Lord Advocate. Again, I had a conversation this morning with the Lord Advocate, when she stressed a number of points. She is happy to provide a timeline of how the Crown has responded and she is very confident about the Crown's response. It was told in 2013 about possible problems, and it issued guidance to its individual prosecutors in 2013. After a period of continual conversation with the Post Office, in 2015, it stopped prosecuting cases where the sufficiency of evidence was dependent on the Horizon system.

The Lord Advocate is open to briefing members of the Scottish Parliament, as we have already heard, and I am sure that she will reflect on whether that is through a briefing or a ministerial statement.

Anas Sarwar is absolutely right that at the heart of this are hundreds of people right across the United Kingdom whose lives and reputations have been tarnished and ruined. It is incumbent on this Government that it works with any other Government in the United Kingdom, including the UK Government, to ensure that justice is forthcoming and that access to compensation is not impeded.

Anas Sarwar: There are big questions for the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, and it would be right for the Lord Advocate to come to the Parliament to answer those questions from members. However, the matter goes beyond convictions.

Disturbing accounts from the public inquiry have revealed that Post Office employees were going door to door in Scotland to threaten and extort money from sub-postmasters. With behaviour that was reminiscent of the mob, those stories show that the Post Office behaved like a private police force and showed little regard for the law in Scotland. Sub-postmasters were pressured into accepting accusations of false accounting and were forced to hand over thousands of pounds

that day or face imprisonment. If any other organisation had behaved like that in Scotland, we would expect to see criminal investigations into its conduct. Does the First Minister agree that potentially criminal behaviour by Post Office officials in Scotland should be properly investigated so that the scandal does not go unpunished?

The First Minister: I say to Anas Sarwar—I should have perhaps said this at the beginning of my response to Douglas Ross—that I absolutely empathise in the strongest way possible with the harrowing tales that we have heard from sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses up and down the country. My family members are sub-postmasters—my late grandfather was a sub-postmaster and my stepgran continues to be so, although they were not affected by this particular scandal. The big difference from the situation in England and Wales is that the Post Office does not have the ability to lodge private prosecutions in Scotland. It is absolutely right that the behaviours of the Post Office should be interrogated, which is why there is a public inquiry. If there were any behaviours in Scotland that were possibly criminal, it would not be for me to investigate them—rightly, the independent Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service would do so. I have every confidence that the Crown will look into any allegations that are made to it about any potential criminal behaviour.

Anas Sarwar: Too often in this country, when there is an injustice, the first instinct of institutions and Government is to protect themselves. Whether it is sub-postmasters taking on the Post Office, the Hillsborough scandal, the Clostridioides difficile—C diff—scandal at the Vale of Leven hospital or victims at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, it should not take victims disclosing the most harrowing moments of their lives to shame both Scotland's Governments into action, but it happens too often. The Government is meant to be on the people's side, but, tragically, when victims come looking for justice, all they get are more barriers put in their way. The silence, denial and cover-up compounds the injustice and amplifies victims' pain. Ministers—whether Scottish or UK Government ministers—always say that we must learn the lessons and that it cannot be allowed to happen again, but it does. Does the First Minister agree that the priority for Government should be truth and justice for victims, rather than protecting institutions or individual reputations?

The First Minister: I agree that that is of paramount importance. I remind Anas Sarwar that the Labour Party was in the UK Government for a number of years while sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses were telling UK Government postal ministers—Labour ministers—that the Post Office

was presenting inaccurate data. It is important for all UK-based parties to reflect on their relationship with the Post Office and whether they were listening or not.

On the Government's approach, we can demonstrate that, time and again, when issues have been brought to this Government, we have engaged—often in really difficult conversations—with individuals who bring forward harrowing stories and tales. Where necessary, we will always investigate, whether that is through independent commissioners, such as the patient safety commissioner—I am pleased that the Patient Safety Commissioner for Scotland Bill has been passed—through the duty of candour in relation to the national health service, or through the public inquiries that we instruct. The Government's approach has been and will always be to ensure that we seek the truth and that we do right by the people of Scotland. When it comes to sub-postmasters in Scotland, we will work with whoever we need to, including the UK Government, to ensure that those individuals get access to not only justice, but the compensation that has been denied to them for far too long.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): To ask the First Minister when the Cabinet will next meet. (S6F-02695)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Tuesday.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Nitazenes are a type of synthetic opioid that is 50 times stronger than heroin. They are often delivered in a single pill or disguised as other substances entirely. The synthetic opioid epidemic has already claimed hundreds of thousands of lives across North America and public health officials and charities are worried that those drugs are coming to Scotland. We know that nitazenes have been linked to the deaths of nine Scots since last summer.

The front line in our response to those new substances is made up of information, detection and treatment. We still have the worst rate of drug deaths in all of Europe, so why does the First Minister's budget deliver a real-terms cut to drug services just as a new threat is emerging?

The First Minister: We are committed to, and have not reduced the money for, the national mission to deal with drugs deaths.

Alex Cole-Hamilton is absolutely right about the danger of nitazenes. The drugs minister and I spoke about that threat recently and, when I was there last year, I spoke to the New York health commissioner about the real dangers of synthetic opioids. Alex Cole-Hamilton is right to say that there is a real epidemic in America and we are not

complacent about the challenges that we face here.

We will continue to invest in the national mission to tackle drug deaths. We are taking a number of specific actions in relation to nitazenes and synthetic opioids. I am more than happy for the drugs minister to meet Alex-Cole Hamilton to give him more detail about the range of actions that we are taking in that regard.

Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill (Climate Implications)

4. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is regarding any implications for its net zero ambitions of the United Kingdom Government's Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill, which seeks changes to the licensing regime, including how regularly licensing rounds are held. (S6F-02700)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Decisions on offshore oil and gas licensing remain reserved to the UK Government. The Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill, along with other recent announcements, demonstrates that the UK Government is not serious about the climate crisis. Instead of licensing ever more fossil fuel extraction, which the bill would have happen on an annual basis, the UK Government should be supporting a fair and just energy transition, in line with its climate commitments.

We have repeatedly called for a rigorous climate compatibility test to be applied to all new oil and gas developments. However, the checkpoint introduced by the UK Government before the latest licensing round is neither robust nor, frankly, transparent.

In Scotland, we remain absolutely committed to a just transition to net zero by 2045.

Stuart McMillan: The former UK energy minister Chris Skidmore recently resigned as a member of Parliament in protest at the bill, and Sir Alok Sharma MP, president of the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—has stated that the bill reinforces

“that unfortunate perception about the UK rowing back on climate action”.

Even those in the Tory party recognise that the UK Government is not serious about climate change.

Does the First Minister agree that a just transition to retrain and reskill the oil and gas workforce is vital to helping to deliver the energy that we use, that any party that forms the next UK Government must be serious about climate change and the push towards net zero, and that only as an independent nation will the people of

Scotland get an energy policy that is fit for the future and for the emergency that we are facing?

The First Minister: I agree with that. The fact that the Prime Minister spent more time on his private jet getting there than he did at COP28 tells us his level of commitment to tackling the climate crisis. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: It is also true that 2023 has been confirmed as the hottest year on record. Those who refuse, in the face of all the evidence, to take the necessary actions are completely abdicating their responsibility not only to current generations but to future ones and to our planet.

I agree that responding to the climate emergency is an absolute imperative. There should be a political consensus on that, and I look forward to meeting with party leaders in the coming weeks to discuss how we can work collectively to tackle the climate crisis. It would be really helpful if, every time the Scottish Government proposed action to tackle the climate crisis, the Opposition did not oppose it simply for opposition's sake.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The latest episode in Tory climate denial threatens to deepen our reliance on climate-wrecking fossil fuels exactly when we should be doubling down on cheap and clean renewables.

In Scotland, we are making great progress—there has been record investment in renewables as a result of planning reforms and there are tens of thousands of quality new green jobs. The “Draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition plan—delivering a fair and secure zero carbon energy system for Scotland” reflects both the scientific evidence of climate change and that economic opportunity by clearly stating a presumption against new oil and gas fields. What impact will the new bill have on that exact commitment?

The First Minister: The Scottish Government absolutely values the exceptional role that the oil and gas industry has played over many decades in Scotland, as well as the exceptional efforts of the incredibly hard-working workforce in the oil and gas industry, which is a vital, key component of Scotland's economic success. However, regardless of what anybody says in the chamber, the facts are the facts. Given the decline of the North Sea basin and the exceptional potential of our renewable sources, it is not just in the planet's interest—although, of course, it is—to have a just transition to net zero but in our economic interest to ensure that that potential is unleashed.

We are in the process of finalising the energy strategy and just transition plan in the light of the

consultation responses that were received. Our focus will be on reducing emissions and the just transition away from fossil fuels and towards unleashing the potential of our net zero green technologies.

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba): As the Rosebank oilfield comes on stream and the Forties pipeline, which accounts for around 40 per cent of UK oil production, continues to flow, refining must be carried out at Grangemouth. Will the First Minister today commit to bringing together Unite the union, Petroineos and the UK Government to create the required rescue package to increase the profitability of the plant and secure its long-term future as a Scottish refinery?

The First Minister: The future industry board, which is looking at that issue, is meeting in the coming weeks. Neil Gray and I have had conversations with the owners of the Grangemouth refinery, and there will be continued and on-going discussions. All of us want to see a viable and sustainable future for Grangemouth, and—of course—we will do our best to ensure that there are no job losses at Grangemouth. We will do what we can. The future industry board will meet, and I will ensure that Neil Gray writes to Ash Regan with the full details of the actions that we are taking, which include engaging not just with the owners of Grangemouth but with trade union colleagues.

Care-experienced People

5. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to reports that the Promise is not on track to deliver effective change for Scotland's care-experienced people. (S6F-02708)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Keeping the Promise is an absolute top priority for this Government. When I met Fiona Duncan, the independent strategic adviser for the Promise, late last year, she confirmed her view that the Promise can be met by 2030. I am determined that we will do exactly that.

Over the past year, we have made substantial progress on a range of aspects of the Promise, including the Scottish recommended allowance for foster and kinship carers and the investment of £6 million in the bairns' hoose pathfinders.

There is simply no doubt that there is more to do, but I assure the chamber that this Government will do everything in our power to keep and deliver the Promise to Scotland's care-experienced people.

Roz McCall: Four years on, and the lives of care-experienced people in Scotland are no better.

The First Minister will be aware of the comments by Megan Moffat of Who Cares? Scotland, who said that, despite laudable ambitions, there is

“no clear detail on how that should happen, who should do it, when by and how much it will cost”.

The outgoing children’s commissioner stated that Nicola Sturgeon “absolutely” failed Scotland’s young people, and that self-same MSP admitted recently that

“there is an implementation gap”.

When will the Scottish National Party-Green Government stop tinkering around the edges of meaningful change, empower and adequately fund our councils to do the job, get the Promise back on track and stop failing the most vulnerable people in our society?

The First Minister: It takes some brass neck for a Conservative member to stand there and demand more money for local services and local government when the Conservative Government is continually—time and again—cutting our budget in real terms over a number of years.

I also disagree fundamentally with Roz McCall’s suggestion that things have not improved. The latest published data shows that there were almost 2,000 fewer looked-after children in July 2022 than there were at the start of the Promise, in July 2020, which is a 12.9 per cent reduction. That is not just a number; that is almost 2,000 children, young people and families who have been impacted and affected positively.

I am not suggesting to Roz McCall or to anybody else that there are no issues with the implementation of the Promise. However, in my recent meeting with Fiona Duncan, who is widely respected by members across the chamber, there was a determination and understanding that we can absolutely keep the Promise. That is why we will work with Fiona Duncan and all the stakeholders in relation to keeping the Promise through plan 24-30. I promise those care-experienced young people and other care-experienced people, whatever stage of life they are at, that the Government is absolutely resolute and unwavering in its commitment to keeping and delivering the Promise to them.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow Southside) (SNP): Does the First Minister agree that, if we are to keep the Promise, the significant progress that has already been made needs to continue and now intensify? In particular, does he agree that the whole family wellbeing fund is absolutely essential to providing the funding to transform services so that families are better supported and fewer young people need to enter care in the first place? To that end, will he give a commitment that the fund will be delivered in full and that it will be fully invested in to improve the lives of the young

people—present and future—to whom the Promise has been made?

The First Minister: Absolutely. First and foremost, I recognise that there would not be a Promise if it were not for the efforts of the former First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, and she would be the first to say that there would be no Promise if it were not for the efforts of young care-experienced people. I pay tribute to them for the impact that they have had on us all—not just on those of us in Government, but, I suspect, on every member of the Scottish Parliament who has engaged with care-experienced young people and care-experienced people more generally.

I have had the pleasure of engaging with a number of care-experienced people in my time as First Minister and before. Most recently, I hosted them in Bute house for a Christmas party, which was not only great fun but gave me the opportunity to hear from them directly on the improvements that we have to make.

To answer Nicola Sturgeon’s question, the whole family wellbeing fund is a central component in keeping the Promise. Despite the very challenging autumn statement and the continued cuts to our budget over a number of years, we have prioritised £50 million for the fund in the 2024-25 budget. We have done so even in the face of significant financial constraints, which reflects the priority and importance that we attach to keeping the Promise.

Mental Health

6. Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what urgent steps are being taken to address reports of a mental health crisis with an increase in calls to the NHS 24 mental health hub. (S6F-02713)

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): There is no question that, for many people, recent times have been extremely challenging, exacerbated by Covid and the cost of living crisis. We are committed to supporting people’s mental health and wellbeing, just as we are to supporting their physical health.

Our recently published mental health and wellbeing strategy delivery plan and workforce action plan recognise that an effective mental health system must address all levels of need. They set out what people have a right to expect from high-quality mental health services and the actions that we are taking to achieve those aims. Those actions will continue to evolve over time, and I am always open to constructive dialogue with Opposition parties on where they think that we can go further.

Paul Sweeney referenced NHS 24 call volumes. It is good that more people feel able to come

forward and ask for help with their mental health, and our substantially increased investment in NHS 24 is helping to ensure that more calls can be responded to.

Paul Sweeney: Data from NHS 24 reveals that the number of calls regarding alcohol problems has risen by more than 600 in two years and that the number of calls regarding psychotic symptoms has more than doubled since 2021. Those calls are not simply from people who are presenting for the first time, but from people who are not being seen urgently in the way that they should.

Last year, astonishingly, more than 7,000 children and young people were turned away from child and adolescent mental health services, which is an average of 26 children a day. Primary and community care services are under growing pressure, but ministers have failed to start recruiting to the promised additional 1,000 mental health roles while cutting the budget for the coming year by £5 million after inflation is taken into account. Will the First Minister accept that his mental health strategy will fail unless it is properly resourced?

The First Minister: When it comes to mental health funding, the Government has a record that we are proud to stand on, and that is in the face of the most difficult set of financial circumstances and constrictions that we have had in the history of devolution.

The autumn statement from the United Kingdom Government was the worst-case scenario for Scotland. Difficult budget decisions have had to be made across Government, but that has not stopped us from focusing on our key priorities. Since 2020-21, the mental health directorate's programme budget has more than doubled. When it comes to staffing, which Paul Sweeney mentioned, following our record-breaking investment in CAMHS, CAMHS staffing has more than doubled under this Government—it has gone up by more than 126 per cent since 2007.

Difficult decisions are being made right across the United Kingdom because of the cuts from the UK Government. Here is a quote from the budget for 2024-25 of—

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister.

The First Minister: —Labour-run Wales:

“we can no longer increase funding by £15m in 2024-25, as was originally planned. We have ... reduced the existing mental health ... budget by a further £6m”.

My point is that we will do everything that we can—

The Presiding Officer: Briefly, First Minister.

The First Minister: —to increase investment in mental health, but we cannot do that in the face of continued cuts from the UK Government.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Research indicates that 10 per cent of children and young people have a clinically diagnosable mental health issue, which is about three children in every class. In particular, neurodivergent children and young people are struggling now, as Scotland faces a severe shortage of medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which affects approximately 26,000 people. What can the Scottish Government do to address the issue?

The First Minister: Karen Adam raises a very important issue, which I know impacts a number of people across the country. I recognise the impact of the global medicine shortages on people living with ADHD and on their families.

The pricing and the supply of medicines are reserved matters for the UK Government, but we engage with it regularly, including specifically on this issue. The shortages have been caused by a combination of manufacturing issues and a global increase in demand, and Brexit red tape has certainly not helped. It is anticipated that most of the shortages of ADHD medicine will be resolved this month. NHS Scotland has robust systems in place to manage medicine shortages when they arise, and anyone who is affected should speak to their clinical team in the first instance.

The Presiding Officer: We move to general and constituency supplementary questions.

Matrix International (Jobs)

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Matrix International is one of Brechin's biggest employers, but most of its employees are awaiting news of their jobs as the manufacturing firm considers its future. Storm Babet was blamed when the factory found itself under 4 feet of water, with extensive machine damage. What has the First Minister's Government done to protect and preserve those highly skilled jobs in Brechin, and when will the Scottish National Party finally fulfil its promise to support the town in its time of greatest need?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): I visited Brechin after storm Babet, and we have been able to dispense thousands of pounds in business recovery grants—I can provide Tess White with the exact details of that. We are stepping up to help the people and businesses of Brechin through the funding that we have made available. We were quick not just to visit but to act.

More broadly, the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy and Scottish Enterprise are engaged on the issues

relating to Matrix International. I was very disappointed to hear reports of potential job losses at Matrix International. The Scottish Government will provide support through our partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—initiative, whose members have already met company representatives to offer support to the workforce. Neil Gray will remain engaged on the issue, as will Scottish Enterprise. I am happy to write to Tess White with further details of that engagement.

Children and Young People with Additional Support Needs (Support)

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): During the stage 1 debate on my Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill, the Government argued that a change in the law was not needed because good practice on additional support needs was spreading. New data from the Government's school census shows that the number of children with ASN who are getting legal support via a co-ordinated support plan has reached its lowest point ever. Despite the fact that the Government has promised action as far back as 2016, things are getting worse, not better, and a generation is being failed.

Given that the First Minister's Government has made countless promises that things will get better, why is support for young people with additional support needs getting so much worse?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): We have invested significantly in ASN support for our young people. I say to Pam Duncan-Glancy that there are a number of reasons why the Government did not feel that it could support her bill, but we are always open to working with her or with any member across the chamber to see what further work we can do—what more we can do—to support our young people when it comes to the ASN support that they require.

As well as investing in that, we will continue to engage with our local authorities. The significant increase in their budgets that local authorities are getting in the 2024-25 budget that the Deputy First Minister presented to Parliament will, I hope, help in that regard.

XL Bully Dogs

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Like many other members, I have been contacted by constituents about the Scottish Government's position on the XL bully dog breed. In the light of the new controls on the breed in England and Wales, which will come into effect on 1 February, will the First Minister outline when his Government will reach a decision of its own on the issue?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): It is probably worth saying, first and foremost, that what is happening in England and Wales cannot be described as a ban on XL bully dogs. Owners can still keep an XL bully dog, but they must make sure that it is registered on the exemption index and must fulfil the other criteria of the legislation.

When the UK Government's action on XL bully dogs was first announced, which was done without any consultation with the Scottish Government or, as far as I can see, with animal welfare stakeholders, we committed to engaging with animal welfare stakeholders and, of course, to continuing to engage with the UK Government.

I am afraid that it has become clear in the past few weeks that we have seen a flow of XL bully dogs to Scotland as a result of a number of people bringing such dogs to the country. That being the case—we will give further details of this to members of the Scottish Parliament through a ministerial statement next week, if the Parliamentary Bureau agrees to that—we will, in essence, replicate the legislation that exists in England and Wales here in Scotland.

Ultimately, although we have a very good system of dog control notices and we take a deed-not-breed approach, we must respond to the situation as it currently stands. Therefore, we will do what we need to do to ensure public safety. Further detail will be given by the appropriate minister next week, subject to that being agreed by the Parliamentary Bureau.

A96 (Dualling)

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): New figures show that 11 people have died and 69 have been seriously injured in accidents on the A96 in the past four years. In 2011, the Scottish Government promised that the road would be dualled by 2030, but that is now subject to a review at a cost of £5 million, the publication of which has been delayed by more than a year. When will that review finally be published? Will the Government ever dual this killer road?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): What does not help when it comes to our capital infrastructure projects is a 10 per cent cut to our capital budget over the next five years. Conservative members cannot come to the chamber and demand that we continue to invest in roads while simultaneously cutting our budget time and time and time again. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: As we confirmed in our programme for government, we remain absolutely committed to improving the A96. That includes dualling the Inverness to Nairn section and the

Nairn bypass, which already has ministerial consent, following the public local inquiry.

The Minister for Transport is due to meet members who have an interest in the A96 on 25 January. We will provide a more detailed update on the scheme, along with details of how the review of the wider A96 corridor is being undertaken. However, in the interim, I assure all members that preparation work continues at pace on the Inverness to Nairn section, including the Nairn bypass. I can advise the chamber that I expect that orders for the scheme will be made in the first quarter of 2024, with a view to completing the necessary statutory process.

Renfrewshire Council (Dargavel Schools)

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): The Accounts Commission is today discussing its report into Renfrewshire Council's handling of the Dargavel schools debacle, which is estimated to cost Renfrewshire's children and taxpayers up to £170 million. The commission has stated that the council faces a challenge to rebuild trust and confidence. It has also stated that the community will be dealing with the consequences of that error for some time. Given that, how can the First Minister have confidence in Renfrewshire Council, when so many local parents do not? Funding for a new Thorn primary school has been rejected by the Government, so what support will the Government provide to Renfrewshire's children to stop them paying the price of their council's incompetence?

The First Minister (Humza Yousaf): Neil Bibby is right to raise—as he has been doing for a number of months—the serious concerns that parents in Renfrewshire have about that situation. The council will have to reflect very hard on how it will rebuild trust with parents in that regard.

The Scottish Government has a good record of investing in new schools and refurbishments across local authorities, including in Renfrewshire. Through the budget for 2024-25, which was announced by the Deputy First Minister, the Scottish Government will be giving a significant uplift to local government. We will continue to engage with local government and Renfrewshire Council on the issue, but it is the responsibility of Renfrewshire Council to ensure that it rebuilds trust with the parents and families affected.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's questions. There will be a short suspension to allow those leaving the chamber and public gallery to do so before the next debate begins.

12:46

Meeting suspended.

12:47

On resuming—

Bank of Scotland Mobile Branch Services

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-11518, in the name of Rhoda Grant, on the Bank of Scotland ending mobile branch services across Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament regrets the recently announced end of mobile branch services from the Bank of Scotland to several towns and villages across Scotland, including several in the Highlands and Islands region; understands that the end of these services will take effect in May 2024; further understands that, although the Bank of Scotland notes that there has been low use of its banking vans, some rural residents will be left without local banking services and will have to travel several miles to reach such services; believes that this will disproportionately affect elderly people and disabled people who potentially cannot travel or access mobile banking services, and notes the calls for the Bank of Scotland to reconsider these plans or implement alternative plans so that everyone can access suitable bank services easily.

12:48

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The Bank of Scotland is ending mobile banking branches in 50 locations across Scotland, 13 of which are in the Highlands and Islands. Those mobile banks were a compromise when local branches were closed, and yet they, too, are closing.

In Caithness, there are only seven branches left of any bank at all. Since 2015, Caithness has seen a 72 per cent decline in branches. It is the same story elsewhere. In Moray, there has been a 66 per cent decline. In Ross, Skye and Lochaber, there has been a 65 per cent decline. In Inverness, Nairn and Badenoch and Strathspey, there has been a 50 per cent loss. Indeed, across the whole of Scotland, 60 per cent of branches have closed since 2015.

When branches were closing in rural areas, we warned that mobile banking vans were not an alternative, yet they were the compromise that was agreed at the time. Mobile banking branches are not great. They are in a village only for a short time, sometimes only for an hour at a time. That time is not always the right time for people who have to work, who have caring responsibilities or who are dependent on public transport. Who wants to queue for a mobile bank in the cold and wet, and in the winter? There is no disability access, and there is no privacy for anyone who is

using those banks. It is no surprise, therefore, that they are used only by people who really cannot access banking facilities in any other way, and those people are now being abandoned by the banks.

Lairg is losing its Bank of Scotland mobile bank, and the nearest alternative branch is Golspie, which is 18 miles away—that is a 36-mile round trip. Lairg is often seen as a hub for the smaller communities surrounding it—places such as Kinlochbervie—and people from those communities will have even further to travel. In addition, if someone is trying to get to Golspie from Lairg by public transport, that is not easy; I believe that there are only three buses a day that run between the two places. That will be the case for many of the locations that are affected, and some will even have no public transport at all.

These are the banks that were bailed out during the banking crash by the people—the very people whom they are now abandoning—and yet they renege on their promises and pass the buck.

The banks say that there are alternatives. They suggest online banking, but in many remote and rural communities, there is no broadband, so people there cannot access online banking. Many people are uncomfortable with using online banking because they are not confident that the banks will deal with scams. Age UK estimates that 40 per cent of over-75s do not use the internet at all and so will not access internet banking. There are also people for whom doing things online is absolutely inaccessible. They include those who, for reasons to do with skills, disabilities and costs, cannot access online connectivity. The Digital Poverty Alliance, a group of charities that was formed to tackle digital exclusion, estimates that as many as 11 million people in the UK struggle with technology.

The banks also suggest using the post office, but access to the post office cannot be guaranteed. It is often very difficult to identify a business in a local community that will take on the post office role, and now, with the Horizon scandal, it will be even more difficult to identify people who would be willing to take on that role. It is poorly paid, and it is taken on only as a way of increasing footfall in an existing business.

The banks talk about LINK, PayPoint and cashback at local businesses. However, those very local businesses are dependent on the banks in order to have cash to be able to give cashback, and cash machines are even less likely to be available in those areas.

That has a huge impact on rural communities, and it makes doing business in rural areas more difficult. There is also a security risk—we hear that, as businesses become more cash based,

they become a greater target for theft. There is anecdotal evidence that there are more break-ins in areas where banks have shut, as it means that people carry more cash because they cannot access money quickly.

We are all concerned about depopulation in rural areas. If these services are discontinued, it will make it harder to do business. That makes it harder for people to live in rural areas, which adds to depopulation.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): The member is making an excellent speech. In America, in the 1970s, it was recognised that banks would withdraw from the poorest and most rural communities in a practice known as redlining. At the time, the Carter Administration introduced the Community Reinvestment Act, which enabled banks to be forced to pay into supporting community co-operatives and community banking services. Does the member feel that similar provision is needed in this country to ensure that we maintain the footprint of banking services across the country?

Rhoda Grant: Yes—that is something that has to be explored, because people need access to banking services, and they should not be left to flounder in the way that they currently are.

I know that the Financial Conduct Authority has been given greater powers to protect access to cash in the United Kingdom. I also understand that the Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy is to meet with the FCA to explore ways in which we could tackle the issue, and I hope that, in summing up, he will update us on what is possible in that regard.

I would also be interested if the minister, in summing up, would tell us what interaction he has had with the bank and whether it is looking to change its mind or have a change of heart on the issue, because it is so important. Withdrawal of the services is simply unacceptable. Rather than cutting them, the bank should be looking at ways of serving its customers better.

The Bank of Scotland plans to withdraw the mobile banks by May this year. I urge it and Lloyds Banking Group to think seriously about whether that is really the way to serve their customers. I urge them to cancel the closures and reinstate local banking in our communities.

12:55

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I congratulate Rhoda Grant on securing this debate. I will be brief in my remarks.

I support Rhoda Grant's motion and completely agree with her that mobile banking services are highly important. She highlighted very well the

issues that are faced in remote and rural areas. The Bank of Scotland's decision to remove mobile banking services will leave many people in some of our most remote and rural communities, including across Dumfries and Galloway in my South Scotland region, without direct access to banking. It is also clear that the decision will disproportionately affect elderly people and disabled people. I join Rhoda Grant and others in calling on the Bank of Scotland to revisit the decision and ensure that people in rural areas are not penalised.

I have been contacted by many constituents who are extremely concerned about the withdrawal of the Bank of Scotland services across Dumfries and Galloway, including the mobile branch services. Constituents report that they feel that it is a betrayal of the promise that the Bank of Scotland made when it previously closed branches, citing that mobile services would be made available. The withdrawal of the services will leave many older and vulnerable people, including those who do not and cannot use online banking, without access to services.

Mobile branches were introduced in many areas that faced the closure of traditional bank branches, and they visit many communities fortnightly. The Bank of Scotland says that most people use the service to pay cash in or out. That shows that the mobile branches are incredibly important. The services are vital for communities that have already suffered many closures. We are seeing that in towns across Dumfries and Galloway.

Connectivity remains a major issue for many people who live in rural and remote parts of Dumfries and Galloway. For example, if a constituent in Wigtown or Whithorn is forced to travel to Newton Stewart in order to bank, it is a one-hour round trip. If they do not have a car, it is a three-hour round trip, given the infrequency of local buses.

The banks must treat people in rural areas with equity and, above all, respect. As I indicated, mobile branches were already a compromise, and there are issues to do with their accessibility. Rhoda Grant highlighted that. For example, my mum couldnae manage the steps on to the mobile service and she was told to bank on the pavement. When she told me that, I found it unbelievable.

I have written to the Bank of Scotland's public affairs department with my constituents' concerns, and I have requested an urgent meeting to discuss how the bank will support people from rural areas to access lifeline banking services.

In closing—I said that my remarks would be brief—I support Rhoda Grant's motion and I call on the Bank of Scotland to revisit the decision.

12:58

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I commend Rhoda Grant for lodging her motion and congratulate her on securing the debate. She outlined her constituents' concerns and, like her, I have constituents across my region who have concerns about the withdrawal of mobile banking.

Over the years, I have been involved in supporting a number of campaigns to try to save bank branches in different parts of my region. I well remember standing in the square in Aberfeldy on a very cold day a number of years ago with a large group of people from the local community who were trying to ensure that the last bank branch there remained open. Unfortunately, it did not. At the time, the sweetener was a promise—Emma Harper made this point, too—that, if the physical bank branch closed, a mobile bank would be provided as an alternative. It is very concerning that, just a few years on, that alternative is being withdrawn.

The issue affects a wide range of communities across Mid Scotland and Fife. The list of communities across Perthshire that are currently visited by the Bank of Scotland mobile branch includes Aberfeldy, Bankfoot, Errol, Scone, Methven, Dunning, Blair Atholl, Auchterarder, Luncarty, Coupar Angus, Murthly, Stanley, Kinross and Killin. A huge chunk of the population in the area that I represent will be affected.

I have called on Bank of Scotland to rethink that. It has said that it is looking to use community bankers as an alternative at three local sites—Aberfeldy, Auchterarder and Kinross. We await more details about how that will operate in practice, but I am not convinced that it will be a satisfactory alternative.

The wider context is that there have been changes in banking practices. That is understood. A lot of the bank branches that ended up being closed had very low footfall as people moved to banking online—as many of us have done. However, banking online is not for everyone, as Rhoda Grant has fairly said. Some people are physically unable to bank online because of particular disabilities, and others, for various reasons, do not trust the internet or do not have access to the internet because of the quality of their local broadband. Others—perhaps because they are elderly—are vulnerable and just do not have the capability to bank online. There are also small businesses that still deal in cash and that want to have somewhere to physically bank their cash, which they are unable to do online.

It has been suggested by the banks that close their branches that post offices should be used as an alternative. However, as has already been pointed out, post offices, too, are disappearing in

many of our towns and villages. In Aberfeldy, which I referred to, there is currently an issue about the future of the post office, because the owner wants to relocate it from its current premises to other premises that he owns in the town, and it is not clear whether permission for that will be forthcoming from the Post Office. There is therefore a concern over whether that facility might also be lost.

The key point is that there has to be access to comprehensive banking services for all sections of society, including those who struggle to use online banking. If banks are to withdraw the services that currently exist—whether in physical branches or through mobile banking—they need to make sure that an appropriate alternative is in place for their customers. I appeal to them to do that. At the very least, they need to rethink the withdrawal of mobile banking.

13:02

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I thank Rhoda Grant for bringing the debate to the chamber. As she and others have said, when branches started to close, we were all promised that the last branch would be kept open; when the last branch closed, we were all told that there would be at least a mobile branch; and now, for bank users in Fortrose, Kingussie and Beaully, even that is going. This year, on 13 May, the mobile branch will no longer frequent Fortrose; on 28 May, Kingussie will be without banking facilities; and, on 29 May, Beaully will also be left in the lurch.

Often, in such rural areas, the distance to the next automated teller machine or banking facility is huge. Who remembers the threat about five years ago to close the branch on Barra, with the local users being told that the closest ATM was about 15 miles away—ignoring the fact that it was on the other side of the water?

Cash still matters. It is always going to matter. The key fact is that it matters more to those who are least able to travel to the new banking sites. That includes small businesses that are trading hard to stay afloat. They have no time to travel for up to an hour to get to their closest bank to deposit cash.

It is the same for families and households, for whom every penny matters in order to make ends meet. It has been well documented that those who are most affected by poverty and those who deal the most with fragile finances will be left behind by these decisions.

Last week, as I queued in a supermarket, which shall remain nameless, to use an automated checkout, I was struck that one of those was free

but was card only and, of the six people waiting, I was the only one who could use it.

I join others in appealing to the banks to think again. We have in front us the figures, provided by the banking companies, about how usage is declining. However, I totally agree with Rhoda Grant that, so often, that is because they are open for only an hour or at inconvenient times—in other words, they are open to suit the banks and not the users. It is therefore no wonder when footfall declines because of that very reason.

Given that I have stood where the cabinet secretary is right now, tearing my hair out, it is important to say that there is a challenge for the Scottish Government, recognising that banking is completely reserved in relation to accountability and enforcement.

That is illustrated by an example in Aviemore, where there are plans for a banking hub to fill the gap that has been left by the closures of the RBS and Bank of Scotland branches. The town has been classified as not rural enough to secure the support and authority to go ahead with a banking hub, but that hub is essential. Although there is a post office, anyone who knows Aviemore will know how popular it is among tourists. Particularly during big events, the post office sometimes has to take deposits or provide cash in the region of thousands of pounds.

LINK and Cash Access UK have assessed Aviemore. I met them just before Christmas and, although they were very helpful, they concluded that, according to their rules, they could not classify Aviemore as being able to open a banking hub. It might be worth reminding members that the nearest bank is therefore in Inverness, which is at least 45 minutes' drive away, with limited public transport.

The Financial Conduct Authority is currently consulting on the rules surrounding rurality and where communities can establish banking hubs. That consultation closes in February. My one ask in the debate is, in essence, an open invitation to everyone to respond to that consultation. I would also be grateful if the cabinet secretary could ensure that the Scottish Government responds to the consultation to appeal for further discretion in order to truly take into account the rurality and distances that many of our Highlands and Islands communities are grappling with. It is about ensuring that, where a community wants and comes together to open a banking hub—which, by the way, is not just a replacement for branches, but usually a replacement for the last branch, and now a replacement for the closure of banking hubs—the rules allow for that, rather than standing in the way.

13:07

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Rhoda Grant for bringing this important motion to Parliament.

Let us be absolutely clear: mobile bank branches were introduced into rural Scotland as a sop to cover up a deeply unpopular and widely opposed bank branch closure programme. According to the consumer organisation Which?, the Lloyds Banking Group, the owners of the Bank of Scotland, who are behind these proposals, has shut down over 1,000 local branches since 2015, 144 of which were Bank of Scotland branches. Another 16 Bank of Scotland branches are scheduled to close in 2024. So this latest sting, to withdraw these mobile banking services the length and breadth of rural Scotland, is nothing less than a double-cross—it is a con trick.

It is the job of this Parliament to remind the people who we are talking about today, so let us be absolutely clear on that, too. In the banking crisis, £137 billion of public money—of our money; of the people’s money—was injected in the form of loans and capital to stabilise the financial system, to support the banks, including HBOS, and to bail out their shareholders. On top of that, £1 trillion of public money—of our money; of the people’s money—was put up to provide shareholder guarantees. And on top of that, the UK Government bought shares—over 40 per cent of the shares—in HBOS and Lloyds TSB to recapitalise the bank and so rescue it from total collapse. That is who we are talking about today.

On top of that, as the National Audit Office has reported, even when those shares were sold back, brokered by Morgan Stanley, it was at a catastrophic loss to the public purse of between £3 billion and £6 billion. So these banks owe us in every sense, and that is why it is right that, today, this Parliament of elected representatives calls out the unelected bankers, bosses and bureaucrats who were responsible then and who are responsible now.

Paul Sweeney: My friend is making a very powerful speech. In relation to his point about the main banks in the UK, does he note that the five main clearing banks in Britain account for 85 per cent of all current accounts whereas, in contrast, in Germany, there are 400 Sparkasse banks and more than 1,000 co-operative banks? Even if the powers of financial regulation are reserved, there is clearly an opportunity for us to further diversify the financial footprint in Scotland for the development of credit unions and other such co-operative organisations in Scotland.

Richard Leonard: Yes—I am greatly in favour of much more diverse ownership of the banking sector, as well as of the economy. That may take

the form of co-operatives, mutuals and regional and publicly owned institutions as part of the tapestry of that.

However, let us deal with the situation as we find it. To the Lloyds Banking Group and its chair, Sir Robin Budenberg, one of the instigators who contrived the bank bailout scheme in 2008; to his deputy, Alan Dickinson, the chief executive officer of RBS UK when that bank collapsed and had to be nationalised; to Lord Lupton, the deputy chair of Baring Brothers bank when it collapsed, and a former Conservative Party treasurer; and to the rest of the executive and non-executive directors who are behind this shameful proposal, we say: search your conscience, do the right thing, do not come down with selective amnesia, do not abandon our oldest neighbours, do not cut off rural Scotland, and do not desert our most vulnerable and our very poorest citizens.

Let me finish with the words of Jean-Paul Marat, which echo down the centuries:

“Do not be taken in when they paternally pat you on the shoulder and say there’s no inequality worth speaking of and no more reason to fight, because if you believe them they will be completely in charge in their marble homes and granite banks from which they rob the people”.

The people are not taken in. They are not going to be patted and patronised. They will not be robbed. They know there is a reason to fight this rigged economy, and fight it they will. I hope that, as they do that, they will get the full and unconditional backing of this Parliament.

13:13

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): First, I thank my Highlands and Islands colleague Rhoda Grant for securing this important debate on an issue that is having an impact right across our region, including in Fortrose, Beaully and Kingussie, as Kate Forbes mentioned and as I have highlighted in the past. There has also been an impact in Moray, and I know that my colleague Douglas Ross has secured a meeting with the banks to discuss the lack of and reduction in services there.

The debate highlights a worrying trend of vital services across a number of sectors being downgraded or withdrawn entirely from our rural communities. I remember, when I was a pupil at Orphir primary school in Orkney, how the bank van used to come round to the parish. In visiting the school, it distributed its largesse of branded piggy banks to excited schoolchildren. That was not without ulterior motives, of course, as we were encouraged to sign up and deposit our hard-earned pocket money into a Super Squirrel saver or some such account. That reflects a time, however, when banks were very much part of our

communities, working to bring services locally and to deliver the best services for their customers.

How times have changed. I was part of the Parliament's Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee, which looked into bank closures across Scotland in 2018. In the same year, I spoke in a members' business debate that was secured by my former colleague Dean Lockhart, which focused on the removal of cash machines across Scotland, including many in rural areas.

More and more banking services have been removed from our local communities, with constituents being forced to move to the last bank in town. As Kate Forbes highlighted, though, that bank later goes as well. In the committee's 2018 report on bank branch closures, we recognised the role of mobile banking, although not as a direct replacement for local branches. However, we also highlighted that

"most people did not seem to know exactly what services the alternatives to bank branches offer (such as post office, mobile banking vans), indicating perhaps a lack of adequate communication from banks in this regard."

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I have a similar motion in the system, for a debate raising the plight of customers of bank branches that have closed in my region, for example in Arran and Cumbrae. I thank members who have signed that motion. I encourage others to do so, so that we can continue the debate.

On the member's point about communication, I add that the response to my communications with many of the retail banks has been completely insufficient. The notice given to members and the wider public has been extremely poor, and the justification and rationale provided have been completely lacking. Does Jamie Halcro Johnston agree that more needs to be done to ensure that all retail banks hold not only to their legislative and regulatory commitments but to their social and moral obligations to their communities?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I absolutely agree with Jamie Greene. One of my concerns is how the banks came to such decisions. Did they adequately promote the services that were available? If banks were to be honest, would they prefer to have fewer branches and have everyone banking via computers and smartphones? I recognise those concerns. Therefore, when banks argue that mobile services are not being used, I ask how those services have been advertised to bank customers and local communities, and how they have engaged with them to ensure that the timings and locations of the visits are what the communities need.

Who is being impacted most by the withdrawal of mobile banking services? As other members have done, I suggest that it is largely people who

already have limited ability to access increasingly distant physical branches and also the many who find it difficult to use online banking, because of either the technical issues that members have highlighted or the fact that broadband can be so unreliable, as it is in parts of my region.

What happens when there is a problem with online banking, which is a situation of which I have personal experience? Despite my spending hours on the phone and online, my problem was solved only with a visit to an actual branch. Even with mobile banking vans, face-to-face engagement can often be key to solving issues or at least providing some reassurance for customers that their issue is being dealt with. For many, that possibility will now be lost.

There are, of course, other options. My parents have recently started using the pop-up post office in our parish, where limited banking services are available. However, that just highlights another issue that has already been raised in the debate. It is all very well for banks and others to suggest that services can be accessed at the post office, but it seems that, every week, we are losing local post office services across Scotland, often in some of our most remote and rural areas.

As I have said, such closures reflect a worrying trend that has seen a downgrading and removal of important rural services, which risks driving people away from our remote and rural communities. Although I know that times are changing, they cannot change so fast that communities, and in particular their most vulnerable people, are left behind.

13:18

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Rhoda Grant for securing this important debate and for highlighting the issue.

I echo calls from members across the chamber for the Bank of Scotland to reconsider its decision. Communities across rural Scotland will feel its impact disproportionately. Although my Shetland constituents will not be directly affected by the bank's announcement, the decision contributes to the ever-growing narrative that because the population of our rural and island areas is decreasing, services can be cut under that guise. It is precisely those communities that most rely on such services so, when they are gone, the impact is deeply felt. We have seen the closure of local bank branches due to the decline in footfall and the increase in internet banking. Mobile banking was introduced decades ago, in recognition of the fact that people in rural and island areas could not easily access physical banks in towns and cities.

We now see a decline in the use of the mobile service, with fewer mobile services being provided

compared with those from branches. Perhaps timings on the mobile route are inconvenient, as others have suggested, and perhaps online banking has become the default way for many to manage their personal finances. However, cutting the mobile banking service will leave those who do not or cannot bank online with more costly and time-consuming trips to do their banking.

I thank Age Scotland for highlighting its findings from the big survey 2023, which received more than 4,000 responses from over-50s in Scotland. A third of older people do not use the internet for banking, and only 29 per cent of over-65s said that they do so.

Internet connectivity remains an issue for many communities; it is not as reliable for some as it is for their counterparts in other parts of the country.

The big survey also revealed that 37 per cent of Shetland respondents did not use the internet for banking.

We know that there is greater reassurance in having an in-person service for those who are worried about scams or for people to feel more confident in dealing with personal finances. Scotland-wide, 43 per cent of older people who responded to the big survey 2023 had been targeted by a scam, and 39 per cent stated that the scam was something to do with accessing banking details or financial services.

Compared with the rest of the United Kingdom, Scotland has a high rate of people who mainly use face-to-face banking services. The figure is 34 per cent, compared with a UK average of 27 per cent.

Why should those who do not bank online be impacted in this way? My Liberal Democrat MP colleague Jamie Stone has been vocal about the announced cuts to services in the far north of Scotland, and has highlighted the impact on remote communities and older people. He said:

"It's only a few years ago that the UK Government stepped in to pay out the banks. I feel that this development goes against any notion of public service, especially for the elderly and those living in the remotest areas."

I could not agree more. Accessing a bank is a basic necessity. It should not be merely a case of putting profit before service.

It seems to me that it is always the most vulnerable and those who live on the peripheries whose service are the first to get the chop, yet the impact is significant. Greater investment in service provision needs to be focused in rural and island areas to improve connectivity, whether digitally or through improved transport links.

To conclude, communities can survive only where viable services exist to support them. If we continue with the narrative that a decreased population is ripe for service cuts, we will reap

what we sow, and the vicious cycle and downward spiral will continue.

13:22

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow Beatrice Wishart. I agree with her. She was absolutely right to raise the issue of the rising tide of scams in this country. I also agree with Kate Forbes, who talked about the need for the regulatory framework to be revisited and for the realities of the geography of our part of the world to be a greater consideration of the FCA and, indeed, the banks.

I congratulate Rhoda Grant on bringing the debate to the chamber. It is vitally important that the issue keeps coming back to the chamber.

I want to mention one specific aspect of the debate in my remarks: the freedom to access and use cash. In my view, that is an essential right that people have in relation to how they manage their financial affairs. A preference to use cash does not make a person a dinosaur, and it is not only about being unable or unwilling to use technology; it is also about financial dignity and choice. It is about the fundamental right that we all have to choose how we deal with our financial affairs. I believe that we have a duty to conserve the right to access and use cash, that that right is under threat, and that the service reductions are undermining it.

The reality is that people who are as far removed geographically from banking facilities as many of our constituents are having their choices curtailed. They are being punished by geography. They are being severely disadvantaged because they live in a rural area or in one of Scotland's many bank branch-free towns. Things are simply going to get much worse.

Richard Leonard will have to stay in his seat at this point, because I agree with what he said about the events of 2008. Many banks—the Royal Bank of Scotland and the Bank of Scotland—were bailed out by the taxpayer because of their incompetence, ineptitude and greed. Slowly but surely, those very banks are doing away with their branch networks.

That debt of obligation to the taxpayer has been conveniently shelved and forgotten—but not by the taxpayers. Rather than remembering that they owe the public a debt of gratitude for keeping their institutions alive when they nearly wrecked our economy, the banks across Scotland are slapping communities in the face by removing local access to cash.

It is right to recognise that it is cheaper for banks to operate digitally rather than physically. It is also correct to acknowledge that more people

than ever before are using digital banking services. That said, those facts do not mean that digital banking is universal, or even that it should be universal. Rhoda Grant made an excellent point about connectivity, which is another issue that we should continue to debate and highlight in this Parliament. The removal of the physical banking infrastructure is leaving behind people who are not skilled in technology or who have no desire to become digitally engaged. It is also reducing the choice that people have over their own money.

Some people enjoy using cash. There are people of my generation and older who feel that tangible cash in the form of banknotes in their wallets or purses somehow gives them an additional level of financial freedom and security. The fact is that cash can be exchanged independently of the digital infrastructure, which is viewed by some people with suspicion and distrust, with regard to both cybersecurity and privacy. It is the right of the citizen to use cash.

Preserving the accessibility of cash is not about resisting progress but safeguarding inclusiveness and autonomy in personal financial management. Cash signifies freedom of choice and is a lifeline for certain demographics and for activities that are not best suited to digitisation.

Banks benefited from public support in their time of crisis, and yet their withdrawal of physical banking infringes upon the very communities that supported them when they needed the public purse to bail them out. Although digital banking offers efficiency, it cannot replace the versatility and dignity that cash grants to individuals. Upholding access to cash defends the rights of those who are less adept with technology and upholds the fundamental freedom of choice that we should all enjoy in relation to our financial matters.

Let us not forsake the accessibility of cash for expediency but strive for financial dignity through the choice of cash for all the people of Scotland.

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

13:28

The Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy (Neil Gray): Before I take the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Scottish Government, I thank Rhoda Grant for lodging today's important motion and members for contributing to an excellent discussion. There have been brilliant speeches from Emma Harper, Murdo Fraser, Kate Forbes, Richard Leonard, Jamie Halcro Johnston, Beatrice Wishart and Stephen Kerr, which have contributed to building a consensus through the Parliament on the

importance of banks to local communities and on the social responsibility that banks have to those communities.

The Scottish Government is acutely aware of the frustration and concerns that are felt by many about the overall decline in in-person banking services across Scotland, which have now been exacerbated by the Bank of Scotland's recent decision to withdraw its mobile banking branch services, which as Rhoda Grant described, were supposed to be a compromise. Murdo Fraser made that point, too.

I assure Rhoda Grant that the Government shares those concerns—as I do, not least because, as someone who grew up in Orkney, I understand the impact that that decision will have on the most vulnerable individuals in our rural and island communities, who might struggle to access alternative services.

Rhoda Grant gave the example of the 36-mile round trip from Lairg to Golspie to access services. It is an area that I know well, so I understand the challenges that she articulated. That example and the example of the three-hour round trip that Emma Harper gave and, even worse, Kate Forbes's example of having to cross the water to access banking services, demonstrate a lack of consideration by banking institutions of individual needs, the geographical issues that people in remote, rural and island communities face and the impact of those closures.

The discussion that we have had today is essential because Lloyds Banking Group's decision to withdraw services has not been made in isolation. It continues a trend that has been witnessed across the banking sector in recent years. Since 2015, more than 60 per cent of Scottish bank branches have closed and, since 2018, more than 20 per cent of Scottish ATMs have closed. Those numbers are consistent with those in other regions in the UK, and it would be naive to assume that no more closures will follow.

That is of great concern to the Scottish Government, as we believe that the ability to access cash is essential in our society and that in-person banking still plays an important role in our communities, not least because of the points that Rhoda Grant made about concerns for people with digital literacy challenges and for businesses, which need to be able to bank. I have raised those issues with Lloyds Banking Group, and I will go into more detail about that shortly.

As Kate Forbes set out, the closures have a clear social impact, because those who are most likely to be affected are those who are most likely to be in poverty. Our concerns are not solely about having access to cash and services, as Emma Harper said. The point has not been raised thus

far in the debate, but bank branches are often seen as anchors in our smaller communities. That is something that I recognise from the closures in my constituency or in towns such as Kirkwall, where we have seen branches close. Their closure will have wider impacts on the dynamics of our town centres and high streets, particularly when it is the last bank in town.

Despite our concerns, the Scottish Government's regulatory power to act—as Kate Forbes said, although I suggest that she has more hair to pull out than I do, sadly—is extremely limited, because financial services are wholly reserved to the UK Government. I was therefore pleased to hear Stephen Kerr make the point that not only is it important for us to debate the issue despite it being reserved, but it is critically important that there is change at the UK Government and FCA level.

The UK Parliament recently legislated in this space by passing the Financial Services and Markets Act 2020 . We are encouraged by the access to cash provisions that are contained in the act. Most notably, the act gives the Financial Conduct Authority, which is the regulator of financial services in the UK, greater powers to protect access to cash by ensuring the provision of cash deposit and withdrawal services for personal and business current accounts across the UK.

Kate Forbes pointed out that the FCA has launched a consultation, and I also encourage colleagues to engage with it. The Scottish Government will certainly engage with the FCA in the coming period. I will meet the chief executive, Nikhil Rathi, next week to discuss the issue. This debate is incredibly timely, because I will be able to raise the concerns that have been well expressed today directly with the FCA to explore what can be done to ensure that the unique banking and cash access needs of Scotland's communities, people, small businesses and charities are being considered.

Jamie Greene: I hope that the corporate comms and Government relations people of our big banks are watching the debate and squirming in their offices, because the cross-party consensus is powerful. The regulation of the industry is a reserved matter, and I know that the debate has been had in Westminster and that MPs from all political parties will say the same thing. In his meetings with the FCA or in any conversations that he might have with the UK Government, can the minister press the importance of not just the removal of physical banking but the fact that, when banks take away the last opportunity for banking—mobile banking, which is the substance of the debate—and squander their obligation to communities, they will lose their trust and possibly even their business as a result.

Neil Gray: I have met Jamie Greene previously, because he has raised some of the concerns with me directly, and I have been able to use them in my interactions with Lloyds Banking Group. I can give him and other colleagues the assurance that I have made those very points. I met Lloyds Banking Group in November to discuss a range of topics, including branch closures, and to express to it my concerns and those of fellow MSPs with whom I have spoken.

Lloyds Banking Group has said to me that it has proactively sought to engage with Government when announcing closures, and it has provided assurances that, before it decided to withdraw the Bank of Scotland mobile branch service, thorough assessments were conducted across every impacted location to ensure that suitable alternatives were available for its customers.

Richard Leonard: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Neil Gray: If Richard Leonard will hold on, I will come back to him.

I note the intervention that Jamie Greene made about prior consultation and information for constituency and regional members. I encourage the banks to ensure that there is early discussion with representatives and communities. The earlier that information is available, the better able communities are to bring about a banking hub or alternative options.

Do we have time for an intervention, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Leonard can make a brief intervention.

Richard Leonard: The cabinet secretary uses the word “assessment”, which is the one that I have seen Lloyds Banking Group use. If there had been a genuine assessment, would that not mean that some of the mobile branches would stay, as well as some perhaps going, whereas the whole fleet is being taken out?

Neil Gray: I share Richard Leonard's scepticism about that, and I have expressed it directly in the conversations that I have had with Lloyds Banking Group.

As Murdo Fraser and others outlined, the number of alternative options for people and businesses to bank are limited. They are not like-for-like or an improvement; they are a derogation of service. They might mean that it is not possible to access advice and, in some cases, the post office might be closing as well.

Although the Scottish Government welcomes the engagement that we have had and is encouraged by some of the support that has been offered by Lloyds Banking Group, the debate

demonstrates that the substitutes or alternatives are less than ideal and often short term. It also provides an opportunity for colleagues to explore what more can be done collectively across the industry and Government to ensure that individuals and businesses can access the banking services that they require.

In our conversations with it, the sector has expressed a willingness to continue engagement with Governments on branch closures and an openness to hearing from elected representatives about specific concerns from their constituents. There is an opportunity for better collaboration across all parties so that we can have constructive conversations with the sector and work together to understand the impact of closures and better support the banking needs of individuals and businesses across Scotland.

Therefore, we are working to set up a cross-party round table with the sector. We already have agreement from Scottish Financial Enterprise, Lloyds Banking Group and the FCA to convene that. We will look to invite colleagues from all parties to participate and take forward the points that have been raised here today.

I extend my thanks again to all members for contributing to this important debate and congratulate Rhoda Grant again on bringing the motion to the chamber. I look forward to continuing to work closely with colleagues across Parliament to ensure that the banking sector's rapid transition to digitised services leaves nobody behind and that Scottish communities, businesses and individuals can continue to access the critical financial and banking services that they require.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:38

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is portfolio question time, and the first portfolio is education and skills. I remind members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

Education Maintenance Allowance (Uptake)

1. **Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to encourage the uptake of education maintenance allowance among eligible pupils. (S6O-02942)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The education maintenance allowance is vital in supporting young people from lower income households to overcome financial barriers and stay in education. It is a central component of the Government's support for young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Promotion and awareness raising of the programme locally remains the responsibility of our delivery partners, which are local authorities, the Scottish Funding Council and learning centres, such as colleges and schools, as set out in the annual guidance. However, the Scottish Government continues to work closely with those delivery partners in order to ensure that effective promotion is maintained. I would encourage every young person who is eligible to apply so that they can receive that vital support.

Stephanie Callaghan: School attendance can be a huge challenge for pupils with additional support needs. Flexibility is key, with many young people requiring reduced timetables to best meet their educational needs.

Recently, I heard that some of those pupils have been told that they are not eligible for the education maintenance allowance. That seems unfair. A part-time timetable is a reasonable adjustment to meet an identified support need. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that pupils with additional support needs are encouraged to remain in education without compromising access to critical financial support? Is accurate data on part-time timetables routinely available?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Stephanie Callaghan for raising that important issue. I share her concerns if young people with additional support needs are

finding themselves in that position, which is even more concerning given the reported national increase in the number pupils with additional support needs towards the end of last year.

The guidance makes clear the need for flexibility when administering EMA for young people with additional support needs, because we recognise that they often require non-standard attendance patterns that might fall short of full-time criteria. We know that institutions are also encouraged to be flexible when they agree on attendance patterns for ASN pupils, and that should be agreed on and written into the pupils' learning agreements.

We will continue to reiterate the need for that flexibility to delivery partners. In the meantime, if the member has any particular cases in which pupils with additional support needs have found themselves ineligible for the education maintenance allowance, I am happy for her to write to me with details on those matters.

Swimming Lessons (Primary School Curriculum)

2. Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has evaluated the extent to which swimming lessons are part of the school curriculum for primary school-aged pupils. (S6O-02943)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Schools in Scotland have the flexibility to decide on the content of their physical education lessons. The Scottish Government does not specifically evaluate the extent to which swimming lessons form a part of those decisions. We know that some local authorities offer swimming lessons as part of their physical education. In other cases, schools may take into account a range of factors, including the time that is required to travel to a swimming pool, in deciding against offering swimming lessons as part of PE. However, the Scottish Government has been working with Scottish Swimming, Education Scotland and other stakeholders to develop interventions and approaches to provide opportunities for children to become confident, competent and safer swimmers.

Fulton MacGregor: Learning how to swim is a life skill that has numerous physical, social and mental health benefits. I, and others, fully believe that every child should leave primary school having had the opportunity to learn to swim. Does the cabinet secretary agree that teaching our young people how to swim is an important skill that must be easily accessible to all across Scotland? Does the Government have any thoughts on how swimming lessons can be more embedded into the primary school curriculum?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises an extremely important point. I agree that learning to swim provides many physical and mental wellbeing benefits, and we should be mindful of that in relation to curriculum for excellence entitlements. That is why, following the publication of the evaluation of the 2022-23 pilots, the Government and Education Scotland will work with Scottish Swimming and sportscotland to look at the best approach for maximising the uptake of swimming among children and young people of school age. I am happy to ensure that the member is kept up to date on that work and I would welcome any further input that he may wish to provide on the matter.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Access to things such as swimming, sport, culture, languages and the arts is essential for young people to enjoy learning and become fit for the future, but some are worried that there is a lack of opportunity in those areas. I asked the Government about young people's participation in cultural activities and was told that it tracked sporting, but not cultural, activity. Is the cabinet secretary confident that all young people have an equal opportunity to experience those things and will she commit to gathering data to ensure that they are?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises an important point. As she will know, we are looking at what more we can do through the education reform agenda to ensure that those entitlements are met.

Curriculum for excellence provides a national curriculum that is not prescriptive, which is one reason why I cannot dictate that local authorities must deliver the swimming lessons mentioned in the previous question. I will speak to officials in relation to the specific point about cultural activity, to ensure that we are meeting those entitlements. That was one of the key recommendations that came from Professor Louise Hayward's review and I am keen that we look again at those entitlements nationally to ensure equality of access to our curriculum.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): The dangers of water are well understood in island communities such as Shetland. When I was a young child, I fell into Lerwick harbour and almost drowned. With that in mind, does the Scottish Government think that it is acceptable that 11-year-olds are leaving primary school without the life skill of being able to swim?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank the member for her question and for sharing some of her personal experience. I recognise the particular importance in island communities of having the skill of being able to swim.

As I intimated in my response to Ms Duncan-Glancy, I cannot mandate local authorities to deliver swimming education, but I am keen that we look at entitlements as part of our broader work with Education Scotland. The member's point is hugely important and I would be keen to work with her, and with others who have an interest in the subject, to see what more we might be able to do to support schools.

We must also recognise that not all schools are in island communities and we must be mindful of local contexts and of the availability and accessibility of swimming pools. When I was at school, many years ago, we had a swimming pool in the school, but that is not the case in many schools in Scotland, so we must be mindful of the availability of swimming pools to ensure that we achieve the equity that Ms Duncan-Glancy spoke about.

Universities and Colleges (Skills Planning)

3. Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it is working with universities and colleges to address the reported skills gap across the economy. (S6O-02944)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): As I confirmed to Parliament last month, and as per the recommendations made by James Withers in his report, the Scottish Government will take on skills planning at national level and will support the development of skills planning at the regional level. In so doing, we recognise that we must better align what is offered by the education and skills system with the strategic skills needs of the economy.

We are developing those approaches in close collaboration with colleges and universities and with others, particularly employers.

Alex Rowley: I have met many employers in the past year, and they consistently raise the key issue of the lack of skilled labour. What is the Government doing to encourage and support the development of skills, training and apprenticeships? Will the cuts to the Scottish Funding Council's budget result in fewer college places?

Graeme Dey: I know that Alex Rowley knows that it is important to differentiate between skills and labour shortages and to determine, as we are doing, what skills are specifically being asked for. That is why I have asked portfolio ministerial colleagues to carry out an exercise to identify the exact nature of current and likely future skills needs and, in so doing, to engage directly with colleges and universities to determine what resources and capacity currently exist to meet

those asks and how we can bring all of that together.

My direct conversations with the further and higher education sectors show that there is a strong appetite to develop the better alignment that is in everyone's interests.

On the particular point about apprenticeships, I assure Alex Rowley that it is our intention to seek to better align those with the economic needs of the country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a number of supplementary questions and I will try to get them all in.

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): Ensuring that there is an alignment between employers' needs and skills provision in our colleges and universities is essential to tackling skills shortages across the economy. In that light, what work is the Government doing on a sectoral basis and with employers to ensure that the skills required now, and in the future, are identified and that the funding of colleges and universities is aligned with supporting employers' needs?

Graeme Dey: Businesses and employers have a crucial role to play in helping to shape the provision in the system. The Government is already engaging with a wide variety of employers to look at the practicalities and options for delivering a more aligned offering. Of course, the skills planning team at Skills Development Scotland is at the forefront of that work.

Ivan McKee is right to highlight the need to approach the issue on a sectoral basis. From my direct engagement with employers, it is already clear to me that some sectors are more progressed than others when it comes to having the detail and specifics that we require in order to move forward. It may be that we pilot approaches as much on a sectoral level as on a geographical level. All that will be looked at in detail at an employers round table, which we will be putting together in the coming months. Learning providers will also be in the room, because we need all sides to be directly involved in order to deliver an agile, aligned and responsive skills and learning system.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): According to research from the Fraser of Allander Institute, Scotland's colleges boosted the Scottish economy by more than £8 billion, which is a more than tenfold return on investment.

What impact will last year's £26 million cut and the proposed £58.7 million cut to the net college resource, which is proposed in the Government's draft budget, have on that £8 billion contribution?

Graeme Dey: I think that the £26 million that Liam Kerr referred to is the transition fund, so it will have no direct impact.

The £58 million that he referred to was, of course, in line with the moneys that were reduced in year. In reality, the current year's money for the colleges will match almost entirely the substance of their budget for next year.

In an ideal world, we would like to be able to better fund our colleges. If Mr Kerr has any constructive ideas as we go through the budget process, we will be all ears.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): With regard to the current skills gap, how is the Scottish Government working with universities and colleges to promote the uptake of modern languages?

Graeme Dey: The Government is clear that access to learning modern languages is vital at all stages of education to equip children and young people with the skills that they need in an increasingly globalised world.

However, universities are autonomous institutions that are responsible for their course provision. It is for them to decide how to distribute the allocation of funded places between faculties and courses. Similarly, operational decisions, including resourcing and course provision, are matters for individual colleges. In both instances, we would look for that to be done in line with the needs of learners and the local economy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Questions 4 and 5 were not lodged.

Violence in Schools

6. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on what action it is taking to tackle violence in schools and the impact that this is having on both pupils and staff. (S6O-02947)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): No teacher, member of staff or pupil should have to suffer abuse in our schools. The series of summits that I held with a wide range of stakeholders on behaviour in schools concluded in November, and the behaviour in Scottish schools research, which has been published, provides an accurate national picture of behaviour in Scotland's schools.

In my statement to the Parliament on 29 November, I confirmed that a multiyear plan is in development to tackle instances of challenging behaviour through working with local authorities, trade unions and others. The plan will be published as soon as possible.

Ben Macpherson: I welcome that update and the different points that the cabinet secretary made in relation to progress. I fully agree that no one in our schools should feel unsafe or suffer

abuse of any kind. I am pleased that the final stage of the series of behaviour stakeholder summits has taken place.

What particular attention is being given to tackling gender-based violence in our schools, which affects both pupils and staff? What engagement has there been with expert organisations such as Zero Tolerance, White Ribbon and SHE—Social, Health and Education—Scotland in my constituency?

Jenny Gilruth: I am very concerned by the findings in the BISS research in relation to increased misogyny in our schools, which, as has been pointed out, was found to affect both pupils and staff.

In the coming weeks, we will publish a national gender-based violence framework for schools, which will support them in preventing and responding to gender-based violence.

We will also continue to work very closely with key stakeholders, including those that Ben Macpherson mentioned, on the gender-based violence in schools working group, which we jointly chair with Zero Tolerance and Rape Crisis Scotland. That work will ensure that the framework not only supports schools in tackling gender-based violence and sexual harassment, but supports everyone in our schools so that they are protected and cared for and have their rights and needs respected.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a number of supplementary questions. We have a little time in hand this afternoon, so I will take them all, but that is not an invitation to go on for overly long. I ask again for brevity.

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I have been inundated with correspondence from constituents who are raising concerns about the widespread violence in Fife schools. In Fife, 71 per cent of teachers who responded to a recent Educational Institute of Scotland survey reported experiencing violence on a daily basis, while officials said that members had been hospitalised due to physical attacks. It is concerning to see that we now have teenagers in Dunfermline engaging in attacks outside the school grounds. Such violence, including gender-based violence, has to stop. I am sure that the cabinet secretary accepts that any delay in dealing with the matter will allow violence to escalate and embed. When will the Government's plans be implemented to support our teachers and parents?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises a number of important points. She commented on some specific cases that I have not been sighted on, but if she wants to share any further detail with me, I would be keen to see it.

We will use the national research that has been published through the BISS research to inform our decision making around the national action plan. We must be cognisant, too, that we need to trust teachers in our classrooms to deliver the learning, teaching and behaviour that we expect in our schools. Yesterday, I visited two schools in Glasgow that are working to embed strong relationships to support better behaviour across the board.

We are working at pace on the plan with the Scottish advisory group on relationships and behaviour in schools and with the wider range of partners that I mentioned in my response to Mr Macpherson. In December, I met teaching unions, following my update to the Parliament, to discuss our response. We expect to publish the plan early this year. I am more than happy to write to Roz McCall with more detail on that. She will understand that, as cabinet secretary, I require the buy-in of and co-production with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, given that it runs our schools. I recognise the urgency of the issue, as the member intimated in her question.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): In just the past few weeks, I have met a pupil support assistant with a broken wrist and a teacher who is off on long-term sick leave because of stress, both as a result of violence in the classroom. The education secretary knows that there is some disappointment and a degree of anger that the message from the statement in December was that teachers need better training. That cannot be the answer—they need more in-class support and more specialist support. I urge the education secretary to look again at the issue of boundaries and consequences, because I think that we have got that out of kilter. Will she look at that again to make sure that we get it right?

Jenny Gilruth: The member made similar suggestions in a debate at the end of the previous term. I tried to intervene on him at that time, but he did not allow me to do so, if he recalls. That was not the message from my statement to the Parliament at the end of term. My statement very much recognised the challenges, but we also need to be cognisant, as a Parliament, that the Government does not run our schools directly. We trust our local authorities, such as Fife Council in the member's constituency, to support their school staff on the ground. The Government also has a responsibility here, which is why I introduced the national action plan, but that has to be done in conjunction with local authorities.

The member has given a number of examples, and he has talked again about consequences. I have been very clear that the national action plan will set out some of that in more detail. The feedback from headteachers at the BISS research

events included a call for more of that to be set out at national level. I am keen to give that clarity so that headteachers understand the options that they have at their disposal. However, we need to be careful not to patronise the profession, which very much recognises how to develop and deliver good-quality learning and teaching and how to set boundaries for our young people. As part of that process, teachers also need support from their local authorities. That is why local authorities and COSLA must be key to the development of the national action plan and to the SAGRABIS work that I mentioned in my response to Roz McCall.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: In order to get in the next supplementary questions, I will need a bit more brevity in both the questions and the responses.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Thank you for your indulgence, Presiding Officer.

The cabinet secretary will know that non-contact time is crucial in addressing the conditions in schools. Does she have the report that she commissioned on delivering that? If she does, when will she be able to share some of the detail with the Parliament?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much agree with the member on this issue. I do not yet have that report from my officials, but I am happy to write to the member as soon as I have received it, because I recognise the ask for additionality in relation to class contact time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is the example to follow.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): What support can the Scottish Government offer to Northfield academy, in my Aberdeen Donside constituency, given that Education Scotland inspectors recently stated that more needs to be done to make pupils feel safe?

Jenny Gilruth: As the member will know, I visited Northfield academy back in August to understand the action that it was taking to address some of the concerns at the school. Undeniably, a number of challenges remain, but I am advised that the leadership team at the school is committed to driving improvements for pupils and staff alike.

Although decisions on the specific support that might be needed are matters for local authorities and schools, as part of our commitment to ensuring that schools are safe and consistent environments for all, we are working on the national action plan that I mentioned in previous responses.

Specifically in relation to Northfield academy, I have requested from my officials an update from the interim chief inspector of education on any

additional support that we might be able to provide the school and the local authority at this time.

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

Given the extent of the problem, does the cabinet secretary think that it would be worth while to encourage schools to get the debate on this issue going at a local level—with the involvement of parents, pupils, teachers and all staff in the schools—to try to resolve it at a local level and engage people on the problem?

Jenny Gilruth: The member makes an interesting and positive suggestion. Yes, I think that it would be worth doing that.

Over the past few months, a number of pieces of research have been published on behaviour in Scotland's schools. At the turn of the year, research was published on attendance and the integration of home and school during the pandemic. That is part of the challenge, so it would be worth while pursuing the member's suggestion about a local approach to re-engage families with the school. I would be more than happy to work with the member on that issue.

Traditional Skills (Training Programmes)

7. Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to address any challenges in relation to the accessibility of traditional skills programmes to ensure that young people have access to the same career opportunities. (S6O-02948)

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Historic Environment Scotland continues to champion traditional skills and is working with stakeholders across the country to address traditional skills gaps to ensure that our historic buildings can thrive as part of the country's sustainable future.

In addition, Skills Development Scotland delivers careers information, advice and guidance in all state secondary schools and in dedicated centres and community locations nationwide. Its all-age service empowers people from all communities to make their own learning and career decisions based on the best available career intelligence.

Miles Briggs: The closure of Edinburgh College's stonemasonry programme has raised serious concerns about the future of stonemasonry in the capital and across Scotland. A recent stonemasonry survey report found that more than 200,000 buildings in Scotland were built before 1919, and it stated that we will

"need a healthy supply of stonemasons to adapt"

them

"to ensure our buildings are fit for purpose ... for decades to come".

What work is the Scottish Government doing to provide for future generations of stonemasons? What work is being undertaken to develop new models to deliver national courses and apprenticeship schemes?

Graeme Dey: I associate myself with Miles Briggs's comments in relation to the importance of the matter. As he does, I recognise the need to ensure that stonemasonry, like other traditional skills, is prioritised in our apprenticeship and training offering. The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development and I have tasked Historic Environment Scotland with developing proposals for a sustainable future model that ensures that we will continue to be able to access the skills that are required to maintain our historic buildings.

However, it must be recognised that delivery of stonemasonry apprenticeships is costly and that the number of apprentices involved do not provide a sufficient critical mass to allow for courses to be delivered across a multitude of locations. Therefore—although I do not wish to prejudge matters—a model involving a centre or centres of excellence might be the best way forward. Currently, three colleges—City of Glasgow College, UHI Moray and Forth Valley College—are engaged in such delivery.

I hope that I have provided Miles Briggs with some reassurance. Given his long-standing and genuine interest in the topic, I would be happy to continue to engage with him on it.

Schools (Pupil Wellbeing)

8. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to ensure that teachers are fully equipped to safeguard the wellbeing of pupils. (S6O-02949)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): The wellbeing and safety of children and young people in Scotland is a key priority for the Government. Our national guidance for child protection in Scotland describes the responsibilities and expectations for everyone who works with children and young people, and it emphasises the key role that the education workforce has in supporting and protecting children.

Education Scotland's safeguarding in education national network brings together local authority leads to share safeguarding and education practice. The professional standards for Scotland's teachers also set out the role of teachers in ensuring the wellbeing and safety of children and young people.

Pam Gosal: Last month, the United Kingdom Government published comprehensive guidance for teachers on how to support pupils who question their gender in schools. The guidance acknowledges the critical role that biological sex plays in maintaining safety and promoting equality in schools, and it recognises the profound psychological effects that social transitioning has on young people and the need for parental involvement in such life-changing decisions. Does the cabinet secretary agree that teachers should be fully equipped to discuss those issues with pupils? Will the Government introduce the same guidance for Scottish schools?

Jenny Gilruth: As the member might be aware, we are currently reviewing our relationships, sexual health and parenthood guidance, the consultation on which closed at the end of November last year. We received more than 4,000 responses to the consultation, which my officials are currently analysing. A report on that consultation will be produced shortly.

The initial findings suggest that the guidance needs to give more clarity, and it will be updated in the light of that feedback and other findings of the consultation in due course. I would be more than happy to write to the member with an update as soon as we publish the consultation data.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time. There will be a brief pause before we move on to the next item of business.

Public Service Values

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-11831, in the name of Shona Robison, on Scotland's public service values. I invite those members who wish to speak in the debate to please press their request-to-speak button. I note that we do not yet seem to have with us in the chamber the Government minister who is responsible for closing the debate. Perhaps that could be chased up. Nonetheless, we will have to start the debate in his absence, which is regrettable. I call the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Shona Robison, to speak to and move the motion.

14:56

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (Shona Robison): People across Scotland, including all of us in the chamber, rely on public services, whether we are talking about the high-quality education and training that our children and young people get, the access to the right treatment and care that our loved ones need when they are unwell, the support that victims and witnesses of crime receive through the justice system or the support that the most vulnerable members of our community obtain through our progressive social security system.

This Government is determined to maintain and improve our public services, despite our facing the most challenging financial situation since devolution. Our block grant funding, which is derived from United Kingdom Government spending, has fallen by 1.2 per cent in real terms since 2022-23, and our capital spending power is due to contract by almost 10 per cent in real terms over five years.

Our approach to maintaining our public services is informed by our shared values, as set out in Scotland's national performance framework, which include treating people with kindness, dignity and compassion. Those values, alongside our missions of equality, opportunity and community, guide everything that we do. We believe that everyone in Scotland should experience high-quality services that are delivered effectively and efficiently, and that, when people need further support for whatever reason, public services should be able to identify those needs early, build relationships with them to understand their needs and work together to support them in whatever way they need to be supported.

Crucially, we also believe that those people with the broadest shoulders should be asked to contribute a little more. That is right and fair, and

our progressive approach—our social contract—sets Scotland apart from the rest of the UK.

As I have said many times, the Chancellor of the Exchequer's autumn statement was a worst-case scenario for Scotland. The fiscal settlement from the UK Government undermines the viability of public services in Scotland and, indeed, of services across the whole of the UK. Responsibility for the situation lies with the UK Government, which has brought us a decade of austerity, Brexit's undermining of living standards and the calamitous Liz Truss mini-budget. Furthermore, when drawing up his autumn statement, the chancellor was faced with a choice on how to use the £27 billion of fiscal headroom that he had available to him. He chose to cut taxes at the expense of public services. Indeed, real-terms cuts are being made across a number of UK Government departments, including the Department for Health and Social Care.

Our values and missions are at the heart of the 2024-25 Scottish budget and have informed all the choices that we have made in response to an incredibly challenging economic environment. Importantly, the UK Government has not similarly prioritised public services through its recent policy decisions—in fact, it has done quite the reverse.

Within the constraints of the current devolution settlement, we are using all the powers that are available to us to maximise investment in our public services. Indeed, the Scottish Fiscal Commission has estimated that our income tax policy choices since devolution will raise an additional £1.45 billion in 2024-25 compared with what would have happened if we had matched UK Government policy.

Those spending decisions build on our successful legacy of investing in our public services and delivering meaningful reform that has improved outcomes for many people across Scotland. For example, the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 underpins the most significant public service reform since devolution and continues to deliver significant savings and improved outcomes. Police Scotland is on track to deliver cumulative savings of more than £2 billion by 2026, and the creation of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has removed around £482 million from the fire service cost base over the past 10 years.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I very much agree with the cabinet secretary in relation to the reforms of the police and fire services and about the decluttering of the public service landscape. Does she think that there is scope for further decluttering?

Shona Robison: Yes, I do. There is a lot of opportunity and scope for shared services and

public bodies working together and, in some cases, potentially merging. However, we must be careful that, in doing so, we keep the focus on delivery rather than on organisational change, because there is a danger of focusing on the latter. In my 48-page letter to the Finance and Public Administration Committee, which I sent before Christmas, I laid out some of the detail of our extensive 10-year reform programme. I am happy to hear suggestions about how we can go further than that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am still a bit shocked that the cabinet secretary is relying on police reform as an example of great reform by the Scottish Government. We had three chief constables in almost as many years. Police reform cost more money than it saved, and the reality is that it was a disaster, especially the centralisation of control rooms. Why is the cabinet secretary using that as an example?

Shona Robison: The most important outcome of police reform is the outcomes for victims of serious crime, particularly sexual offences, rape and murder, and the results that Police Scotland has been able to deliver consistently across Scotland.

We have also prioritised tackling poverty, particularly child poverty, and we have made significant progress by working collaboratively and creatively with partners. As a result of this Government's policy interventions, including the expansion of the Scottish child payment, it is estimated that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty in 2023-24. *[Interruption.]* I know that the Tories do not want to hear about child poverty, but this Government wants to talk about child poverty.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I take this opportunity to interject. If members wish to raise an issue, they know that there are ways to do that, including by standing up and seeking to make an intervention.

Shona Robison: As I said, it is estimated that 90,000 fewer children will live in relative and absolute poverty in 2023-24. Notably, poverty levels are lower in Scotland than they are in England.

For more than 75 years, our national health service has been a universal public service, free for all at the point of need. We are resolutely committed to those founding principles and have a strong record of investing in our health and social care sector. For example, we have invested £193 million in our national treatment centres programme. We opened two new centres in Fife and Highland in spring last year, and two further centres will open or expand early this year. Together, the centres are planning to deliver more

than 20,000 additional procedures by 2024-25, which will improve patient outcomes.

Alongside mitigating the impacts of UK Government decisions, the scale of the current financial challenge means that we must change the way that we deliver public services in Scotland. In the short term, we need to reduce costs and improve effectiveness further. However, as we look at the demographic projections for Scotland, which were made worse by Brexit and the UK Government's approach to immigration, combined with the anticipated level of demand on public services, we know that we must change the way that we deliver services in the long term to fundamentally improve people's lives and reduce their need for on-going support.

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): Inward migration into the UK was at a record level last year, but that was not the case for Scotland. Why?

Shona Robison: Actually, if we look at net immigration from the rest of the UK, at least 10,000 people—who may have come from various parts of the world previously—are moving from the rest of the UK to Scotland, and 7,000 of those who are coming each year are of working age. I would have thought that the Tories would welcome that, but clearly not.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the member give way?

Shona Robison: No, thank you.

In December, I provided the Finance and Public Audit Committee with a detailed update that set out the Government's aims and principles for an ambitious 10-year programme of public service reform. The update included the actions that we need to take over the next two years to bring together a common approach for reform; to further align our policies and reform programmes; and to enable and empower our partners to act.

In short, the Government's vision is for all public services to be person centred and designed around the unique needs of individuals; to be focused on prevention and prioritising early intervention and support to reduce the need for crisis intervention in the future; to be place based and designed in ways that best meet the distinctive needs of communities across Scotland; and to be built on partnership and creative collaboration with partners.

Achieving that vision will not be easy, and the Scottish Government cannot do that alone. We therefore want to build a consensus around those new ways of working with local government, the third sector and other partners in order to achieve it.

The Government has a clear plan to deliver reform. We are working with local government and

the public to take forward reforms that enable us to change how services are delivered at a local level. We remain committed to delivering the local governance review and the democracy matters initiative alongside the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; to exploring single authority models; and to delivering on commitments to reform, funding and accountability in the Verity house agreement.

We are aligning all of our major policy reforms and investments around our shared vision for public services. Across our education and skills sector, we are reforming to make sure that everyone in Scotland is supported to fulfil their potential. We will continue to support schools and local authorities to improve the attainment of children and young people who are impacted by poverty; that is underpinned by £1 billion-worth of investment in the school attainment challenge in the current session of Parliament.

We are continuing to reform our justice system to prioritise victims and witnesses; to protect front-line services; to make better use of digital approaches; and to support greater collaboration between partners to keep communities safe. In health and social care, the development of the national care service builds on our strong commitment to high-quality, consistent and fair public services. Our programme of co-design is making sure that people are at the heart of those developments, and that human rights principles are embedded, as we deliver for the more than 230,000 people in Scotland who receive social care support.

We are also driving innovation and making public services more efficient, as set out in the resource spending review. Our single Scottish estate programme has already reduced the size and cost of, and emissions from, the public sector estate. It has delivered savings of more than £4 million through the co-location of services and the closure of surplus offices in Edinburgh and Dundee. Work is under way to consolidate the public sector estate in Glasgow from five premises into one new net zero carbon property to deliver associated carbon reductions alongside anticipated revenue savings of more than £3 million a year from 2028-29.

We are expanding the use of national collaborative procurement. That approach has the potential to deliver significant efficiencies: for every £1 that is invested in Scottish Government-led collaborative procurement, more than £40 is returned in financial benefits. In 2022-23, more than £130 million was saved through that approach.

Digital technology and infrastructure is also a key enabler of public service reform. For example, we invested £1.8 million in a new digital

dermatology service in 2023. The programme has the potential to reduce demand for out-patient appointments by up to 50 per cent, and it will lead to a better and quicker service for patients as well as reducing pressure on our workforce. The Scottish Government is continuing to review its own workforce numbers carefully to ensure that we are delivering for the people of Scotland as effectively and efficiently as possible. From March 2022 to the end of September 2023, the size of our contingent workforce has reduced by 27 per cent, thereby reducing reliance on temporary staff and contractors.

I have been clear that the Scottish Government cannot do this alone. Collaboration is central to how we deliver ambitious reform across the public sector. In the past year, we have strengthened our collaboration with local government, public bodies, business and the third sector. We have worked effectively with the Scottish Green Party through the Bute house agreement, and I welcome continued collaboration across this Parliament as we seek to deliver collectively for the people of Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Government's continued investment in delivering public services for Scotland's people and communities; notes, however, the economic damage of Brexit, which means up to £3.7 billion of potential funding for these services has been lost; recognises the Scottish Government's legacy of successful public service reform in recent years that has improved outcomes for people and communities, including health and social care partnerships and Social Security Scotland; further recognises the valuable role that public sector workers play in delivering precious public services; supports the Scottish Government's ambitious public service reform projects in the education, justice and health and social care sectors, which will deliver further reforms over the next decade, including by focusing on prevention and early intervention, involving people and communities in the design of public services and embracing the power of digital technologies; believes that further reform to public services will be necessary to ensure that public services remain fiscally sustainable and continue to improve outcomes for Scotland's people and communities, and welcomes, therefore, constructive contributions from partners across the public sector, third sector and business community, as all stakeholders work to protect and reform Scotland's public services together.

15:10

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, as a practising NHS general practitioner.

We have listened to the Deputy First Minister, who talks as if the SNP has not actually been in charge of public services for the past 16 years. Once again, this SNP Government treats the people who really matter—the public, and public sector workers—as if they are fools. SNP

ministers persistently refuse to admit their failures. They expect everyone to believe that they are competent despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary—and, to pay for their incompetence, they go all out to tax workers and businesses for working hard. The Scottish Retail Consortium says that the SNP Government will be back for even more in taxes next year because it will fail to reform the public sector.

The Deputy First Minister claims that her party has created a

“legacy of successful public service reform ... that has improved outcomes for people and communities”,

including in health and social care. Really? That is as delusional as Humza Yousaf's fantasy economics and his calculation that independence would lead to Scottish households being £10,000 a year better off.

Shona Robison: The member mentioned health and social care, which gives me an opportunity to ask him why his Government is reducing health and social care spending. It is down by £8 billion, which represents a cut of 4.7 per cent. How can he justify that?

Sandesh Gulhane: I think that the Deputy First Minister needs to concentrate on the facts. Not only is this the Scottish Parliament, but you are in charge of healthcare here in Scotland, and what you should be doing—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind all members that they need to speak through the chair. Otherwise, they are referring to me, and I have no responsibility in that regard.

Sandesh Gulhane: It is little wonder that, on 20 November 2023, the Deputy First Minister refused to confirm, when asked, whether SNP ministers always tell the truth.

Today, we are debating Scotland's public service values. Let us start by considering the SNP's catalogue of shame in respect of the public services of healthcare, education and procurement. We have lengthy accident and emergency waiting times, and targets have not been met. We have worsening cancer treatment waiting times, with a quarter of patients waiting two months to see a specialist, and today we have seen reports that Scotland has some of the worst cancer survival rates in the world. We have woeful workforce planning and a lack of ambition while vacancy rates for nurses are at record levels and the rates across many other NHS professions are at a four-year high. On public health, the SNP has by its own admission taken its eye off the ball. Drug and alcohol-related deaths are higher in Scotland than anywhere else in Europe. Some 1,300 babies have been born with drug dependency since 2017. That is disgraceful.

This SNP Government is all about soundbites and promises that it consistently fails to deliver on, telling us each time that lessons will be learned. Let us consider school-age children. The SNP has failed to address the educational attainment gap. That is another failed promise. Sixteen years of botched SNP reforms that blew £1 billion have ruined an education system that was once the envy of the world. According to a poll in *The Scotsman* just this week, the majority of Scots believe that the SNP is running public services poorly.

The SNP also sets a very low bar when it comes to setting an example to others in Scotland. There is a police investigation into the party's finances, which is fuelling doubts about transparency and adherence to the rule of law. Of course, we are well accustomed to the SNP blaming its failures and incompetence on others. I am not talking about the Scottish Greens, although some in this chamber clearly blame them.

The SNP is also quick off the mark in making claims about others that do not stand up to scrutiny. For example, a misleading post on the Scottish Government's official Twitter account claims that the autumn statement resulted in only an extra £10.8 million of funding for our NHS. However, that is just spin, because HM Treasury provided a record £43 billion to fund public services in Scotland, and the Scottish Government can spend the funding in any way that it wants. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Members!

Sandesh Gulhane: In the same way, the SNP Government decided not to spend on Scotland's NHS the £18 billion that it has received by way of consequential from NHS spending down south since coming to power.

It is about SNP choices, such as having 160 officials—costing £9.77 million a year—working on preparations for a bloated national care service.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Will Sandesh Gulhane give way?

Sandesh Gulhane: No.

Other examples are the spending of £7 million per year on pretend overseas embassies, millions of pounds on a failed deposit return scheme and hundreds of millions of pounds on ferries—I could go on.

While we lament the performance of the SNP-Green Government, we must stress our admiration for Scotland's amazing public sector workers, who deliver vital services. The trouble is, those workers are undermined by the SNP Government's mismanagement, year in and year out, and by the SNP's failure to properly support local government. To deliver well and stay true to public

service values, we need to do things differently. We need to recognise a reorganisation of Scotland's public sector that prioritises efficiency, preventative care and productivity.

No one is saying that reform is easy. The Scottish Parliament Finance and Public Administration Committee has been tasked with conducting an inquiry into such reform. That is important work. Audit Scotland has called for urgent reform and highlights that the SNP-Green Scottish Government has made no progress since 2016. It is vital to deliver reform in order to deal with long-term financial pressures.

The Scottish Conservatives believe that the principles of the Christie commission on the future delivery of public services are as important today as they were when they were published in 2011. Back then, the Scottish Government was told:

"Unless Scotland embraces a radical, new, collaborative culture throughout our public services, both budgets and provision will buckle under the strain",

with a

"fragmented, complex and opaque"

system hampering the collaboration between organisations, and an approach that is

"'top-down' and ... lacks accountability",

while failing to deliver to meet the needs of individuals and communities.

The Scottish Government has not heeded what the Christie commission said. Instead, the SNP has the highest taxes in the UK, despite receiving around £2,000 more per Scot than is received from the UK Treasury for people in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Stephen Kerr: Will Sandesh Gulhane take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Dr Gulhane is about to conclude.

Sandesh Gulhane: I would take Stephen Kerr's intervention if I could.

We need to grasp the thistle. Reform is possible if there is a will to do it. The SNP's raising of taxation to record levels in the history of devolution, while the capacity of public services continues to be reduced, demonstrates that its public sector model is unsustainable. A major review of Scotland's public sector is required and must be implemented, lest our services face a disastrous collapse.

I move amendment S6M-11831.2, to leave out from the first "welcomes" to end and insert:

"recognises the valuable role that public sector workers play in delivering vital public services in Scotland; further recognises the urgent need for reform within the public sector for the reasons set out by the Finance and Public

Administration Committee; believes that the principles of the Christie Commission remain important, but that the delivery of these principles has been undermined by the economic mismanagement of successive Scottish National Party administrations and the failure to properly support local government, which is on the front line of so many public services, and urges the Scottish Government to implement a comprehensive re-organisation of the Scottish public sector to prioritise efficiency, preventative care and productivity.”

15:18

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):

There is a very important discussion to be had about the urgently needed reform of our public services in Scotland, in order that they be fit to meet the huge challenges that we face in responding to climate change, demographic change and technological change. Sadly, the motion that is before us does not really rise to that opportunity. Having gone through the party’s spin machine, the Government’s mangled motion comes to us from another planet—one on which the SNP has a genuine interest in or a credible plan to reform public services in Scotland.

Back in the real world, the SNP has never been invested in the hard, honest work of public service reform. It came to power in 2007 on a platform of no reform, and it has spent 17 years ensuring just that. The single change that matters to it has come ahead of all else, so we have had populism rather than progress, and party before people.

Members need not just take my party-political word for it. In 2023, the Parliament’s Finance and Public Administration Committee conducted a wide-ranging inquiry into the Scottish Government’s public service reform agenda—or lack of it. The committee heard an abundance of evidence, including from Audit Scotland, which laid bare the paucity of the Government’s track record of reform, which is abysmal. It said that there was

“limited evidence”

of any

“real difference in improving the quality and effectiveness of services provided to the public”.

What little reform the Government has engaged in has, of course, been botched, and often reversed in fairly short order. The motion that we are debating cites health and social care partnerships as one of the Government’s successes—so successful, of course, that they are to be scrapped as part of the chaotic national care service plans. Those plans are themselves an unmitigated disaster, with spiralling costs, no progress after years of prevarication and delay, and an incompetent minister saying that the proposals are “a little bit hard” for them to get their “head around”.

All the while, delayed discharge soars across Scotland. It has now reached—just in recent weeks—its worst ever level. That is despite the Deputy First Minister’s personal commitment to end delayed discharge entirely by the end of the year—that year, of course, was 2015, not 2023. Day by day, GP access and NHS dental care are increasingly a myth for families across Scotland.

We could also take education reform as an example. We are three years on from the SQA scandal: the SQA was, rightly, going to be scrapped, and Education Scotland to be replaced, but on they roll, unabated, unchanged and unrepentant, across the forest of reports and commissions that now lie on the floor, undelivered. Any real possibility of reform is stifled by the Government. The latest cabinet secretary announced just in November that the one attempt at reform from the past decade—John Swinney’s useless regional improvement collaboratives—is to be wound down. What a track record of success. So committed is the Government to not reforming education that, just last month, the Deputy First Minister slashed the education reform budget.

Any programme of reform must be about genuinely improving the lives of the population. The absence of any programme of reform and of adaptation to a changing country means that our services have become less efficient and ever less appropriate to the needs of our citizens. It places those services in a spiral of decline. One in six Scots are languishing on an NHS waiting list. PISA figures show that Scottish pupils are a year behind their English counterparts in maths. There is falling life expectancy in this country. It really matters. We have to get reform right for the sake of the public services on which we all rely. I am afraid that the Government’s reality-denying motion does little to fix the mess that it has made of our NHS or our education system.

The Tory amendment references the Christie commission principles, which we have already heard a bit about. However, I wonder whether we should not simply collectively acknowledge that none of that was ever implemented. It is not that the commission was wrong or that those principles were incorrect or not based on sound values; indeed, much of what Campbell Christie had to say was prophetic. He set out the consequences of an inadequate Government, which have come true, to the detriment of the country. However, all of that was 13 years ago. Frankly, I find the continued use of Campbell Christie’s name to validate an approach that has been wilfully ignored to be disrespectful. It is the antithesis of his call for practical reforming co-operation and the values that he espoused in his work in our trade union movement across Scotland.

Christie called for a programme that was “urgent and sustained”. Nothing could be further from the truth. After 16 years of decline, Scottish Labour is clear that our public services are in desperate need of reform. However, we know from the cold reality of experience and the chaotic heat of current conduct that this Government cannot be trusted to do it. Only by getting rid of Scotland’s two bad Governments can any meaningful change take place.

I move amendment S6M-11831.1, to leave out from first “welcomes” to end and insert:

“recognises that communities in Scotland have been let down by the Scottish National Party (SNP) to the extent that poverty is rising, life expectancy is falling and health inequalities are widening, and that the SNP administration has a 16-year record of failure in reforming public services, as highlighted by Audit Scotland, COSLA and other public bodies in the recent Finance and Public Administration Committee inquiry; further recognises that the promises of a healthcare system free at the point of need have been broken by this SNP administration, with almost one in six people in Scotland on waiting lists, whilst £1.2 billion has been wasted on delayed discharge since it promised to eradicate the practice, and that a lack of a credible workforce plan has resulted in millions being spent every year on agency workers; considers that the botched National Care Service and stalled education reform under this SNP administration are particularly egregious examples of its failure to reform public services; welcomes the invaluable work that public sector workers continue to do, and calls on the Scottish Government to urgently provide clarity to public sector bodies, unions and workers regarding its plans for the public sector workforce; notes that, if Scotland’s economy had grown at the same rate since 2012 as the UK overall, it would be £8.5 billion larger, and calls on the Scottish Government to prioritise the delivery of economic growth in all parts of Scotland to create jobs, boost incomes, reduce poverty, and allow for greater investment in, and reform of, public services, including transforming the NHS and social care system to meet the needs of people and communities, and embracing the power of digital technologies.”

[*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Marra is seated and has concluded his remarks.

15:24

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): What a pompous and insensitive title for a debate. We have heard lofty speeches about “Wha’s like us?” at a time when people are stuck in ambulances outside accident and emergency departments and are waiting in pain on ever-longer NHS waiting lists; when children from poor backgrounds are stuck in poor educational outcomes; when people who are desperate for a home see the SNP Government slash the housing budget; and when the drug death rate remains the highest in Europe.

This debate is a sign of a Government that has lost touch with the lives of ordinary people and their struggles. The debate is not about public

service values: it is all about the SNP Government setting out its excuses and providing cover for what will be a savage budget ahead. Ministers are hunting for everyone and anyone as the cause of what is a financial predicament of their own making. Brexit, the Tories, the pandemic and probably, somehow, also the Welsh Labour Government and Keir Starmer are all to blame, according to the SNP, as the true cause of the SNP’s own mismanagement of the public finances and failure to reform public services.

I have a test. The more the SNP people hunt for blame, the more we know the deep financial hole they are in. I agree that the Conservatives have been a terrible Government, and I agree that Brexit is damaging, too, but those are not new revelations. They have not just happened: we have known about them for some time.

Why is the SNP suddenly surprised and panicking now? We have heard for years the warnings from the Christie commission, Audit Scotland and the Scottish Fiscal Commission. Take the Scottish Fiscal Commission. It warned in May 2018 that the Scottish Government was facing a £1.7 billion shortfall in public finances over the following five years. The commission said back then—five years ago—that expected wage growth reductions would result in a significant drop in income tax revenues, as Scotland’s economy would lag behind that of the rest of the UK, with growth remaining below 1 per cent a year until 2023—which was last year.

The Auditor General warned at least as far back as 2018—again, five years ago—that the NHS was not in a financially sustainable position. He repeated his warnings in November 2022. He said that

“Failure to make the necessary changes to how public services are delivered will likely mean further budget pressures in the future”.

Now, Scotland’s NHS boards are forecasting a deficit of £395 million this year. Way back in 2011, 13 years ago, the Christie commission warned about the need to increase preventative spend to stop demand swamping public service capacity.

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

Willie Rennie: No.

Despite all those warnings, which stretch back years, it is apparently now someone else’s fault. The panic among SNP ministers has been concerning to observe. I have never witnessed them cutting budgets to such a degree in-year in the way that they have done in this financial year. Who has suffered? It is colleges and universities—twice—and farmers, because of what has happened with farm support.

The flexible workforce development fund is gone this year. Even the NHS budget was not safe.

Alasdair Allan: Will the member give way?

Willie Rennie: No.

In total, that is £525 million—[*Interruption.*] Members should listen to this. A total of £525 million has been cut in this year's budget. The budget for education is down by £165 million, there is a £145 million cut to the transport budget and the NHS has had a £70 million cut. Those are all in-year cuts. That is chaotic management of the public finances.

There has been no substantial reform of public services during the SNP's tenure in office. Take education. John Swinney's proposed education bill was stripped out and abandoned, and the last remnants of its measures—the regional improvement collaboratives—have just been torn up by the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. Jenny Gilruth has also delayed scrapping the Scottish Qualifications Authority, and the Hayward reforms—on which we will be having another debate in the next few weeks—are delayed, as well.

On health and social care, the big answer from the SNP was the national care service, but it has been delayed and watered down. The SNP will also scrap its previous supposed reforms to health and social care partnerships.

At the Education, Children and Young People Committee, we looked into regionalisation of colleges. I found it very difficult to find any significant benefit from the changes. The colleges are now shadows of their former selves.

Of course, there was also police centralisation, which the cabinet secretary was boasting about, but it resulted in there having been three chief constables in almost as many years. The control-room centralisation was rushed, and we must remember the tragic event of the crash at the side of the M9, which led to the deaths of Lamara Bell and John Yuill. That was a direct result of the hasty kamikaze approach to centralisation of control rooms. What happened was unforgivable: it was not something to boast about.

This is plainly not a Government of competent reform. It too often ducks reforms—probably because, when it does try to introduce them, it mishandles them. The real proof must lie in the outcomes: a yawning poverty-related attainment gap, many councils across the country declaring housing emergencies, the highest number of drug deaths in Europe, record long NHS waiting times and the high rate of delayed hospital discharges. That is not a record to boast about.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I advise that we have some time in

hand, so there is plenty of time for interventions, should members wish to make them.

15:30

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): I thank the Government for securing this debate on a hugely important subject that is often overlooked but is critical to the success of our public services.

I welcome the Government's openness, which its motion mentions, to receiving constructive suggestions on measures that could be adopted to move the agenda forward. This is a real opportunity to articulate Scotland's public service values and how they inform our approach to delivering for the people of Scotland. It is good that, as we move through the process, we have such a vision.

So far in the debate, much has been said about the Christie commission. This afternoon, I read back through its report, which has the four clear principles of empowerment, partnership, prevention and efficiency. Although some reform has happened since its publication, those messages still clearly resonate and form a solid basis and guiding principles for moving work forward.

I will address a number of issues, starting with finance. Finances will always be challenging; that is the nature of the environment in which we live now. It will be so in the future, and it has been the case in the past. The post-2008 crash was recognised as being part of the backdrop to the Christie commission's work. The commission also recognised that additional funding was only part of the issue and was not itself the solution. It identified that up to 40 per cent of public sector spending was on cure rather than prevention, which could be reduced by shifting the focus to preventative measures in a much more structured way. That number dwarfs anything else that we might talk about in budget discussions, and would give us much to go on if the measures were to be approached in the correct structured way.

The second matter that I want to raise is the art of the possible. It is often the case that we lose sight of that in arguments about numbers and budgeting processes. However, it is instructive to reflect on the Covid experience. We should not forget that, for all the challenges, difficulties and hurt that we went through in the pandemic, it showed what partnership working could deliver and how we could turn up the dial on speed and make things happen quickly and efficiently, when we have to. It is important that we do not lose sight of that. I worry that, to a great extent, we have done so.

We must accept it as part of our culture that things can be done differently. Such culture

change is central to progressing a meaningful public sector reform agenda. We do not often recognise that the Government's role is to enable such change, but also to lead by example and to make the areas over which it has control run as efficiently and effectively as possible. That amounts to a structured change-management process in a complex organisation: that is what it is. Those of us who have experience of doing that in other environments recognise that such a process cannot be done ad hoc or piecemeal, but needs to offer a clear process that is followed through. It is also not a big top-down change. That is expensive and time consuming, and it goes against the Christie principle of empowerment.

The Tory amendment falls into the trap of asking for a complete review of everything, which would take many years, cost a lot of money and not deliver very much at the end of it. The approach should be much more about creating the right environment, simplifying the landscape and recognising that complexity is the enemy. We now have 129 public bodies on the list. I have not checked how many there were in 2011, when the Christie commission's report was published. It might be instructive to look at that to see what the direction of travel is, and whether we are making progress or going backwards.

Clarity on accountability is critical. We start from a good place. We have a very effective and well-documented national performance framework, which lays out what we are trying to deliver and whether we are making progress on it. However, without clarity right through the system on who is responsible for what, we fall into the trap of having something that is everybody's responsibility becoming nobody's responsibility. If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.

Stephen Kerr: Does Ivan McKee agree that the point that he has raised about cluttering, with all the different bodies, hardly helps with clear lines of accountability? Is that not just a fact of organisational life?

Ivan McKee: That is exactly the point that I was making.

My next point is about empowerment, listening to front-line staff, the public and service users, and recognising the power of micro improvements in a culture of continuous improvement. Often, we think that things should be imposed from the top down and take a long time because the big bang is the best solution. A culture in which staff feel empowered to make changes on the ground on a daily basis, and in which members of the public feel empowered to raise issues where they see service delivery not working effectively and in a joined-up way is hugely important.

Unfortunately, in my experience, the culture too often in the public sector is that the system knows best, whether that be the management system or, indeed, the computer system. In recent days and weeks, we have seen the damage that can be caused when something that does not obviously pass the common-sense test is taken forward and people do not step in to blow the whistle. People did not do that with the problems with the Post Office.

It is really important to remember that poor public service delivery makes inequality much worse. That point has already been made in the debate. Making public services excellent and more efficient is the best way to tackle inequality. Frankly, the middle classes will always find a way around poor public services. Unfortunately, it is those who are most challenged economically who will fail to do so. It is important that we recognise that delivering effective and efficient public services is the best way to tackle inequality.

Vested interests exist, of course. The approach needs to be not to ignore them, but to identify them and align them where possible or to tackle them where necessary, and not use them as an excuse for poor delivery.

I will say a few practical things in my closing remarks. We recognise that duplication exists, but there are no mechanisms in place to allow things to be brought together and duplication driven out of the system across Government. Multiple agencies work in the same environment. Our having a mechanism to do that is hugely important.

The Deputy First Minister mentioned consolidation of estates. I welcome the focus that that is getting. It is disappointing, to some extent, that the Glasgow hub is being taken forward. That investment is wholly unnecessary, given the significant surplus of estate that already exists across the wider public sector in Glasgow. Getting the local authority, other agencies and the Government to bang their heads together and talk about what they have in respect of spare capacity would mean that we would probably not need the hugely expensive Glasgow hub, which is, unfortunately, a pet project of many people in the civil service. I see no progress—maybe there is; the minister can let us know about it—on the opportunity to make use of the spare capacity at Victoria Quay, which is 80 per cent empty, for supporting business, culture and technology development in that part of Edinburgh.

Digitisation is hugely important, but it is important to recognise that it is not a big-bang solution. That harks back again to the Post Office experience. Digitisation is part of the solution. It is very important to deliver it, but it is only part of

what needs to be a wider culture of change in management and process.

Finally, 10 years is a long time, and I think that that timeframe creates complacency: people can afford to kick the can down the road. As I have said, the Covid response shows what is possible in short timeframes. We need to be able to drive change on an on-going basis, with quarterly results.

I have said a lot in a short time. As always, I am very happy to engage with ministers to add value to the improvements.

15:39

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow Ivan McKee, because he is an SNP member for whom I have enormous respect. I say that sincerely. He has led organisations. He has led and managed businesses, so when he talks about culture and transformation, it is worth while for everyone in the chamber—especially those on the Government front bench—to listen to what he says.

I wanted to intervene on my colleague Sandesh Gulhane. I did not realise that there would be so much time for the debate when my intervention was not possible. The point that I wanted to make to him is that the Green Party's Patrick Harvie is today claiming credit for the widening tax gap between Scotland and England. There you go! There is the SNP for you in this Government; the Greens are claiming credit for that particular piece of nonsense.

I agree with Michael Marra that this Government has no appetite for reform of any kind. There can be no doubt that there is a serious need for reform in the Scottish public sector. However, we are stuck with an SNP-Green Government that will never tackle the big issues because it just does not have the appetite for it. The people who know that better than anyone else are the people who work in our public services. They come to their work, every day, frustrated by the stress of delivery failures that make their lives, and the lives of the people whom they serve, worse.

Willie Rennie went after the Government on its record in his speech, but I thought that, untypically, he was too generous. The fact is that this set of ministers lacks the competence to deal with serious reform, but he did not mention competence. They just cannot do it. They do not have it in them. It is all just too hard for this group of ministers.

That is why so many of our public services, from councils to the NHS, have turned inwards. They are now obsessed with how things are done, and with a great morass of corporate governance that

is all about covering backs and finding new ways to refuse to do things. They have become obsessed with reputational protection and, indeed, with public relations.

That is the product of the mismanagement and lack of leadership over the past 17 years by the SNP-Green Government, which has compounded the decline of our public services that, frankly, started under Labour and the Liberal Democrat coalition of 20 years ago.

It is also why we have ended up with so much secrecy. Organisations have lost their candour, and nowhere is that more evident than in the area of whistleblowing. I want to make some serious remarks about whistleblowing, because it is something that I think that we, as a Parliament, should take a lot more seriously.

In March last year, we observed whistleblower awareness week. We had a meeting in Parliament, attended by parliamentarians from every party bar one, including members who are present in the chamber this afternoon. We listened together to public sector whistleblowers telling their stories and it was a traumatic experience, both for those who were telling the stories and for all of us who were listening. It was raw, authentic and distressing.

Whistleblowing is a public good. We should hold those who whistleblow in high esteem. They are heroes who uphold the public good, but too often management sees them as some sort of affront to the organisation and its reputation. It deals with the whistleblower as a problem to be solved, rather than addressing the issue that the whistleblower has raised. Human resources procedures and legal devices are thrown at the whistleblower because they had the temerity to raise their hand in the first place and point out a genuine concern.

There are many examples of mistreatment of whistleblowers in the Scottish public sector services. Nobody in the Parliament should assume a superior attitude about the treatment of whistleblowers in any branch of Scotland's public services.

In NHS Scotland, there are cases of grotesque victimisation and the misuse of executive authority. We have health boards where we know that there have been widespread cases of bullying. In one health board, senior clinicians have retired and left the service because they felt that they were asked to do things that were unethical, being subject to what some called emotional blackmail that caused them to suffer extreme mental stress. In one case that I am aware of, a senior clinician took his own life, such was the horrendous experience that he was enduring.

In Police Scotland, there have been outrageous examples of misogyny in the way that women police officers—highly professional and accomplished women—have been dealt with by the senior officers. Police officers have been bullied because they raised concerns about their safety and the inappropriate behaviour of other officers.

The culture in our education system also leaves a lot to be desired. I cannot tell members how many teachers I have spoken to who have said that they fear speaking up about what is really happening in the classrooms of our country, because they feel that their careers will effectively then be ended. They are marked out as troublemakers, and when they raise concerns about what is happening with school discipline, their ability as teachers is questioned. When they speak out, their comments are ignored and deliberately struck out or withheld from the minutes of meetings. They become marked. It is career inhibiting, if not career ending.

That is but the tip of the iceberg. People who have come forward to serve in the NHS, the police and our schools deserve our respect and support. They need to know that the Parliament has their interests at heart. Those who come forward with issues should be thanked and listened to, not sidelined and mistreated. They should not be threatened with legal sanction, harassed or blackmailed for their efforts. Members of the Parliament will know—they will have been told and they will have seen—that that is the experience of far too many people in our public services. We owe it to the people who work in public service to have an honest conversation about the culture that they experience in the workplace. In large measure, that is what I took away from Ivan McKee's speech.

We need to start with culture; culture eats strategy for breakfast. We might want to change things with strategic ideas, visions and objectives, but if the culture is not right, none of that progress will be realised. We owe it to the taxpayers of this country, who feel that they are being short changed by the services that they expect to receive when they need to use them, to speak up on their behalf. It is time for us to establish an independent office of the whistleblower, sitting outside any public services. It should be an arm's-length entity that is answerable to the Parliament and provides a safe harbour for whistleblowers. It should be somewhere that they can go in confidence, be treated with respect and have their concerns listened to and addressed, as appropriate. Public service begins with the transformation of organisational culture towards a culture of transparency and candour. That transformation begins with the creation of an environment in which every employee's opinions

and concerns are not only noted but respected and acted on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, please bring your remarks to a close.

Stephen Kerr: I will.

The people who work in our public services know how to fix the service delivery problems that they experience every day of their working lives. We need transparency and accountability. Those are the values that we should be reinforcing through the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: May I conclude?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have been very generous with the time, Mr Kerr. I am now going to call the next speaker.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. You interrupted me. I had an important addition to make to my remarks.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, please resume your seat for a second. Thank you very much.

Further to your point of order, I said that I wanted you to bring your remarks to a close. You continued and continued, and I had to intervene to effect that very result, because I have to protect other speakers' speaking time as well. *[Interruption.]* Mr Kerr had a very generous allocation above his six minutes. I think that we have heard the general gist of Mr Kerr's points put extremely well. *[Interruption.]* Mr Kerr has a further point of order.

Stephen Kerr: I have to declare that members should refer to my entry in the register of interests. I am the director of a not-for-profit company, WhistleblowersUK. It is important that that is put on the record. Perhaps, if you had allowed me to say that, the matter would have been done and dusted long ago.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Well, that could have been said during the member's speech, but it is now on the record. It is time to move on to the next speaker, who I am sure members would all very much wish to hear. I call Mr Mason, to be followed by Mr Rowley.

15:48

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for your kind words. I was waiting quite a long time for Mr Kerr to finish.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in the debate. There is probably a lot that we can agree on, including the three key missions of equality,

opportunity and community, as well as ensuring that public services remain fiscally sustainable, improving outcomes and reducing inequalities in outcomes among communities in Scotland. The challenge is how we go about all of that.

One of the themes that I will look at is whether we could reduce the number of organisations in Scotland. Surely one of the advantages of being a smaller country is that we should be able to do things with simpler structures and fewer organisations. That is why I have a concern about the growing number of commissions or commissioners, and the Finance and Public Administration Committee is to carry out an inquiry into that. I note that Mr Kerr wanted to add yet another body. In paragraph 114 of its response to the committee, the Government says that it has an assumption against the creation of new public bodies and it is my hope that Parliament will also take that approach.

We have already brought the police into one body, as has been mentioned, and we did the same with the fire and rescue services. There has been some recent discussion about health boards, with the suggestion that they could be reduced to three in number. I wonder whether we could reduce them to just one, although that is just a question.

The idea of single island authorities also sounds very attractive to me. We have long needed better integration between health boards and councils and the health and social care partnerships or integration joint boards have moved that programme forward. However, that has meant that, where we previously had two organisations, we now have three; one of my fears when we first heard about the National Care Service Bill was that we were going to end up with four. I say again that Scotland is a small country and that we have the opportunity to do things more simply, which means a yes to more integration and partnership working but surely a no to having more organisations.

The motion mentions prevention and early intervention and I think that we are all supportive of that. Policies such as the 1,140 hours of early learning and childcare are a good example of that. If we can support children and families better during the early years, it is highly likely that their outcomes will be better later on. I suggest that the fire service has also been a success story. There are fewer fires and less loss of life due to fires because of much good preventative work.

However, it must be said that we have struggled to achieve major change in the health sector. There is still a major focus on hospitals and secondary care, including on ambulance delays and waiting times at A and E. Those are all important, but that means that we tend to lose

focus on general practitioners and other aspects of primary health care and prevention. Much of that depends on finance. If we had a period of budget surplus, we could invest more in preventative spending, but when budgets are tight, as they are at the moment, it is difficult to disinvest in hospitals to switch the money to community spending instead.

The finance committee, which has public administration as part of its remit, has been looking at public service reform. We had thought that the Government was going to set out clear targets for reducing the number of public sector workers, but it has seemed more recently that each organisation in the public sector will have to reform itself, within its own budget limits. That approach leaves each body managing a trade-off between the number of staff and the pay increases that it can afford.

As the committee has also heard, the previous police and fire boards would not have amalgamated to become Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service without clear leadership and direction from the Scottish Government and from Parliament.

The committee had also expected to be given more detail about future years when this year's budget was published. I understand that we are now due to get that in May, when we get the new medium-term financial strategy.

There is the on-going challenge of whether to provide universal support and benefits or to target those who need the most support. The committee has, to some extent, looked at that and the issue was raised at our public engagement session in Largs in August. It seems to me that there is broad acceptance that school education and the NHS should be free to all at the point of use, which may in part be because they have been around for so long. Ideally, and if we had enough money, I would like to see most services being universal, with no need for means testing or targeting, but money is tight right now and I think that we should target those who are most in need.

For example, the retail and hospitality sector has been asking for non-domestic rates relief to be more like the system in England. However, some parts of that sector are doing extremely well and have no need for such support, so I think that the Scottish Government's approach of targeting those that are most in need—including small businesses and businesses on islands—is the right one. Even that is not perfect and there will be anomalies, but I think that that is better than providing either no support at all, or support across the board that is not always needed and is unaffordable.

Public service reform is only part of the answer. We must try to engage the wider public in debate about which public services they want and how much they are willing to pay. Public services can be provided by the public sector but also by the private or third sectors. I was very taken by the briefing for today's debate from Social Enterprise Scotland, which made the point that there is room to look at new models and to democratise public bodies, such as ScotRail and Scottish Water, by having customers and employees on their boards.

Some workers in the private sector provide an excellent public service. For example, postmen and postwomen go beyond the call of duty by checking up on older people, which reduces isolation; and bus drivers can be incredibly helpful with people who do not have good English or are unfamiliar with an area.

In conclusion, I very much agree that we need to emphasise values as we look at public sector reform, but I also think that we should not be afraid of being radical and of taking a long-term view as to what is best for Scotland.

15:55

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

To say that I was flabbergasted when I read the Government's motion for the debate today is an understatement. The SNP is either in denial or completely delusional about the state of Scotland's economy and public services. I believe that it is clear to anyone in this country who has been paying attention that Scotland is in a worse state now than it was when the SNP took power 16 years ago. Therefore, it is completely ironic—but predictable—that the SNP Government has decided to bring MSPs to the chamber today to request congratulations for the dire state of Scotland's public services. I have no doubt that, with the support of the SNP's partners, the Greens, the motion of self-congratulation will be passed today, but the only people they are fooling are themselves. The majority of people in Scotland will not be fooled, because they have witnessed the deterioration of their public services at first hand, so they know how disingenuous the motion is.

Just yesterday, I read in *The Scotsman* the words of Dr Lailah Peel, an A and E doctor working in Glasgow, who said that "the last thing" she would want

"is for any of my loved ones to be in A&E".

She said:

"To put it in perspective, imagine your Granny or another elderly relative needing to go to A&E ... You call an ambulance, that ambulance is going to take longer to come out.

Then they're going to sit in that ambulance outside of A&E for however many hours, and they're going to eventually come in and they might sit in a corridor for however many hours, and then they'll get seen by a doctor and then they'll be waiting on a trolley for another however many hours."

To go back to the self-congratulatory motion, how does that situation equate to success in health?

Dr John-Paul Loughrey, vice-president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine said that, at some emergency departments in Scotland, only 20 per cent of patients are being seen within the Scottish Government's four-hour wait target, adding that many NHS workers are looking for exit plans as people are leaving shifts in tears.

What impact will that have on our already short-staffed and exhausted NHS workforce, which is shouldering the repercussions of this Government's failure in workforce planning? What impact will it have on my constituents, who are already having difficulty in accessing the medical care that they need, or the one in six Scots who are currently on ever-increasing waiting lists?

Also yesterday, I read that, over the past six years, the number of elderly people who have died while waiting for social care in Scotland has more than doubled. Donald Macaskill, the chief executive of Scottish Care, said:

"I have lost count of the number of social care providers who have said that a service user was supposed to come in, but they're dead."

He went on:

"It is an unforgivable scandal that people are not experiencing the quality of life that they could."

He added that shortages of staff to perform assessments was likely behind the increase in deaths, as was

"the fact there seems to be a total inadequacy of resource going into social care".

Yet this Government seems to believe that its proposed national care service—nothing more than a centralised procurement system that further removes power from underfunded local authorities and has been widely condemned by key stakeholders—is the answer to those issues although it is not scheduled to arrive until 2029, which is halfway through the next parliamentary session.

Is this the "ambitious public service reform" that the Scottish Government believes should be supported in today's motion? Unless the region that I represent is uniquely unlucky, I am confident that the cabinet secretary's inbox, and those of her colleagues, much like mine, are increasingly overwhelmed with contact from constituents who are desperately trying to access public services

that are similarly overwhelmed or simply non-existent.

How does the cabinet secretary explain to those who are struggling with access to public services across Scotland that the SNP-Green Government thinks that it is doing a great job? It is clear that this Government has spent 16 years engaged in short-term thinking for long-term problems, with the full extent of its ambitious reform proposals boiling down to little more than centralisation and budget cuts.

I believe that people up and down Scotland are desperate for a change in approach, a change in attitude and a change in focus. If we are to deliver the public service reform that Scotland so desperately needs, ultimately, the people of Scotland need a change in Government.

16:01

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I am pleased to contribute to today's debate on Scotland's public sector values.

There is no doubt that Scotland's public sector is currently navigating one of the most challenging financial climates since devolution. The impact of inflation, the tragic conflict in Ukraine and a severe cost of living crisis have exposed Scotland's public services to significant economic vulnerabilities, exacerbated by harsh Tory austerity choices and a hard Brexit.

Brexit has been devastating. According to the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, the real gross domestic product of the UK has decreased by a staggering 2 to 3 per cent. In 2023 alone, Scotland experienced a reduction in devolved spending power amounting to around £1.6 billion. That is a substantial consequence of a decision that voters in every local authority area across Scotland rejected.

Despite challenging circumstances, Scotland fights to remain resilient. We have heard many negatives today, but there are some positives. The attainment gap for literacy is closing for our primary school learners, unemployment is at 3.8 per cent and our core A and E facilities have consistently outperformed others in the UK for the past eight years.

I take pride in our Scottish Government's unwavering commitment to prioritise public services, in stark contrast to the UK Tory Government's approach of cutting taxes at the expense of public services. The Verity house agreement marks a significant step towards achieving optimal outcomes for our citizens, and it empowers local government to use its wealth of local knowledge to enhance the delivery of our public services. With increased empowerment

over local decisions and the introduction of legislation such as the visitor levy and council tax premiums, local authorities will have greater autonomy to generate revenue to meet local needs.

Stephen Kerr: What does Stephanie Callaghan say to the local authority leaders whom I have spoken to who say that the Verity house agreement is not worth the paper that it is written on?

Stephanie Callaghan: That is certainly not the evidence that we, in the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, hear directly from them.

That collaborative effort between national and local government, operating within a shared framework and aligned policies, only enhances our capacity to deliver sustainable and person-centred public services. Although that will continue to be challenging, keeping the needs of our citizens at the core of that shared partnership and of what we are thinking will be the key to success.

The third sector—or, more accurately, the community and voluntary sector—plays a pivotal role in delivering public services, yet its contribution is sometimes overlooked. When I met the chief executive of Voluntary Action North Lanarkshire recently, its emphasis on the big wins for small investments in the sector resonated deeply with me. The contributions of the community and voluntary sector include its crucial role in priming our economy for growth by providing essential skills and workplace training and by delivering high-quality services in health, social care, education and more. That sentiment is reinforced by the Royal Society of Edinburgh's report "The economic contribution of the third sector in Scotland", which hails the sector as

"a significant player in the Scottish economy".

Social enterprises have also played their part. In 2021, they provided nearly 90,000 full-time equivalent jobs and £2.6 billion in gross value added to the Scottish economy. However, the Royal Society of Edinburgh and others have suggested that clarity on whether social enterprises are classed as third sector would be helpful as we consider service reform. It would be good to have a comment on that.

I want to talk about a local example, the MorphFit Gentle Movement Project. It is based in Hamilton, Lanarkshire, and delivers inclusive exercise plans and lifestyle interventions for people who would otherwise struggle to access exercise at all. MorphFit focuses on supporting the ageing population, those who are experiencing isolation and those who are caring for others. It receives referrals from local GPs and health and social care partnerships, among others. It supports

up to 60 individuals every week and has built a real community, which has expanded into arts and other projects. Residents tell me regularly that it has been absolutely life changing for them. It is the person-centred delivery that makes a difference in people's lives.

It is imperative that we provide sustained support for third sector organisations and uphold the recognition of them as not just service providers but integral sources of positive social and wealth generation.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that I support Scottish independence. Today, we have heard a lot of negatives and a lot of urging for us to spend more money, but where is that money going to come from? Some people might be surprised that I did not vote SNP until 2015, after decades of voting for the Labour Party. However, my principles and values have always been rooted in social justice, including our duty to look after each other, respect others as equals and value our local communities. That chimes with the three key Scottish Government delivery priorities—equality, opportunity and community.

Although Scottish independence has often been portrayed as being about flag waving, nationality and disliking England, that is not my experience at all. For me and many people like me, independence is all about creating a Scotland that looks after everyone who lives here, from cradle to grave. It is only with the powers of independence that we can fully unleash the talents and resources that will allow industry to thrive and that we can truly invest in those precious public services that uphold Scottish citizens' rights and prioritise happiness and wellbeing. That is the kind of Scotland that I want to live in.

I will close with a recent quote from Scotland's First Minister, which I could not agree with more:

"independence is urgent ... precisely ... because the cost of living is at the very top of people's concerns".

16:07

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to all our public sector workforce, in everywhere from the NHS to schools to the fire service. They deserve our praise, but more than that, they deserve a Government that is prepared to meet the promises that it has made and that treats them with respect. The motion does not do that.

I want to speak directly to our communities, who are being let down. I understand that it is they who suffer long waits in our health service, cannot access community facilities and see no future in the education system. It is our communities who suffer as the mess deepens and deepens. We

need action, and that action needs to work for our communities and our dedicated workforce.

Before my colleagues on the SNP benches start to jump up and down at me, I want to make this point: I am no friend of the Tories. I believe that the chaos that has been created by Liz Truss and Boris Johnson, on top of the constant Tory attack on working-class people, means that the Tories have undoubtedly contributed to a raid on our public purse.

However, to be clear, our job in this place is not to deflect and not just to blame—it is to deliver on the commitments that have been made and the services that are required. The reality is that, if we do not reflect on our own actions and our own contributions to the problem, we will never seek to find the solution; we will just absolve ourselves of the responsibility.

The reality is that this tired Government, as it enters its 18th year, must be prepared to acknowledge its failures. Currently, it just grasps at straws, such as trying to build a set of "values"—as it describes them—out of the wreckage of Scotland's public services.

The Government's motion seems to be about dressing up brutal cuts in the language of reform and values; it is about window dressing rather than substance. If we are absolutely honest, everyone in the chamber knows that, even those who sit on the Government benches. For 17 years, no priority has been given to our public services.

Alasdair Allan: Carol Mochan talks about some of the pressures on Scotland's budget. Does she anticipate that an incoming UK Labour Government would continue to hold to its plans to stick to Tory spending priorities for the first two years?

Carol Mochan: I think that the member will know from my words in the chamber that I expect delivery for our communities, and that is what I expect from a Labour Government.

If we strip away the spin, we can sense what really lies in store here in Scotland—funding cuts for the whole public sector and considerable job losses across the country.

The Government wants to focus the debate on what someone else has done, but it needs to face up to its lack of long-term planning, leadership and decision making. As we have heard, the Finance and Public Administration Committee has been critical of the Scottish Government's lack of strategy and leadership in the area of public sector reform. In its pre-budget report, it stated:

"the focus of the Scottish Government's public service reform programme has, since May 2022, changed multiple times, as have the timescales for publishing further detail on what the programme will entail."

Multiple changes and a lack of decision making are a common theme for this Government, and that is undeniably a problem for Scotland and its communities, because it leads to anxiety, a lack of productivity and a country that looks to be in decline rather than one that is surging into a new year with confidence and purpose. That lies at the door of this SNP Government.

Over the past year, I have spoken to workers in every part of our public sector, including local government, colleges, the NHS, our emergency services and schools. Conjuring up new public service values is of little comfort to them. What they need is investment and leadership, and for the work that they do to be valued through proper planning, proper investment and proper pay.

Shona Robison: Will the member take an intervention?

Carol Mochan: I want to make progress.

If I speak to constituents, they say the same thing. They see a lack of investment in the public sector, particularly in their communities. They see a Government that is not capable of tackling NHS waiting lists or reducing the attainment gap.

Shona Robison: I thank Carol Mochan for giving me the opportunity to ask about the point that she has just made on pay. Would she not recognise that we have delivered—quite rightly—pay deals that are not only deserved by our public sector workforce, but which are in advance of any other pay deals anywhere else in these islands? That is an important part of investment in our public services. Our investment in pay has been beyond anything that has been seen anywhere else in these islands.

Carol Mochan: That is what I expected from the cabinet secretary. I have spent hours on picket lines in Scotland, so she should not pretend that we have a comprehensive plan for where we are going. I will accept good pay and pay increases for all our public sector workers, but let us be honest about some of the other stuff that we need to do. In the college sector, for example, we are nowhere near where we should be.

The reality is that we cannot have a debate such as today's without talking about local government. I do not have much time left, but the Government's disdain for local government is there in plain sight and must be overcome. The Verity house agreement has been mentioned; we know that councils and COSLA are concerned about that. COSLA has said:

"The Budget as it stands leaves not a single penny for transformational Public Service Reform—there is very limited scope for a focus on 'Spend to Save'."

The Deputy First Minister has been unable to give councils or trade unions any idea of where the cuts that we have spoken about will be made.

I ask the Government to speak less about values and to consider more closely what value it is providing to the voters who stood by it for a number of elections only to be left with public services that are on the brink of collapse.

16:14

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): This is a useful debate for us to have as we head into the second half of this parliamentary session, particularly in the current financial context. Although public sector reform should not just be based on affordability, we cannot ignore the fact that budget availability is one of the deciding factors in our decision making.

I am a fan of a big state. I think that Government should be the expression of the popular will of society. It is where we share power and resources to do transformational things, in particular to protect our most vulnerable neighbours and our planet. Big challenges, such as the deeply embedded inequality that is present in the UK and the climate crisis, require a big, co-ordinated response of the kind that only Government can lead.

I want to see a bigger state in Scotland doing more to meet the needs of people and planet, but I do not just want what we have now on a bigger scale. We need far more efficient and accountable service provision. The kind of Scottish Government that the Greens want would inevitably require a larger staff head count, for example, but we recognise that the level of output from the Scottish public sector over the past decade has not grown as much as the head count. That is not a criticism of staff themselves. Those are issues of structure, process and culture, and not the individual competence of civil servants and officials.

That is very clear in the gap between intention and delivery that is identified by Audit Scotland. We are all—every party—good at ambition, but ambition is far easier than delivery, so that is not a surprise. Whether it is in councils, Government, health boards or other public bodies, we all recognise that delivery, although rarely as bad as it is made out in debates in here or in sections of the press, is not always meeting our aspirations.

There is no singular solution to that, but I suggest that the following would help. First, there should be a rebalancing of resources from the Scottish Government centrally to its agencies and public bodies. We will not solve the delivery challenge by underresourcing those who are responsible for delivery. Pulling resources into the

centre because agencies are perceived to have failed or be unreliable is understandable, which is why governance reform and clear ministerial direction for public bodies is critical. More resources alone for bodies that are not delivering is rarely going to be the solution and, in some cases, will be counterproductive.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Ross Greer: I think that we have heard enough from Mr Kerr.

In some areas, funding is not the issue at all. Take the SQA, for example—a body that has failed to deliver what we would all expect of it. The issues there relate to governance and culture. The education reform bill, which will replace the SQA with a new qualifications body, will be one of the most important bills in this session.

It is critical that the weaknesses in the SQA's current governance structures and culture are not replicated in the new body. We must not see a repeat of a board with just one current teacher but three management consultants. Corporate governance skills are important, but the SQA and some other public bodies are getting the balance wrong and leaving the boards with an inadequate understanding of the policy areas for which their organisation is responsible. I suggest that that is leading to their being unable to scrutinise effectively the decisions that those bodies are making and the way in which they are discharging their duties.

Michael Marra: I whole-heartedly agree with Mr Greer's assessment of the SQA. We are now three years on from the fiasco of the exams disgrace that happened to young people in this country. We were told at the time that the SQA would be scrapped. The Government's motion runs directly counter to the track record of getting that work of reform done.

Ross Greer: I understand entirely Mr Marra's desire to see that work take place as quickly as possible. I will come on to the fact that there is a tension between ensuring that we are undertaking good quality work, particularly legislative work, and the need to do so at pace. In particular, when we are abolishing and replacing a body as significant as the SQA, it is right that the cabinet secretary has decided to take the time to consult the workforce directly.

I have mentioned before my belief that the new qualifications body would be better served by a board that includes a substantial number of current teachers and lecturers, as well as students, parent and carer representatives, children's rights experts and others. If that had been the case with the SQA, I sincerely doubt that we would have ended up in the appalling situation in which the Equality and Human Rights

Commission had to take enforcement action after discovering that no equality impact assessments had been conducted for who knows how long.

The other key element to successful replacement of the SQA is an overhaul of its organisational culture and, specifically, its management culture. The SQA has developed a deserved reputation for hostility to question and challenge, particularly from teachers. The structure of the new organisation can address that, in part by baking in consultation and co-design processes, discussion forums and a range of other mechanisms.

However, just creating the space does not guarantee that that purpose will be fulfilled, certainly not if the ivory tower culture of SQA management transfers over. Considerable work was done at the point of establishing Social Security Scotland to ensure that it had the right organisational culture. That approach, or something similar, should be taken to the reform processes that are taking place in this session of Parliament.

One other success story, which I do not think we talk about enough in Parliament, is Screen Scotland. It was set up as a unit within Creative Scotland and has had a transformational effect.

Ten years ago, our film and TV professionals were embarrassed by the state of the sector. Now, we have world-class studios that are booked out and are turning business away. The value of film and TV to our economy doubled from 2019-2021; the sector is employing record numbers of people in a vast range of roles; and our international reputation is rapidly growing. The team at Screen Scotland have been critical to all that. I still think that further reform is required there—perhaps we need a body that is independent from Creative Scotland—but we should look to the success of establishing that screen unit in dealing with public sector reform in other cases.

I do not have much time left, so I will race through a few more points. I mentioned the importance of consultation and co-design, but—as I said to Mr Marra—there is a challenge in respect of the tension between the demand on public bodies to be more nimble in responding to change and the need to take the time that is required to make the correct decision. Sometimes, however, simply explaining why a process is what it is and why it is taking so long is all that is needed to maintain stakeholder buy-in, at least for a time.

We need to see far more collaboration, starting with the basics of sharing data. The David Hume Institute reckons that our economy owes us £2 billion every year as a result of public data in Scotland not being accessible. The Government and a handful of councils operate open

government licences; I have persuaded two more councils and four colleges to adopt that approach, but others need to do the same.

We need to ask why we have an Ethical Standards Commissioner for Scotland and a Standards Commission for Scotland, when one body could fill both those roles and save on operating costs. I am completely unconvinced by the argument that merging councils is a solution to anything, when they already feel so remote to the communities that they serve, although sharing services has potential. I am concerned by the constant suggestions that the NHS needs fewer managers, when it is already undermanaged in comparison with many other healthcare systems. Clinicians already do too much administration, so getting rid of more admin support staff will not help with that, even if it makes for easy headlines.

We should make more time for debates such as this on a regular basis. Public sector reform is a key topic that cuts across every portfolio and affects the lives of everyone in Scotland. This afternoon, we have had the opportunity to begin scratching the surface of what more radical and substantive reform could look like. Some members have taken the opportunity to do so, but sadly others did not. I am still completely unclear as to what the Opposition's alternatives are to any of the reform programmes that the Government is taking forward, but I would welcome the opportunity for us to have more debates on public sector reform on a regular, or at the very least an annual, basis for the rest of the current session of Parliament.

16:22

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the importance of continued investment in delivering and reforming public services for Scotland's people and communities.

Although things have undoubtedly been challenging for quite some time—since the beginning of Tory austerity more than a decade ago, in fact—it is clear that the economic damage of Brexit, which means that up to £3.7 billion of potential funding for our public services has been lost, has piled on additional pressure. Much like the austerity agenda, it is the result of a political choice, which the majority of Scottish citizens voted against.

In speaking to the Scottish Government's motion and legacy of successful public service reform in recent years, including the creation of health and social care partnerships and Social Security Scotland, I make it clear that, although outcomes have improved for many people and communities, in particular as a result of Social Security Scotland's absolute focus on treating

people with dignity and respect—which has been transformational and to which all parties in the Parliament have contributed—one person in this country not having their rights realised is one too many. We—all of us—need to focus on the policy implementation gap that is clear in several areas.

The slightly hyperbolic rhetoric from some Opposition colleagues might have us thinking that our country is in absolute tatters. That is both untrue and unhelpful when we are seeking to reform services, but it would be equally unhelpful for us to close our eyes to the very real challenges that our public services face and the impact that that has on many of our vulnerable citizens.

Colleagues on the Education, Children and Young People Committee saw a stark illustration of that with regard to our disabled children and young people. Of course, as with everything, there are pockets of excellent practice, but it is not good enough if the rights of any children and young people are not being realised.

Colleagues on all sides of the chamber will be aware of the numbers of people in their constituencies who are not receiving their full entitlement to social care—care that is crucial to sustain them in a dignified manner in their own homes. Health and social care integration was absolutely the right thing to do. Again, there are pockets of excellent practice, and there is a skilled and committed workforce of people who do their very best to make the lives of citizens better. However, there is much to learn from what has not worked so well.

For the proposed national care service to succeed, there must be clarity on what its structure will mean from the perspective not of organisations or professionals but of those who are entitled to the services. For example, there must be clarity on how a disabled citizen who is assessed as requiring additional support in their home in order to be healthy and thrive will actually get it. When a citizen returns to their home after a serious operation and a professional assesses that they need adaptations to ensure that they are safe, there must be clarity on how those adaptations will be completed in a timely manner. It is no exaggeration to say that those are matters of life and death.

My constituents also want to be clear on whether key local services such as mental health support for vulnerable young people should be delivered on a project basis. Should boards be able to withdraw services with no consultation, no equality impact assessment and no transitional arrangements being in place? World-leading human rights-based approaches to policy and legislation are a wonderful thing to talk about, and we should be aspiring to them, but they must be

backed up by delivery and access to redress when rights are not realised.

Further reform to public services will be necessary to ensure that they remain fiscally sustainable and to improve outcomes for all of Scotland's people and communities. Public sector workers are key to the success. As I acknowledged earlier, they are doing an excellent job in some challenging circumstances. Showing how much we value them will mean continuing with fair pay and conditions.

The Government's motion states that further reform will require a focus on

"prevention and early intervention, involving people and communities in the design of public services and embracing the power of digital technologies".

As my colleague John Mason laid out, we all know intuitively that focusing on prevention and early intervention is the right thing to do, but we also have screeds of evidence that it will improve outcomes for people and be the most cost-effective way to operate. However, bravery will be required to deliver that, because investing additional resource in prevention and early intervention will often involve shifting resource from elsewhere. That is difficult in times of abundance, but it is even more challenging in the fiscal environment that we find ourselves in now.

I noted at the beginning of my remarks that the political choices of austerity and Brexit that were made elsewhere put our public services at risk. Those were choices that our citizens in Scotland did not vote for. Whatever constitutional arrangement Scotland has, there is a lot of work to do. However, it is crystal clear to me that, until Scotland's independence is restored, we will always be at risk from political decisions that are made elsewhere. With the number of challenges that our communities face, that is frankly heartbreaking. I agree that independence is urgent.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): We move to the winding-up speeches.

16:27

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I have the pleasure of closing the debate for the Labour Party—the party that brought us the national health service, our social security system and many other key pillars of our public services, having first formed a Government almost exactly a century ago. The main achievement of that first Labour Government, which was elected on 22 January 1924, was the Wheatley housing act of 1924, which went some way towards rectifying the problem of the housing shortage that was caused by the disruption to the building trade during the first world war and the inability of working-class

tenants to rent decent affordable housing. The Wheatley act provided public housing to council tenants, as opposed to the previous Government's privatisation agenda. It subsidised the construction of more than half a million homes with controlled rents by the 1930s, when the subsidy to encourage local authority housing was abolished by the Tories.

What do we have a century on, in 2024, in the wake of a similar disruption—the pandemic? We have housing emergencies in Scotland's two largest cities, a homelessness crisis and a cut to the country's capital budget for housing. That is a shameful indictment. A century on, we have made little progress. Indeed, we are going backwards.

The NHS is another great institution of our public services—one might say that it is the epitome of public services—but this Government has failed the people who give it so much, and it has failed NHS patients, too.

Stephanie Callaghan: The member mentioned the NHS and housing and talked about a time when the UK was on its knees. Does he agree that Keir Starmer should be looking back at that time and looking to invest in this country, should he become the next UK Prime Minister?

Paul Sweeney: Stephanie Callaghan makes a fair challenge about being inspired by previous Labour Governments. Labour has been in Government for only about 30 years of the past century, so the opportunity to serve, from the end of this year, will be significant.

The national missions that Labour has outlined will supercharge that effort. We need to be bold and resilient and to show the necessary ambition to dig ourselves out of the vicious cycle that the country has been in for far too long—it has certainly been in it for the entirety of my adult life. I do not want to be part of a generation that is poorer than its parents. We need to build out of that.

Our healthcare professionals are in a similar position. They have no headroom right now. Every day, they tell us that they are overstretched. Mental health services are at breaking point. In Scotland last year, waiting times in accident and emergency departments resulted in 1,600 excess deaths. Astonishingly, the principle of free care at the point of need is no longer taken seriously, with almost one in six Scots being on an NHS waiting list. Some are counting down the days between having a treatable condition and having a terminal condition. The SNP Government has let down patients and the people who work in our national health service.

The most glaring sign that NHS workers feel undervalued is the swathes of staff who leave to head overseas. We have to not only retain staff

but grow the national health service workforce in Scotland. Labour will increase the number of training places in Scotland and will aggressively and relentlessly focus on countering the reasons why we fail to retain staff.

Shona Robison: Will Paul Sweeney give way?

Paul Sweeney: I am happy to do so if I can have the time back.

The Presiding Officer: Yes—I call the cabinet secretary.

Shona Robison: Will Paul Sweeney at least acknowledge that NHS staff in Scotland are the best paid anywhere in these islands?

Paul Sweeney: Yes—in relative terms, they are. However, that is not working well in absolute terms, as is demonstrated by the workforce challenges that we have in Scotland. The cabinet secretary should recognise those challenges with a degree of humility, because we are still not performing well enough and people are dying unnecessarily. That is not good enough on our watch.

The member for Glasgow Provan recognised some of the structural changes that are critical to any realistic change management programme, and I commend him for his speech. However, as was mentioned by my friend Alex Rowley, a member for Mid Scotland and Fife, the SNP Government has neglected public services across the board for years. The abject failure of the SNP Government, over 16 years, to reform Scotland's public services means that they are crying out for investment.

My friend Carol Mochan, a member for South Scotland, highlighted the lack of focus, commitment and consistency that has characterised the Government's programmes for many years. Indeed, it feels as though the Government is focused on public relations rather than on project management. Just one example that she cited was colleges.

Frankly, I find it risible that the Government's motion claims that the Scottish Government continues to invest in delivering public services. When the Deputy First Minister set out the Scottish Government budget, just before Christmas, it did not sound, from where I was sitting, like a budget that was about promoting and advancing our public services. COSLA has since said that, as a result of the proposed budget, there will be

"cuts in every community in Scotland and job losses across Scottish Local Government."

That is hardly the paragon of municipal socialism that characterised the first Labour Government.

Shona Robison: Will Paul Sweeney give way?

Paul Sweeney: Yes, if I can have the time back.

Shona Robison: By and large, the quantum that is available to us is dictated by the decisions of Whitehall spending departments. The quantum is the quantum. The only way to increase that quantum is through limited levers, such as tax. Is the Labour Party's position still that it is against tax rises to raise additional revenues? If so, is that not totally inconsistent with the point that Paul Sweeney just made?

Paul Sweeney: It is about having fiscal rules that are characterised by discipline. The Government has been profligate with public expenditure.

I allude to the points of the member for Glasgow Provan about making capital investments that earn back income for the country. For example, colleges should make, not lose, money for the country by selling training programmes to industry, reinforcing our public services and stabilising our workforce challenges.

The Government does not seem capable of making such three-dimensional calculations and structures in its delivery of public policy. It is characterised by draughts players, not chess players. The SNP's spin does not cut the mustard. The disastrous budget fails to invest in public services and will leave councils at financial risk. That is further evidence that communities across Scotland have been let down by the Government. Slow economic growth means that there is less money to spend on public services than could have been built up to reform them. If the Scottish economy had grown at the pace of the overall British economy since 2012, it would be £8.5 billion larger today.

The Scottish Government must prioritise economic growth across the country to ensure that the national health service is not stuck in a permanent crisis and that local councils are not left cash strapped.

I go back to the member for Glasgow Provan, because I was taken with his speech. He made important points on the complex realities of undertaking a change management process while adhering to the Christie principle of empowerment and the need to ensure clear lines of accountability and continuous improvement.

We need micro and macro reforms, which I could go into in great detail. One example could be our efforts to recharge the commercial shipbuilding industry in Scotland, but that would require an entirely different speech.

Listening to and empowering our staff and workers on the front line is essential to reform. Mr Kerr, the Conservative member, made the point about culture eating strategy for breakfast.

The motion that has been presented by the Deputy First Minister is puzzling. It is devoid of reality and of humility, which is a fundamental prerequisite of any reform programme. The Deputy First Minister said that the SNP is investing in public services, but the budget slashed funding for public services left, right and centre. The spin does a disservice to thousands of public service workers who feel overstretched, undervalued and demoralised.

16:35

Jackson Carlaw (Eastwood) (Con): As this is the first debate in which I have participated since the passing of our former Labour colleague Hanzala Malik, I wonder whether I might begin with a tribute to him. When I saw that today's debate was about public service values, I thought about how Hanzala Malik was, to me, the epitome of a politician who was one of the better public servants. He was a regular participant in what I call the "graveyard shift", which is the Thursday afternoon debate. Colleagues who served in the chamber then will remember that he began every debate by saying, "Good afternoon, Presiding Officer. Good afternoon, everybody." He would then enter into a spirited contribution.

He was never pejoratively partisan, and I always felt that he had the interests of the people he served at the forefront of his concerns. He left here to serve, again, in council. He was immensely proud of his roots, his community and his family, and I shall always remember him with great affection.

Paul Sweeney: I echo Jackson Carlaw's fine tribute to the late Hanzala Malik, who I greatly enjoyed working with, as a fellow representative of Glasgow. I pay particular tribute to him for his founding of the Glasgow City Heritage Trust, of which I am a trustee, and which does great cross-party work to protect Glasgow's built heritage. I wanted to put that on the record.

Jackson Carlaw: We do well to remember those with whom we have worked over time.

I will make a couple of reflections. One is about age, really, as I approach my late 60s. The peer group that motivated me, as I came into politics, were all men and women who had served in the war, or who had learned of experiences from those who had served in the war. A real sense of duty and public service underpinned that. That was true not only of politics but of people who went into the national health service. They had seen the absolute worst of the world, and they were determined to build the best of a new world thereafter.

Although I do not want to generalise too much, when I look at things now, I sometimes wonder

whether that top level, whether in public life or public service, has the same moral authority that it had in the generation that I grew up in the wake of. Sometimes, it seems to me that the moral authority now comes from those on the ground up, rather than from the top down.

When I was undergoing a cancer biopsy at the start of the Covid pandemic, nervous as I was, I was struck by the NHS staff who recognised who I was and asked whether they could meet me to say, "We just want to let you know, Mr Carlaw, that we will not let the country down." I was very moved by that integrity and the sense of purpose that comes from so many of those who work in our public service, which is, to an extent, now let down by the chiefs. It seems to me that, too often, they seek to defend the indefensible and to find ways around taking responsibility or being properly accountable for what happens.

When I first came into this Parliament, I asked what the NHS compensation bill was. It had grown pretty quickly, and we were all pretty appalled. It had gone from £5 million up to £18.9 million in 2007. In the most recent year, the compensation figure was £109.24 million. It seems to me that there is a reliance on finding routes to absolve or to excuse responsibility, rather than to take responsibility.

The corrosive effect of that is that, further down the line—within our public services, in public life or anywhere—people will think, "Why should I bother? Why should I make all that effort if others can get away and excuse themselves?"

Ruth Maguire: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackson Carlaw: Just before I take an intervention, I should say that it applies to politics, too. If members were to ask me, "What about Boris Johnson?" or "What about the junior doctors and their leaders?" or if they want to talk about Sir Ed Davey or Sadiq Khan, I would say that the actions of all those figures in public life have led to a sense among people at the sharp end that it is they who are giving and showing moral leadership, which is not being reflected by those above them.

Ruth Maguire: Jackson Carlaw's remarks have been interesting—although I was not going to ask any of those things. I was wondering whether, more generally, the dialogue that we have in politics and in the media prohibits that kind of honest reflection on the part of leaders. I think that our discourse sometimes contributes to that. Does he agree?

Jackson Carlaw: Time is such that I will not be able to make as much of a contribution on as wide a range of areas as I wanted to cover this afternoon but, yes, I recall that, during the session from 2011 to 2016, members in the chamber were

very reluctant to apply the word “crisis” to any of our public services. When an MSP said that the NHS was in crisis, there was a general feeling around the chamber that we could not indulge in that sort of hyperbole.

In the decade since, we have come to the view that there is a crisis in all our public services—whether in education, policing or health. That is not just here in Scotland. Let us be honest: it is also the case in Wales and elsewhere, too. Why? Back in 2007, we talked about the demographic changes that were coming in this country and which Michael Marra has reflected on. However, we sometimes do not accept what that means.

Alasdair Allan rose—

Jackson Carlaw: It means that we have a dramatically ageing population, and many of the benefits that the Parliament has rightly offered to people in Scotland, including free personal care, free transport at 60, free tuition and free prescription charges, cost even more with an expanding population, who will draw on and rely on them: an even bigger percentage of the population than was the case when those benefits were first introduced.

Michael Marra: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackson Carlaw: That has to be funded within the budget settlement in Scotland, over and above all the other pressures that apply to every other part of the United Kingdom.

I will take an intervention from Alasdair Allan first.

Alasdair Allan: I thank the member for giving way, and for the characteristically thoughtful tenor of his remarks.

The member points to the demographic crisis—let us use the word—that Scotland and other parts of northern Europe face. Does he also take the view that that must make us think about our policy on freedom of movement within Europe and from elsewhere?

Jackson Carlaw: I addressed the fact earlier that we had record migration into the UK last year, but not to Scotland.

I had hoped that this debate, on a Thursday afternoon, could be more reflective, whereas I thought that the motion invited a more controversial and spirited debate. Mr Marra very politely eviscerated the Government; Mr Rennie less politely eviscerated the Government—it did get rather heated. It seems to me, however, that if we recognise that we have a hugely ageing demographic, that such problems are common elsewhere and that we have advanced additional public services here in Scotland, it is not a

weakness on the part of the Government to accept, after all these years, that not everything is right or going right.

If we are to make progress, at some point—as Alex Neil once recognised, when he was a cabinet secretary—it will require more of a collective understanding and acceptance of what our priorities are going to be and how we are going to address them. I am sorry to Mr Greer, but that must go beyond simply saying, “I want an even bigger state,” or, “I want a larger staff head count: it’s only gone up by 55 per cent,” and telling people, “You’ve never had it so rarely as bad as you think,” to paraphrase what I think Mr Greer said.

In closing, let me dedicate at least part of my speech, generously, to Ross Greer in this, the 150th anniversary of the year of the birth of Sir Winston Churchill, who has of course been such an inspiration to the notorious reputation that Mr Greer has managed to secure.

16:44

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): Presiding Officer, I apologise to you and to colleagues across the chamber for being slightly late for the beginning of the debate.

In such debates, I am conscious that we all have a vested interest in public sector services and their reform. We all make use of them, and will all be dependent on some part of our public sector at some point, whether it be, for example, our health service, our education system or our transport system. We all have an interest in ensuring that we have the most effective and efficient public services that can deliver the best outcomes for citizens across the country. Despite members’ political differences on certain aspects, we all share the view that we want our public services to be successful and effective.

Prior to this debate, I was reflecting on public sector reform. Discourse and debate on the subject often focus on the here and now—that is the bit that we experience in this chamber or that we witness as we move through this political space—but such reform and change have always been with us.

In the past 50 years, one of the most significant public sector reforms that has taken place in the UK was the introduction of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990. For members who are not already aware of it, that legislation was introduced at the start of my career in the health service. It was at the time when the UK Government decided to move away from institutional-based long-stay care for people with mental health issues or learning disabilities and

other complex needs towards a community-based approach that also recognised the need for fundamental reform of service delivery in the future.

The legislation was also one of the most significant social policy changes that took place in that 50-year period. At the time, it faced a great deal of criticism. There were challenges to its implementation, where care was not delivered in the right way and the necessary funding was not provided to support the transition from institutional to community-based care, which was more expensive for individuals with complex needs. Notwithstanding those challenges, and the problems that occurred at that point, it was the right policy decision to take. Had such change not been progressed then, we would have faced even greater challenges in reforming the public sector later on.

That brings me to my point. There is a danger that we always characterise public sector reform as a failure. The reality is that such reform has taken place over many decades. It has had its challenges, but it has been necessary and the right thing to do. I will refer to a couple of examples of what I believe to have been good reforms that often go under the radar. In doing so, I will try not to focus overly on structural reform being the way in which we should deliver public sector reform; in my view, structural reform is often the easy part of it.

In his contribution, Ivan McKee said that the real challenge in public sector reform is cultural change—that is, the ability to change the way in which a service is delivered. I will give three examples of where no structural reform took place but where cultural change made a real difference to service delivery. One of the most notable examples of that in the past 15 years was the introduction of the Scottish patient safety programme, the aims of which were to address unnecessary deaths in our health service, to identify where they had occurred and to take action to prevent others from happening. The introduction of that programme did not involve changing health board boundaries or hospital management structures; it was about cultural change and empowering staff to take decisions and to make the necessary changes.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): I put it on the record that I strongly agree with what Michael Matheson is saying. In one of my multiple previous lives, I delivered large-scale changes in corporate companies. The vast majority of such change programmes failed because of a failure to take cognisance of the prevailing culture. That is a well-known management statistic.

Michael Matheson: We very often focus on structural change rather than on some of the

changes that have taken place in our public services over the past two decades. The patient safety programme, which we as a Government introduced, is internationally recognised as being one of the most comprehensive patient safety programmes of its type anywhere in the world. That was about enabling and empowering staff to make the right decisions.

Another aspect of public sector reform that is often forgotten but significant is the change that came from the challenge that was set out in the Christie report in relation to how our public sector operates and on the need to move from symptom management to being much more focused on preventative measures.

I will refer to the impact of that change on youth justice. As a result of the Christie report, we have gone from an environment in which Polmont young offenders institution was overcrowded to the point that it is now—or was—half empty. That is because of a change in approach, with a much more preventative focus taken to address offending behaviour at a critical stage. It was about moving away from a dependency on forcing people into the system and thinking that the system knows best and that putting them in jail would solve the problem to recognising that that approach is not very effective. It is much more effective if we can deal with things upstream and prevent crimes from happening in the first place.

The youth justice system provides a very good example of how we have been able to reform our public services without the need for structural reform; rather, the reform was done a much more meaningful way and has changed how those services are delivered.

I come to another area, given Campbell Christie's background. Some members might recognise that I have a constituency interest in the way in which Scottish Canals operates and, previously, how British Waterways operated. The latter organisation often sat in the background and did little other than managing a bit of infrastructure in our country that not much use was made of. During his time as chair of that organisation, Campbell Christie transitioned British Waterways into Scottish Canals, and moved it from being an asset management organisation into being an economic development organisation, to help to use our canals to unlock potential in areas—and no more so than in my Falkirk constituency, with the Falkirk wheel. That development then flowed through into the Kelpies and has led to significant investment in, for example, Springburn.

In that example, we have a public service body that has taken a different approach. There was no structural change, but it recognised that it has a more important role to play than just managing the assets that it holds, and it is taking a much more

holistic approach to how it can support communities.

Paul Sweeney: I recognise the huge transformation that Scottish Canals has achieved, particularly in the Glasgow canal section of the Forth and Clyde canal. Does the cabinet secretary recognise that a large part of that was down to the structure of Scottish Canals as a public corporation and that changing it recently into a non-departmental public body has placed fiscal constraints on it that might challenge its ability to do those more entrepreneurial activities? Maybe we need to look again at the structure of the public corporation.

Michael Matheson: I recognise that. I made that point because a number of people have referred to the Christie report, and Campbell Christie was the chair of British Waterways when the UK Government decided to abolish it, leading to the creation of Scottish Canals.

I think that Paul Sweeney is referring to the issue of Treasury rules, which have led to the challenge that we have had to address. I know that that is not ideal, and that it places constraints on the organisation. However, I offered that up as an example of a very good public body that is making a real difference in communities—particularly in deprived areas—and that uses assets and unlocks them in a way that results in much greater benefit.

As Paul Sweeney will know, we have only to look around Springburn to see the real difference that the organisation has made to the area, or around Maryhill and the back of Firhill. Because of the economic development approach that has been taken, an area has been opened up that people would simply not have gone to previously. We have to encourage more of our public bodies to do that.

I want to address the challenges that we have around healthcare, which a number of members have referred to. I think that Jackson Carlaw and Michael Marra referred to the demographic challenges that we face. Some of the early policy options that were set out in the early part of this parliamentary session still have to be funded, such as free personal care. Decisions were made then, given the demographic shift that we face. We will face the same challenge in our health and social care system going forward. It will have to reform and change in order to meet demand. That is not just because of the demographic challenge that we face; it is because of the disease burden that we as a country face. That burden is estimated to increase by about 21 per cent over the next 20 years. We cannot simply think that we can continue with the existing model and that it will deliver for us. Right now, we have a health and social care system that—

Michael Marra: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Matheson: I will just finish this point and then give way to the member. Do I have until 5 o'clock, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer: Yes.

Michael Matheson: I will keep going, then.

I want to make this point because, if we look at the way in which our health and social care system has traditionally operated, over many decades and many Governments, its priorities have been secondary care, primary care, social care and then the individual—the patient. In reality, our system has to be completely flipped. It must be much more patient focused, social care focused, primary care focused and then secondary care focused.

That will require significant change to our health and social care system over the next decade, and we will have to address that if we are to meet the demographic challenge and the disease burden that we face. That will require, as Alex Neil said many years ago, greater collaboration and co-operation across the chamber. We must have a mature and reasoned conversation about what we can realistically provide and how that can be delivered in the years ahead. That will require us—dare I say it, Presiding Officer?—to take some of the party politics out of the decision-making process to ensure that we make the right decisions for the future and deliver better outcomes for those who make use of those public services.

Michael Marra: The minister recognises two points. The first is that many of the problems in our health system, as well as in our social care system, come from the demographic transition that is under way. The second point is that that is long predicted. It precedes the advent of this SNP Government in 2007. We knew the demographic trajectory of this country, so why, nearly 17 years on, are we just having the beginnings, it would seem, of the conversation about trying to build that consensus, when we have known all along that it had to be done?

Michael Matheson: I do not think that that is a fair characterisation. Throughout my time in this Parliament, there have been various debates, discussions and attempts to engage in public sector reform and to have reasoned debate around some of the issues.

Let me take the example of delayed discharges, which is an issue that we are trying to deal with. That issue is not new to our health and social care system. [*Interruption.*] It is not new; delayed discharge is an issue that predates this Government and even this Parliament. There have

been various iterations to try to address that. We have had the joint future agenda, and then we had structural change that introduced NHS trusts.

John Swinney (Perthshire North) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Matheson: I will, if I can just finish this point.

We then had different approaches to try to deliver greater integration. Those have all helped to a small degree, but they have not been able to address the issue to the full extent that is required. That is why I think—I will come back to this point—that a national care service will be critical to supporting us in achieving that.

John Swinney: Would not the short answer to Mr Marra's intervention be that the Government initiated the Christie commission, 13 years ago, and has spent the past 13 years implementing its outcomes?

Michael Matheson: I agree with that. I have made reference to a couple of issues in which we have made progress in relation to the Christie principles.

I turn back to the issue of the national care service. We need to get right that huge reform. It is important that we take the right time to manage that reform, because a top-down approach to the creation of a national care service will not work. We need to work in a collaborative and co-operative fashion, and we have taken extra time with COSLA and others in an attempt to achieve that. We have made progress. There is more that we need to do, but it is critical that we get it right.

Although I know the Labour Party's criticism of the Government, I presume that it still supports the creation of a national care service. However, if we are to change the system so that the patient, social care, primary care and secondary care are our four key priorities, the national care service will be critical to supporting us in achieving that. That is why we need to get it right and to ensure that that engagement is progressed correctly.

We must always learn from the reforms that we have undertaken but that have not progressed as well as they could have done. I hope that the approach that we are taking with the national care service is seen as being a genuine attempt, and a recognition on our part of our need, to try to do that.

There is a need for us to significantly reform and change our public services. I put on record my huge thanks for the thousands of public sector workers across Scotland who work day in, day out to deliver excellent, outstanding services where they can. I recognise the challenges that they face, and we as a Government will continue to do

everything that we can to support them in the important role that they play in Scottish society.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on Scotland's public service values.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Sandesh Gulhane is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Michael Marra will fall.

The first question is that amendment S6M-11831.2, in the name of Sandesh Gulhane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11831, in the name of Shona Robison, on Scotland's public service values, 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.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:02

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Sandesh Gulhane is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Michael Marra will fall.

We move to the division on amendment S6M-11831.2, in the name of Sandesh Gulhane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11831, in the name of Shona Robison. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

The Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care (Michael Matheson): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My vote has not been recorded. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Matheson. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app was not working, but I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kidd. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 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)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

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)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 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)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 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)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 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)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O’Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 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)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-11831.2, in the name of Sandesh Gulhane, is: For 31, Against 81, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S6M-11831.1, in the name of Michael Marra, which seeks to amend motion S6M-11831, in the name of Shona Robison, on Scotland’s public service values, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Bill Kidd: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kidd. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

Michael Matheson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Matheson. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app would not connect, but I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Gulhane. We will ensure that that is recorded.

For

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowe, 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)
 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)
 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)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)

Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (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)
 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)
 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)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the vote on amendment S6M-11831.1, in the name of Michael Marra, is: For 48, Against 64, Abstentions 0.

Motion disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-11831, in the name of Shona Robison, on Scotland's public service values, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Michael Matheson: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My vote has not been recorded. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Matheson. We will ensure that that is recorded.

Bill Kidd: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kidd. We will ensure that your vote is recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (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)
 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)
 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)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 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)
 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)
 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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 64, Against 48, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the Scottish Government's continued investment in delivering public services for Scotland's people and communities; notes,

however, the economic damage of Brexit, which means up to £3.7 billion of potential funding for these services has been lost; recognises the Scottish Government's legacy of successful public service reform in recent years that has improved outcomes for people and communities, including health and social care partnerships and Social Security Scotland; further recognises the valuable role that public sector workers play in delivering precious public services; supports the Scottish Government's ambitious public service reform projects in the education, justice and health and social care sectors, which will deliver further reforms over the next decade, including by focusing on prevention and early intervention, involving people and communities in the design of public services and embracing the power of digital technologies; believes that further reform to public services will be necessary to ensure that public services remain fiscally sustainable and continue to improve outcomes for Scotland's people and communities, and welcomes, therefore, constructive contributions from partners across the public sector, third sector and business community, as all stakeholders work to protect and reform Scotland's public services together.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:10.

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

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